



# CONGRESSIONAL PRAYER CAUCUS FOUNDATION

March 5, 2019

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Congressman Joe Wilson  
Congressman Robert Wittman

Ms. Kristin Pressly  
Public Affairs Officers  
VA Medical Center  
718 Smyth Road  
Manchester, NH 03104

Re: "Missing Man" Table Display

Dear Ms. Pressly:

I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation. The Foundation serves nearly 100 members of Congress who are part of the Congressional Prayer Caucus (the names of those members of Congress who serve on the Congressional Prayer Advisory Team are listed on the left).

In addition, the Foundation serves a network of Legislative Prayer Caucuses in over 32 states, which has over 1,000 state senators and state representatives as members. These leaders are working together to preserve the integrity of our founding principles and to protect First Amendment rights for all.

We understand that recently you received a letter from the Freedom From Religion Foundation ("FFRF") complaining that a Bible was part of a POW/MIA "Missing Man" table display at the VA Medical Center. In this letter, FFRF claimed that the inclusion of the Bible sent a message "that the Manchester VAMC values Christian service members above minority religious and nonreligious ones." FFRF asked that the Medical Center commit to either removing the Bible from the POW/MIA table, or "replacing the bible with a blank book that can represent whatever individuals viewing the display wish it to." We further understand that in response to this FFRF letter, you removed the Bible from the table.

As you probably know, the Missing Man Table and Honors Ceremony was created by the National League of POW/MIA Families, a private non-profit organization established to honor those soldiers in prison or missing in action in the Vietnam War. The National League selected the elements for the Table, with each item being symbolic. See <https://www.pow-miafamilies.org/missing-man-table-and-honors-ceremony1.html>. The round table was to show our everlasting

concern, and the white table cloth symbolized the purity of motives when these soldiers answered the call to serve. The yellow ribbon and lighted candle symbolized the continued hope for the return of these soldiers, and the inverted glass symbolized these missing soldiers' inability to share a toast. The Bible placed on the table symbolized "the strength gained through faith to sustain us and those lost from our country, founded as one Nation under God."

The Bible was not selected by the National League of POW/MIA Families because it believed the Bible was the inerrant Word of God, or that it contained truth claims while other religious texts were false. By its express words, the National League selected the Bible to symbolize faith that sustained both those suffering in POW camps or MIA, and those loved ones longing for their return. The Bible was selected for all faiths, not simply the Christian faith.

Removing the Bible from the Table or, worse yet, replacing the Bible with a blank book shows utter disregard for the faith that sustained POWs/MIAs and their loved ones. Singling out Bibles for removal as a symbol demonstrates hostility toward religion, which is a violation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. As the Supreme Court in *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306, 313-314 (1952) stated, "We find no constitutional requirement which makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and to throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of religious influence."

In the context of Christmas symbols being displayed on public property, Justice Anthony Kennedy, dissenting with Chief Justice Rehnquist, Justice White and Justice Scalia in *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573, 663-64 (1989) correctly in our opinion addressed symbolic displays when he wrote:

If government is to participate in its citizens' celebration of a holiday [or a cause like POW/MIA] that contains both a secular and a religious component, enforced recognition of only the secular aspect would signify the callous indifference toward religious faith that our cases and traditions do not require; for by commemorating the holiday only as it is celebrated by non-adherents, the government would be refusing to acknowledge the plain fact, and the historical reality, that many of its citizens celebrate its religious aspects as well. Judicial invalidation of government's attempts to recognize the religious underpinnings of the holiday would signal not neutrality but a pervasive intent to insulate government from all things religious. The Religion Clauses do not require government to acknowledge these holidays or their religious component; but our strong tradition of government accommodation and acknowledgment permits government to do so. See *Lynch v. Donnelly*, *supra*; cf. *Zorach v. Clauson*; *Abington School District v. Schempp*. (citations omitted).

The Bible as part of the Missing Man Table is precisely in our nation's strong tradition of government accommodation for religion. As Justice Kennedy noted, you were not *required* to display the Bible, but can certainly choose to do so, thereby recognizing the religious life of soldiers.

We urge you to reconsider the decision to remove the Bible from the Missing Man Table. If we can provide you any additional information or assistance on this issue, please let us know.

Sincerely,



Lea Carawan  
Executive Director  
Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation