

THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AMERICA

The state of religious freedom is at the forefront of national conversation as people across America attempt to process the stunning actions recently taken by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that pit religious freedom against compliance with a federal healthcare mandate, forcing people of faith to make a decision that infringes upon the religious freedom that our Founding Fathers robustly protected from our very beginning. Unfortunately, the HHS mandate is not an isolated incident; it is more of the same. As Founder and Co-Chairman of the [Congressional Prayer Caucus](#), a bipartisan group of 103 Members of the House of Representatives dedicated to preserving religious freedom in America, Rep. Randy Forbes will continue standing up against burdens on these inherent freedoms.

In August 2011, HHS issued a [mandate](#) requiring that all health plans cover abortion-inducing drugs, contraceptives, and sterilization at no cost to the patient, despite the fact that scores of people have religious and moral objections to these services. The mandate included an extremely narrow exemption for churches, but offered no protection to religious hospitals, schools, and charities, with the reason being that these entities often serve and employ individuals that do not share the groups' religious beliefs. After receiving over 200,000 public comments on the mandate, HHS [refused](#) to broaden the religious exemption, instead merely giving religious institutions an extra year to comply. After a firestorm of opposition, President Obama [announced](#) on February 10, 2012 a "compromise" that purportedly will exempt religious organizations from directly covering the services, but will force the insurance companies they hire to cover them. To reiterate, employees at such organizations will still receive, by virtue of the insurance plans offered by their employers, services to which their employers have religious and moral objections. The President's new [arrangement](#)—which may not be released in detail until August 2013—is really more of an accounting gimmick, as it will still ultimately require abortion-inducing drugs, contraceptives, and sterilization to be provided to all employees of religious institutions at no cost. On February 15, 2012, HHS published in the [Federal Register](#) the finalized mandate and its narrow religious exemption, in their original form, and explained that the new "compromise" announced by the President would be fleshed out in the coming year and a half. This scenario leaves religious hospitals, schools, and charities still unprotected and uncertain of what the "accommodation" offered to them will look like.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THE MANDATE

"The faithful for whom birth control is a matter of religious conviction haven't been accommodated at all. They'll merely have to keep two sets of accounting books."

[Immaculate Conception](#), Wall Street Journal, Feb. 13, 2012

"In a nation dedicated to religious liberty as its first and founding principle, we should not be limited to negotiating within these parameters. The only complete solution to this religious liberty problem is for HHS to rescind the mandate of these objectionable services."

[Bishops Renew Call to Legislative Action on Religious Liberty](#), U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Feb. 10, 2012

"This thing is a distinction without a difference . . . It's an accounting gimmick or a fig leaf. It's not a compromise."

[Paul Ryan Denounces Obama's Contraception Compromise as 'Accounting Trick'](#), ABC News, Feb. 12, 2012

"A long time ago, the Catholic Church received a mandate from a higher authority . . . It is the mandate of Jesus Christ. . . . Catholic ministries for the needy are as blind to race, creed, class, and gender as Jesus Christ, their founder. That any one of them, much less all of them, should be forced to choose between the Gospel mandate and the U.S. government's health care mandate strikes at the very heart of the right to religious liberty on which our country was founded."

[The Jesus mandate vs. Obama's mandate](#), Washington Post, Jan. 27, 2012

MORE OF THE SAME: HOSTILITY TOWARDS PEOPLE OF FAITH AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

In recent years, there have been numerous examples of a recurring hostility towards people wishing to exercise their constitutionally-protected religious freedoms. The HHS mandate is not an isolated incident; it is more of the same. The very existence of these occurrences, regardless of whether they are successfully reversed, shows a troubling pattern that has a chilling effect on people of faith, leaving them uncertain about exercising their religious freedoms.

IN THE ARMED SERVICES

Air Force Rapid Capabilities Office [removes](#) “God” from patch due to pressure from the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers. Rep. Forbes led 35 of Members of Congress in sending a [letter](#) calling for reversal of the decision.

Walter Reed National Military Medical Center [prohibits](#) the use of religious items during visits. Officials reversed the policy after meeting with Rep. Forbes and other Members of the Prayer Caucus.

Air Force Academy (AFA) [rescinds](#) support for Operation Christmas Child, a Christian charity that sends gifts to impoverished children around the world, saying only Christian cadets should have been notified of the opportunity to participate.

Air Force Chief of Staff [prohibits](#) commanders from notifying Airmen of Chaplain Corps programs.

Air Force [suspends](#) ethics briefing that includes Biblical and religious references following complaints from the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. The briefing included Biblical and religious references, and had been used for over 20 years.

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) [strips](#) “God” from flag-folding ceremonies at veterans’ funerals. The VA backed off the ban shortly after Members sent a letter to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs requesting the policy’s reversal.

AND ACROSS AMERICA

Legislative [bodies](#) across the country are facing [lawsuits](#) for opening sessions with prayer. The Supreme Court recently [declined](#) to clarify the law on a county board’s practice of opening meetings with prayer. The lower court held the board’s prayer policy unconstitutional because it resulted in prayers that too often mentioned “Jesus.”

Vanderbilt bans religious student groups from requiring leaders to share the groups’ religious beliefs, and [placed](#) four religious student groups on provisional status for doing so.

New York City [prohibits](#) churches from using public school facilities; allows access to other community groups. Churches that have been meeting in NYC public schools for years held their final services on Sunday, Feb. 12, 2012.

University dismisses counseling student from graduate program because of religious beliefs. A federal circuit court recently [held](#) that a university improperly dismissed a counseling student who had requested that a homosexual client be referred to another student because her religious beliefs precluded her from affirming same-sex relationships.

Officials remove “God” from certificates for flags flown over the U.S. Capitol. Capitol officials [denied](#) a young Eagle Scout’s request that a flag be flown over the Capitol on his grandfather’s behalf, and that the accompanying certificate reference “God.” The policy prohibiting “God” on the certificates was reversed after pressure from Rep. Forbes and Members of the Prayer Caucus. [Legislation](#) was then introduced to prohibit future censorship.

References to “God” and faith excluded from U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. Historical religious references such as the national motto “In God We Trust” and the Pledge of Allegiance were excluded from the newly constructed Capitol Visitor Center. They were corrected after [pressure](#) from Rep. Forbes and Members of the Prayer Caucus.