

September 3, 2014

The Honorable Charles T. Hagel  
Secretary of Defense  
1400 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable Ray Mabus  
Office of the Secretary of the Navy  
2000 Navy Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20350-2000

Dear Secretary Hagel and Secretary Mabus:

The undersigned members of the Restore Military Religious Freedom Coalition write to comment about the ongoing controversy over the placement of Gideon Bibles in Navy lodging facilities.<sup>1</sup> The debate commenced in June 2014 when the Navy Exchange Service Command (NEXCOM) appeared to implement a new policy that would have led to Gideon Bibles being removed from Navy lodges.<sup>2</sup> According to one press account, the policy would have affected forty lodges in sixteen states and five countries.

Most troubling was the fact that this wrong-headed step was precipitated by a March 2014 letter from the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF). The core of FFRF's complaint was its erroneous claim that "[p]roviding [B]ibles to guests in Navy-run hotels amounts to a government endorsement of that religious text."

Fortunately, various news services in mid-August carried stories that senior leadership in the Navy decided to intervene and stop the implementation of NEXCOM's decision pending a policy review. According to the NEXCOM Bulletin the entire review was prompted by the fact that "[s]ome Navy Lodges have [B]ibles in the guest rooms and some do not."

We believe this is an easy problem to solve: the Navy should direct NEXCOM to allow Gideon Bibles in all facilities for which the Gideons are willing to make Bible donations. Furthermore, this should be a DOD-wide policy – not one merely put in place for Navy facilities. As you are aware, in 2012, the Air Force experienced its own similar controversy regarding the presence of Gideon Bibles in Air Force Inns. A DOD-wide policy that makes clear that donated Bibles are an acceptable piece of literature to have in base lodging would provide clarity and certainty for service members and families.

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<sup>1</sup> "Gideon Bibles" are distributed by the Gideons International (Gideons) an evangelical Christian organization based in Nashville, TN. The Gideons use a number of standard Protestant translations of the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Bockelman, Vice President NEXCOM, Information Bulletin, "Religious Items in Guest Rooms," Navy Lodge Program: 14-004 (June 19, 2014) (NEXCOM Bulletin).

There is no constitutional reason to worry about a policy along these lines. The mere presence of a Gideon Bible in a hotel room does not constitute a form of messaging from the proprietor to the guest. In the same way that no one is coerced into watching a religious television channel simply because it is available as a choice in most cable television packages, no visitor to a Navy lodge is coerced into reading a Bible simply because it is present in a night stand. Many *commercial* establishments allow Gideon Bibles to be made available to guests. Is a Motel 6 that provides Gideon Bibles in its guest rooms endorsing Christianity? Almost certainly it is not. As innkeepers wishing to please their guests, both Motel 6 and NEXCOM know that some proportion of their guests will want to read the Bible. This is not surprising because the Bible is the most widely read and widely published book in world history by orders of magnitude.

We know of no policy by NEXCOM barring the placement of other religious texts in guest rooms. There is no viewpoint discrimination here. Gideon Bibles are seemingly ubiquitous because the Gideons International is a dedicated, highly effective international organization committed to disseminating Bibles. It has distributed approximately 1.9 billion Bibles and New Testaments since 1908.<sup>3</sup> It is also significant that Gideon Bibles cost the government nothing. The Gideons pay for them, and they pay for any replacements.

We understand that some may claim to take offense at the presence of the Gideon Bibles in the guest rooms. That mere fact does not constitute a constitutional problem to be fixed. As the Supreme Court observed recently in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*:

Offense, however, does not equate to coercion. Adults often encounter speech they find disagreeable; and an *Establishment Clause* violation is not made out any time a person experiences a sense of affront from the expression of contrary religious views....<sup>4</sup>

No person is compelled to read a Gideon Bible that has been left in a guest room, and guests with no interest in the Bible can just leave the Gideon Bible in the drawer unopened.

Recently, a humanist organization, protested the presence of Bibles on a shelf within the Saint Louis Military Entrance Processing Station. Apparently, the Bibles were made available to new recruits by the Gideons and a newly enlisted serviceman felt pressured by their presence in the facility.

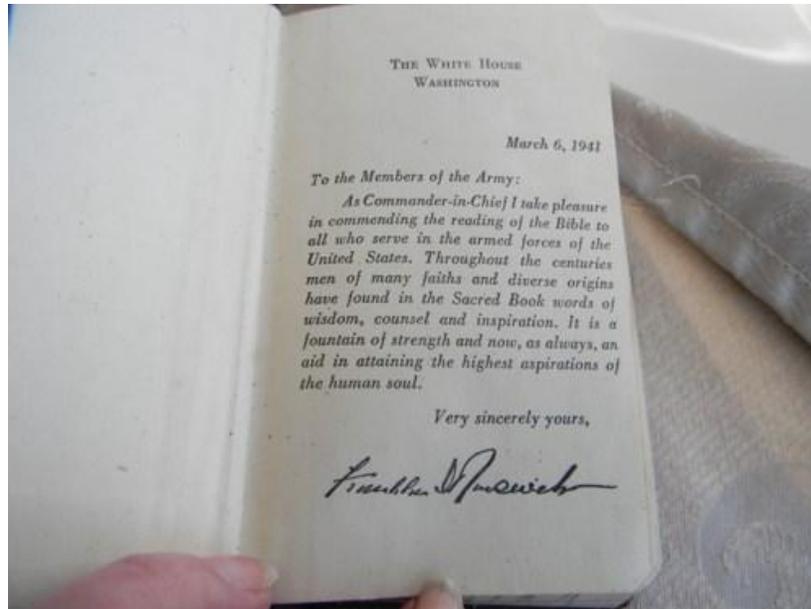
When made aware of the objection, the Office of the Secretary rejected the complaint. It issued a statement through spokesman LCDR Nathan Christensen. According to LCDR Christensen, non-governmental organizations, like the Gideons can seek permission to place secular or religious materials for use on a facility like the one in Missouri – as approved by the facility commander. These materials may include Bibles, pamphlets, tracts, and texts.

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<sup>3</sup>The Gideons operate in over 190 countries in more than 90 languages.

<sup>4</sup>*Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 134 S.Ct. 1811, 1826 (2014).

The United States government has long recognized the spiritual value of the Bible for men and women who serve in the military and may have to enter combat. For example, during the Second World War, our nation's time of greatest foreign threat, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made certain that members of the Armed Forces would each have a Bible. In fact, President



Roosevelt wrote an inscription for the flyleaf of these pocket Bibles on January 25, 1941. It was addressed to the "Armed Forces" under a banner "THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON":

As Commander-in-Chief, I take pleasure in commending the reading of the Bible to all who serve in the armed forces of the United States. Throughout the centuries men of many faiths and diverse origins have found in the Sacred Book words of wisdom, counsel and inspiration. It is a fountain of strength and now, as always, an aid in attaining the highest aspirations of the human soul.

These Bibles were not left lying around barracks in drawers. They were given directly to the members of the armed services to be carried into battle.

In closing, as the Navy and DOD review the policies relevant to receiving Bibles, pamphlets, tracts, and texts on military facilities, please keep in mind that throughout American history our Armed Forces have recognized the importance of providing for the spiritual needs of its personnel. President Roosevelt's inscription in government-issued Bibles provides powerful evidence of that.

As we noted above, no one is being coerced or pressured to take a Bible or other materials. Additionally, the presence of Gideon Bibles in a military lodge's guest rooms does not constitute an endorsement of religion. Therefore, we believe that DOD and the Navy should adopt an "open door" policy for these materials, including Gideon Bibles, across all military installations and analogous operational platforms.

Please reply to the Chairman of the Coalition: Lt. Gen. Jerry Boykin (USA-retired), Executive Vice-President, Family Research Council, 801 G Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001.

Respectfully,



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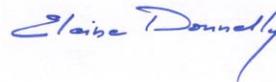
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