

THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMISSION

OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION



Richard Land, D.Phil. (*Oxon.*), President

April 16, 2012

The Honorable Howard P. McKeon
Chairman, House Armed Services Committee
2120 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman McKeon:

We write to thank you for your leadership in defending the rights of conscience and religious freedom, as well as the enforcement of the Defense of Marriage Act, in our military. With these protections under increasing assault, the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission urges you to remain vigilant on these fronts, including through advancement of the Military Religious Freedom Protection Act (H.R. 3828), which would help to ensure these protections are afforded to both our military's chaplains and service members.

The United States has a rich history of protecting the freedoms of conscience and religious expression of members of our armed forces. In recent months, however, the government and the Pentagon have stripped away many of these protections. These attacks on religious freedom in the military intensified last year with repeal of Section 654 of Title 10, commonly known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Following that action, on September 30, the Department of Defense went a step further by issuing two memoranda targeting the exclusivity of traditional marriage in the military. The first memo permitted same-sex ceremonies on military installations, while the second, alluding to the first, stated that military chaplains can participate in such ceremonies. These policies directly violate the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as only the union of one man and one woman.

In practice, these policies pose a severe threat to the religious freedom of our military's chaplains and service members. Many of them profess religious beliefs that conflict with the lifestyles and behaviors of those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community (LGBT). Yet there is growing evidence confirming that service members who hold these religious beliefs face discrimination and career penalties if they remain true to their consciences. Regrettably, the Pentagon's policies actively pressure these brave men and women to choose between serving their country and holding true to their deeply-held religious faith. It is a disgrace that our federal government would promote such an untenable climate for any service member of any creed.

In light of these devastating policies, we believe it necessary and urgent that Congress act to protect the religious freedom of all soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, and the chaplains who minister to them. In addition to the sizable Southern Baptist representation among the chaplaincy and the military at large, we stand alongside chaplains and service members of all faiths, and of no faith, to protect their freedoms of conscience and religious expression when threatened by the civil government. In that effort, we strongly support H.R. 3828, sponsored by Rep. Tim Huelskamp, which would protect their rights of conscience against such threats, regardless of the size or popularity of their particular faith tradition or belief.

In that spirit, we urge you to do all that you can to safeguard the embattled freedom of religion for those who risk their very lives daily to defend that sacred freedom, and all other constitutional freedoms, for us. Please know that we stand ready to assist in this regard and, more specifically, to help secure passage of H.R. 3828. Again, thank you for your continued leadership on the Armed Services Committee.

Sincerely,

Richard D. Land