Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 28, 2016

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

We have been informed that Bibles as part of Missing Man Table displays have been removed at Veterans Affairs (VA) clinics in Youngstown and Akron, Ohio and Houston, Texas, as well as at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

It is our understanding that the individual facility directors at the three VA clinics made the decision to remove the Bibles following complaints issued by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, and that the November 7, 2014 Guidance on Religious Exercise and Expression in VA Facilities and Property Under the Charge and Control of VA was used to justify the removal.

Since 1979, our nation has commemorated National POW/MIA Recognition Day, as a day of for all Americans to remember, honor, and respect those who were prisoners of war and those who remain missing as a result of the nation's conflicts.

Another means of recognizing prisoners of war and those missing in action is the Missing Man Table and Honors Ceremony. The National League of POW/MIA families provides a script for this ceremony and a description of the table:

> *As you entered the room, you may have noticed a special table; it is reserved to honor our missing men. Set for six, the empty chairs represent Americans who were or are missing from each of the services – Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard – and civilians, all with us in spirit.*
>
> *Some here were very young, or not yet born, when the Vietnam War began; however, all Americans should never forget the brave men and women who answered our nation's call and served the cause of freedom in a special way.*
>
> *Let me explain the meaning of this table, and then join me for a moment of silent prayer.*
>
> *The table is round – to show our everlasting concern.*
>
> *The cloth is white – symbolizing the purity of their motives when answering the call to serve.*
>
> *The single red rose reminds us of the lives of these Americans….and their loved ones and friends who keep the faith, while seeking answers.*
>
> *The yellow ribbon symbolizes our continued uncertainty, hope for their return and determination to account for them.*

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A slice of lemon reminds us of their bitter fate, captured and missing in a foreign land.

A pinch of salt symbolizes the tears of our missing and their families - who long for answers after decades of uncertainty.

The lighted candle reflects our hope for their return – alive or dead.

The Bible represents the strength gained through faith to sustain us and those lost from our country, founded as one nation under God.

The glass is inverted – to symbolize their inability to share a toast.

The chairs are empty – they are missing.

Let us now raise our water glasses in a toast to honor America's POW/MIAs, to the success of our efforts to account for them, and to the safety of all now serving our nation!

As noted in the description, one of the objects on the table is a Bible, meant to "represent the strength gained through faith to sustain us and those lost from our country, founded as one nation under God."

As your guidance correctly notes, the Establishment Clause exists to ensure that the government cannot affirmatively impose or elevate one religion over another. However, it does not prohibit the government from referencing religion altogether, nor does it require that the government scrub all references of religion from the public square. Rather, the Establishment Clause ensures both that the government does not show preference to a certain religion, and that the government does not take away one's ability to practice religion.

In 2014, the Navy Exchange Service Command issued a memo for the removal of Bibles in Navy Lodge guest rooms following a complaint from the Freedom From Religion Foundation. The Navy reversed course and announced that the Bibles would be replaced.

Similarly, the Establishment Clause does not require that you remove Bibles from the Missing Man Table displays. The mere presence of a Bible coerces no one.

The Supreme Court recently stated that "an Establishment Clause violation is not made out any time a person experiences a sense of affront from the expression of contrary views…" *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 134 S. Ct. 1811 (2014).

We request an explanation as to why the Bibles were removed from the three VA facilities, as well as any policy that will be applied going forward, including a summary of who will be responsible for implementing it. We respectfully request that you respond no later than May 3rd.

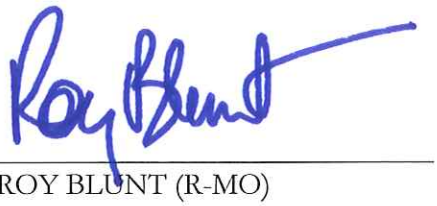
If you have any questions about this request, please contact Sarah Seitz in Senator Lankford's office at 202-224-5754 or Amy Vitale in Congressman Forbes' office at 202-225-6365. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

JAMES LANKFORD (R-OK)
United States Senator

J. RANDY FORBES (VA-04)
Member of Congress

JAMES M. INHOFE (R-OK)
United States Senator



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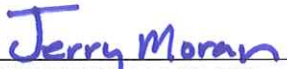

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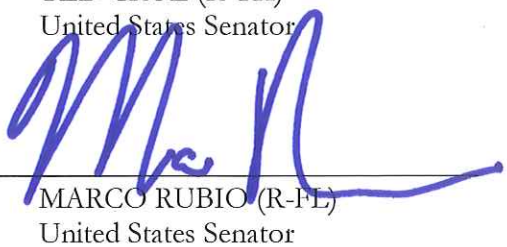

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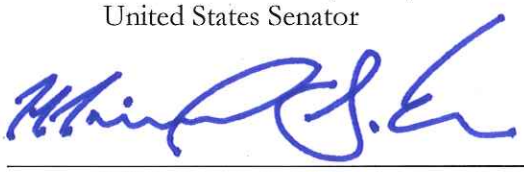

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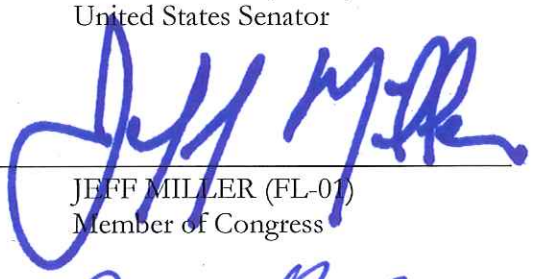

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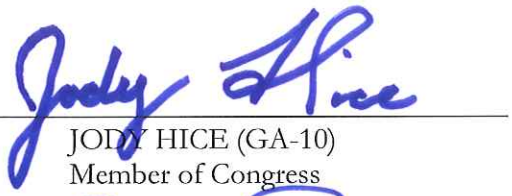

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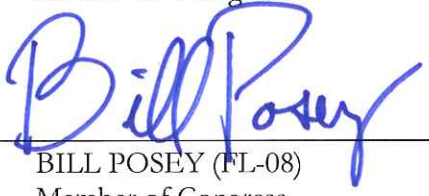

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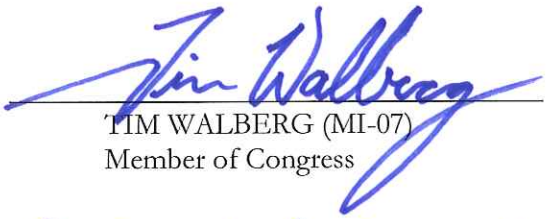

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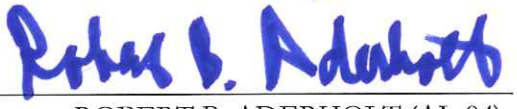

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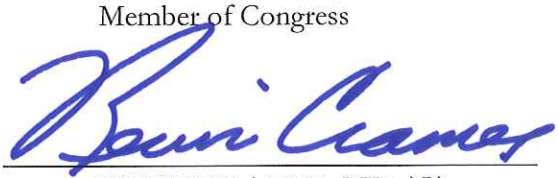

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