Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 19, 2012

Honorable Leon E. Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta,

Religious freedom is an integral component of America's greatness and has been a vital pillar of our nation from the very beginning. Unfortunately, it has come to our attention that the United States Air Force (USAF) has taken a series of steps signaling hostility towards religious freedom. We ask that you investigate this matter and issue clear guidance in writing to formally assure active duty servicemembers and those considering future service that they need not leave their faith at home when they volunteer to serve.

In recent months, the USAF has made various changes regarding the religious freedom of individuals bravely serving in the military. Most of these changes occurred following a September 1, 2011 memorandum issued by General Norton Schwartz, Chief of Staff of the USAF, imposing a stringent policy with regards to religion. The memo stated that Gen. Schwartz expected "chaplains, not commanders, to notify Airmen of Chaplain Corps programs," suggesting that the mere mention of these programs is impermissible. We believe this statement exemplifies the troubling "complete separation" approach that is creating a chilling effect down the chain of command as airmen attempt to comply.

While we agree that leaders should not use their positions to impose their religious beliefs or to extend preferential treatment to those who share their beliefs, the decisions that have been made in reliance upon this policy go beyond what is required by the U.S. Constitution. The First Amendment prohibits the establishment of religion; however, the mere discussion of religion or reference to God certainly does not rise to that level. Censorship is not required for compliance with the Constitution, and should not be required for compliance with military directives.

The USAF repeatedly has succumbed to demands from organizations that seek to remove all references to God and faith in our military. Recent USAF capitulations in this area include:

- Suspending an ethics briefing for nuclear missile officers, due to its discussion of Bible references and St. Augustine's "Just War" theory;
- Removing a Latin reference to "God" from the Rapid Capabilities Office motto;
- Removing an article from a Squadron Officer School distance-learning curriculum because it referenced chapel attendance;
- Removing Bibles from Air Force Inn checklists; and
- Modifying the presentation of the Air Force Academy's involvement with the charity "Operation Christmas Child."

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These modifications go beyond the requirements of the Constitution, and appear to have been influenced by the more stringent guidance issued by Gen. Schwartz in September 2011. The changes lend credence to the notion that the Air Force will remove any reference to God or faith that an outside organization brings to its attention.

Mr. Secretary, the combination of events mentioned above raises concerns that the Air Force is developing a culture that is hostile towards religion. We request that you investigate what may have led to this series of incidents and issue clear Department of Defense policy guidance, consistent with our Constitution, to preserve the place of religious expression in the military at large. We trust that you will ensure that all analysis of these sensitive issues is being conducted in a deliberative and thoughtful manner, with special respect given to our military's legacy of honoring the place of faith among its members. We appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to receiving your prompt response.

Sincerely,

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Member of Congress

W. TODD AKIN
Member of Congress

TIM GRIFFIN
Member of Congress

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