

**Testimony of
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Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers
Before the
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
Committee on Armed Services (House)
Hearing on Freedom of Religion and Belief in the Military
November 19, 2014**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Davis, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers concerning the need for support for people with nontheistic values and beliefs serving in our nation's military. We appreciate that the subcommittee is applying scrutiny to the treatment of religion and belief within the military. There is a great opportunity to increase resilience of the force by accommodating those service members who are good without a god.

The Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers provides community for atheists and humanists in the military. We directly support those thousands of active duty and veterans who are members of our organization and indirectly represent those tens of thousands of additional service members who share a nontheistic and naturalistic approach to life. This hearing is evidence that the military cares very much about the moral fiber and foundation of our service members. One important question is whether an ethical foundation not based on a god will be given equal treatment.

The first step is to allow for recognition of our beliefs. The option "Humanist" is not among over 100 current options and could easily be added. The Army has done so just this year after years of pressure and only after legal pressure from the MAAF and the American Civil Liberties Union. But the Department of Defense and the other branches of service continue to deny requests. These requests have been presented by members of our organization through official channels and seem to end with the Chief of Chaplains of each branch. A survey conducted by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute in 2009 showed 3.6% of the military identifies as Humanist. Yet this population is disenfranchised and unaccounted for in the current system. Freedom of religion and belief cannot happen when we deny the existence of these groups. Beliefs are not accommodated if they are not even accounted for, so I would ask that the subcommittee ensure these requests for Humanist accommodation on the Religious Preference listings at the Department of Defense (DMDC) and within each Branch of Service are accommodated.

A second area of great opportunity is Basic Training. Without asking, any recruit can expect easy access to organized, funded services for beliefs from Protestant to Jewish to Buddhist to Wiccan. These are important services for young men and women who need to lean on their personal values as they meet the greatest challenge of their young lives. Nontheists are no different. MAAF has helped to organize humanist services outside chaplain-provided services at each military academy and Air Force Basic Training. At each location the humanist services were among the most popular among trainees. Establishing these services has taken hundreds of hours of local and national volunteer work and the support of a few supportive local commanders. God-based religious services enjoy command funding, advertising, scheduling, and facilitation. Chaplains have directly denied requests for humanist support in most cases, interpreting such beliefs to be outside their scope while still claiming to support all personnel. Particularly during high-stress, low-freedom training, everyone benefits from the community of like-minded individuals and the mentorship of those who share their beliefs. Humanists should be afforded these services as well. Even if the chaplains opt not to help, these humanist services should be advertised and available, with humanist volunteer support, at every training location where time-off for church is offered.

At the core of all this is the Chaplaincy, a chaplaincy that has no humanists (in the nontheist sense) or even relationships with humanist organizations. We recognize the need and value of the chaplaincy and ask only that they include all core values and beliefs, not only theistic core values and beliefs. Chaplains have power in their command influence, access to personnel, influence on the religious preference list, organization of training services, and in other ways like resiliency/spiritual fitness training and marriage counseling. Chaplaincy recognition would go a long way to overcome discrimination against atheists and humanists.

Chaplains should be asked not simply whether they will counsel humanists, but whether they will provide Humanist support to Humanists just as they provide Wiccan, Muslim, and Christian support to those who hold those beliefs. Chaplains claim they are available for all personnel, yet they do not have humanist training, humanist materials, humanist services, or external endorser points of contact to provide authentic humanist support. To humanists, they claim humanism isn't 'approved', yet there is no approved religion list and no procedure to get on such a list. Lay leaders sought out by the chaplains to support minority groups such as Mormons and Wiccans are turned away when they seek to represent humanists. An endorsed Humanist Society chaplain candidate with two masters degrees in religion was recently turned away by the Navy. Fewer than 2% of chaplains are non-Christian and none are Humanist. Those demographics, especially in a military where less than 70% of personnel identify as Christian, demand reform. We seek a military that embraces and celebrates diversity of belief that includes nontheists.

The Humanist Society, American Ethical Union, and Society for Humanist Judaism are denominations legally equivalent to the Catholic Church and that the chaplaincy should rely upon for personnel, resources, and advice. The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers and other organizations are nonprofits providing values-based support equivalent to the National Association of Evangelicals, Cadence International, and other non-church ministries relied upon by the chaplaincy. Chaplains connect strongly with many agencies yet frequently refuse to learn from or even work with humanist organizations. The military needs a chaplaincy that celebrates diversity of belief including nontheist beliefs.

These requests – equal chaplain support, humanist alternatives to church in basic training, and a humanist option in on the religious preference list – simply constitute equal support for nontheists. These are not requests for kickball or chess club or a simple hobby, but for core values and beliefs protected under the first amendment and critical to resilient military personnel.

It is important to put a spotlight on those military practices that marginalize humanists and foster anti-atheist prejudice in military culture. I have focused on providing for humanists but humanists cannot thrive when military leaders privilege Christianity above all other beliefs. Military lodging facilities proselytize Christianity by placing Bibles in hotel rooms. Chaplains are allowed to use their faith to discriminate against gays and lesbians. Prayers are broadcast over the loudspeakers on Naval vessels. The Air Force and now the Navy have tried to force religious oaths as a religious test to serve in the military. Invocations and Benedictions are given at military ceremonies and even daily meetings. Religious language persists in military songs and creeds. Maintaining neutrality toward religion in government is an ideal we have not achieved. Personal faith should not need and does not deserve a captive military audience or special promotion at military events or facilities. So long as these Christian privileges persist, it is that much more important to extend accommodation to humanists and other nontheists. Though Christianity may be the majority, the majority should not be threatened by accommodating minority nontheistic beliefs.

At the last Military Personnel briefing on this issue on January 29th, Chaplains confirmed over and over again that chaplains are free to evangelize and it is the responsibility to junior personnel to opt out, assuming it is not an official ceremony where they have no say at all. Members of Congress and chaplains supported defamatory statements by a chaplain in Alaska who declared in his official capacity on an installation news service that there were no atheists in foxholes. Ms. Penrod, to whom I presented many of these issues in person years ago (Aug 2011), entirely dismissed, in her comments to this subcommittee, atheists and humanists as simply “non-religious” and undeserving of protections under DoDI 1300.17.

If it is the official DoD policy that humanists and other nontheists are entirely outside the scope of the chaplaincy, then that policy must be made clear in writing, in funding, in access to personnel, in training authority, and in the influence given to chaplains who, in that instance, would represent only a subset of the military rather than all personnel. It would be a difficult job for the command to recreate a non-chaplain replacement for all the privileges of the chaplaincy that would then be available only to those who profess a god-belief. If that is the case, the discrimination against atheists should be stated clearly and the Constitutionality and military value of the chaplaincy can be evaluated in that reduced god-only role.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Davis, Members of the Subcommittee, the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers represents military personnel who have deeply held beliefs and core values that are nontheistic and naturalistic. We should not be pushed aside because our beliefs are different from or even offensive to some military chaplains or military leaders. We should be embraced as an ever-present and valuable part of the diversity of belief in our military. 5000 senior officers serve throughout the US military in all components and branches as chaplains, and chaplain facilities exist on nearly every military installation and ship, as they should. However, those officers and facilities currently have no education, resources, materials, or, apparently, respect for those in their ranks who are good without a god. Just as the military and the chaplaincy had to adapt to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Wiccans among the troops they serve, now is the time for them to adapt to Humanists.