



Protecting the Equal Rights
of Nonreligious Americans

October 26, 2026

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www.secular.org

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Chair
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington DC, 20510

Dear Senators,

I write on behalf of the undersigned members of the Secular Coalition for America to express our serious concerns regarding the establishment of the new Office of Religious Affairs (ORA). As outlined by Secretary Hegseth, ORA would add a layer to the established military chain of command which currently includes the Chiefs of Chaplains and the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, the body responsible for advising the Secretary on religious matters. We urge you to carefully consider whether this restructuring truly serves the best interests of our nation's service members and their religious freedom.

The chaplain corps could be improved in several areas including the imbalance towards evangelical chaplains over those of other denominations and faiths and the lack of resources and training for chaplains to help them serve the 25 percent of servicemembers who have no religious affiliation. Having the chaplaincy report directly to the Secretary, especially this Secretary, makes it less likely that those areas will be addressed. As you know, Secretary Hegseth openly promulgates his version of Christianity within the Department, which is not followed by a majority of American Christians, let alone a majority of Americans.

The scope of other functions that will be consolidated in ORA is also concerning. They include "faith-based homeschool support for military families," "faith-based suicide-reduction initiatives," and "contracted services from faith-based non-Federal entities." I hope you will examine whether these are the actual functions of the new Office and if they will serve soldiers, their families, and the contracting process better under ORA than they do now. In general, the Defense Department's role should be to provide reasonable religious accommodations and support for its personnel of every religion and no religion. I encourage you and the Armed Services Committee to provide the necessary oversight so that ORA is not promoting one particular version of one religion.



Atheists. Agnostics. Humanists. Americans.

As the Senate prepares to consider the Fiscal Year 2027 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), I urge you to carefully examine the implementation of the Secretary's Office of Religious Affairs initiative and its implications for the religious freedom of all service members. Its budget should include language which emphasizes that priority. ORA should also conduct regular, accurate assessments of the religious affiliations and needs of both military chaplains and the broader force are essential to ensuring that military policies reflect the diversity of those who serve. These policies must protect the freedom of conscience of every service member rather than privilege the theological perspectives of any particular religious group, regardless of its influence within the Department of Defense.

In announcing the establishment of the Office of Religious Affairs, Secretary Hegseth said, "While we wage physical war, we all know the real battle is spiritual." Every soldier who doesn't agree with that is likely to be ill-served by ORA and the new command structure.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Steve", followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Steven Emmert
Executive Director

American Atheists

American Ethical Union

Atheist Alliance of America

Black Nonbelievers

Camp Quest

Center For Inquiry/Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science

Ex-Muslims of North America

Freethought Society

Freedom From Religion Foundation Action Fund

Hispanic American Freethinkers

Recovering From Religion

Secular Student Alliance

Secular Woman

Society for Humanistic Judaism

The Clergy Project

Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association