



November 8, 2021

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Atheists. Agnostics. Humanists. Americans.

The Honorable Greg Murphy
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Murphy,

I write to commend you for introducing H. Res. 770, supporting the First Amendment and its guarantee of freedom of speech. The right to express one's thoughts and opinions has never been more important. This right is one of the cornerstones of our nation and our democracy, and it sets us apart from nations that do not guarantee it for their citizens.

As your resolution says, freedom of speech is at risk on campus: "teachers, college administrators, and boards of trustees are often too timid to push back against the culture of intolerance on their campuses, and high percentages of students are afraid to express their views on controversial issues." I just read today that Samford University in Birmingham has uninvited Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Jon Meacham from speaking at inauguration ceremonies for the school's new president after student protests. Higher education is supposed to be an opportunity to learn from and about people from different backgrounds, different regions, and different beliefs, as well as being exposed to new ideas. This cannot happen when a school actively or passively allows the suppression of ideas from students, faculty, or outside speakers.

I am directly familiar with the challenges some students face on campus because one of our coalition members is the Secular Student Alliance which gives a voice to atheist, humanist, and other non-theist students who find their opinions and beliefs under attack. The First Amendment is there for them too, as you know.

I am pleased to see your resolution reference Justice Robert Jackson's 1943 statement about the role of schools in our society. I believe you are referencing his majority opinion in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* in which the Supreme Court reversed itself from a ruling just three years earlier, correcting Justice Felix Frankfurter's opinion that Jehovah's Witnesses, and therefore others, could be compelled to recite the Pledge of Allegiance despite their religious beliefs.

I particularly appreciate this paragraph from Justice Jackson's opinion: "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein. If there are any circumstances which permit an exception, they do not now occur to us." Clearly Justice Jackson understood the importance of freedom of speech, as well as the separation of church and state, another bulwark of the First Amendment. In fact, the Establishment Clause is the very first line.

Your resolution is important in ensuring that Americans do not lose sight of the freedoms in the First Amendment and the real-life challenges that ensue in protecting them on campus and elsewhere. Students need to know they are free to express themselves and other students need to remember that everyone has that right. This resolution makes that point. I hope H.Res. 770 receives bipartisan support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Debbie Allen".

Debbie Allen
Executive Director

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