

Statement of Congressman Doug Collins (R-GA)
Military Personnel Subcommittee
Religious Accommodation in the Armed Services

November 19, 2014

I thank Chairman Wilson and this Subcommittee for its persistent efforts to protect the religious liberty of our men and women in uniform. As a military chaplain, I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to submit a statement for the record.

Over the last few years, a series of incidents targeting those serving in the military as well as the Department of Veterans' Affairs have formed an unacceptable pattern of opposition to faith. Numerous Army briefings reportedly cited evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics as "extremists" in the vein of al Qaeda. In 2012, two chaplains were harassed for their Christian beliefs during their participation in a Veterans' Affairs chaplain training program. Legal action has been

taken in an attempt to force the military to accept atheist chaplains. Last year, the Pentagon stated that soldiers could be prosecuted for sharing their faith. Reports also surfaced that the Southern Baptist Convention's website was blocked from Army, Air Force, Marine, and Navy bases. A member of the panel who will testify before the Subcommittee today has actively campaigned to remove the phrase “so help me God” from the U.S. Air Force Academy’s honor oath.

Taken together, these incidents demonstrate a pattern of hostility to Christian organizations and those practicing the faith who are part of the military. Our men and women in uniform have chosen to put their lives on the line for all the freedoms we hold dear, including our First Amendment liberty to worship freely. Members of our military must not be denied this precious right. It’s as simple as that.

Like many Members of this Subcommittee, I have been involved with legislative efforts to defend the religious liberty in the military. I authored legislation to protect our soldiers' free exercise of religion after the Administration used the government shutdown as an excuse to prevent chaplains from performing their duties overseas. I'm pleased that this legislation passed both the House and the Senate, which showed the Administration that Congress was united in believing that religious freedom should never be a political pawn. I joined my colleagues in publicly questioning the Department of Defense in letters regarding the Southern Baptist Convention website as well as other matters of religious liberty. Members also addressed a letter to the Superintendent of the U.S. Air Force Academy to inquire why a Scripture reference was removed from a Cadet's personal whiteboard in his room.

I have served Airmen of all faiths as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, which I considered my duty and privilege.

The religious diversity in America's fighting force is no cause to elevate one faith – or no faith – over another; rather, it gives us all the more reason to protect the First Amendment principles millions of Americans have fought for over the centuries.

Any attack on expressions of faith in the United States military is not only unconstitutional, but an unacceptable way to treat those who have given the most in defense of our nation. America's bravest deserve better, and I stand ready to work with my colleagues on this Subcommittee to protect this right to all our men and women in uniform.