

Dec. 6, 2003

Soapbox: Will ACLU desecrate military cemeteries?

Editor:

I received the following e-mail from Ed Nixon, a casual acquaintance from the old days. Yes, he is Richard Nixon's youngest brother, if, that is, 73 years of age can be considered young.

His sentiments appeal to me and, I thought, they may appeal to an old ex-Marine. They are pertinent.

Aside from that, the picture [accompanying Mr. Nixon's e-mail, showing row upon row of crosses serving as grave markers at Sawtelle Soldiers Cemetery in Los Angeles] indicates that there are no atheists in the military cemetery.

Could that also mean that "there are no atheists in fox-holes," either?

Maybe you can check with your resident "expert" for his opinion on military cemeteries.

Continued good luck for your hard work!

**Matt Wiest
Willows**

Ed Nixon's e-mail read:

"I noted in the news last week where the ACLU doesn't want any crosses on any federal property! We'll just have to see about that.

"Let them try to remove these! What are these people thinking? At what point do we say, enough is enough?

"Please take the time to pass this on to as many people possible as quickly as you can, even if you normally don't do this type of thing. Some mes-

sages just need to be forwarded and this is most certainly one of them.
"Ed Nixon"

Religion Editor's note: Having never served in the armed services, the religion editor decided to forward Dr. Wiest's and Mr. Nixon's e-mails to an actual one-time atheist in a foxhole and member of the ACLU, Jason Torpy, president of Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF). Mr. Torpy responded:

Religion Editor:

The ACLU supports separation of church and state. This means that religious symbols are generally inappropriate for permanent display in public buildings, lest the government show preference to one religion over all others.

In order to discredit separation of church and state, someone has declared that the ACLU wants to remove all crosses from government land and pointed out that it would be ridiculous to remove religious headstones from military cemeteries.

As an ACLU member, my first reaction is that the ACLU would never threaten a person's right to choose their own headstone. I would invite you to get the official opinion of the ACLU on the matter. I believe they will agree that religious headstones are perfectly appropriate in military cemeteries as long as the headstone reflects the service member's stated wishes (not "Christian unless otherwise noted").

I did check on the matter myself and found no official policies or even suggestions in the direction removing Christian headstones. What I did find was a press release detailing ACLU efforts to protect religious headstones in one Florida cemetery (see <http://archive.aclu.org/news/>

1999/n033199a.html).

Someone has again tried to turn Constitutional separation of church and state into a soulless attack on religion. It's a common technique.

Some have said that separation of church and state means outlawing prayers in school and teaching atheism in science class and denying parents the right to send their children to private school. Now we are presented with the ridiculous claim that separation of church and state allows the ACLU to desecrate the graves of our war heroes.

Simply put, I would suggest Mr. Nixon and Dr. Wiest check their sources. The ACLU is not out to get their headstones. By all means, show me the official ACLU document stating such a thing.

Despite Mr. Nixon's claim, I could find no "news" on this matter, unless by news I think he meant the paranoid militant conservative rhetoric found at http://www.americasvoices.org/archives2003/SeeseD/SeeseD_022803.htm. Same story, same picture. I would bet this is where he got the idea.

The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers fully supports the current Department of Defense policy allowing rectangular headstones with an optional religious emblem. MAAF opposes the removal or alteration of any existing headstones except at the request of the family on behalf of the deceased (see <http://www.maaf.info/polmarker.html>).

Also of interest may be this application for military headstone that marks the emblem of belief as an optional item, and including an atheist marking (see <http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/forms/40-1330.pdf>); and this approval of a humanist headstone (see <http://www.americanhumanist.org/press/Symbol.html>)
Jason Torpy
President, MAAF

Dec. 13, 2003

Religion Soapbox ACLU protects religious symbols on gravestones

Religion Editor's note: The following e-mail from the American Civil Liberties Union was received at The Valley Mirror earlier this week in response to Dr. Matt Wiest's and Mr. Ed Nixon's suggestions that the ACLU is seeking to have Christian crosses removed from grave markers in military cemeteries.

Religion Editor:

Thank you for the question about the ACLU's position on religious symbols on personal gravestones in cemeteries, whether private or public.

The right of each and every American to practice his or her own religion, or no religion at all, is among the most fundamental of the freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. The Constitution's framers understood very well that religious liberty can flourish only if the government leaves religion alone. The free exercise clause of the First Amendment guarantees the right to practice one's religion free of government interference.

The ACLU will continue working to ensure that religious liberty is protected by keeping the government out of the religion business.

The ACLU is not pursuing, nor has it ever pursued, the removal of religious symbols from personal gravestones. Per-

sonal gravestones are the choice of the family members, not the choice of the government. The ACLU celebrates this freedom to choose the religious symbol of your choice.

You can find more about the ACLU's position on religious liberty at <http://www.aclu.org/ReligiousLiberty/ReligiousLibertyMain.cfm>

We realize that there is incorrect information about the ACLU position going around the Internet, and thank you for the opportunity to clarify that falsehood.

If you are not already an ACLU member, we encourage you to help support our aggressive work on the issues you care about. To join please visit <http://www.aclu.org/contribute/contribute.cfm> or call 1-888-567-ACLU.

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