

*Congressman Bachus was one of 126 Members of Congress who signed the following letter to Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon Mansfield after a ban was imposed on the traditional 13-fold American flag recital that has been read at thousands of military funerals. A single complaint about religious content led to the prohibition.*

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*After this letter was sent on October 29, the VA reversed its policy and said that the flag-folding ceremony remains permissible when requested by the family of a deceased veteran.*

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It has recently come to our attention that the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) has banned the recitation of a common flag-folding ceremony sometimes used by cemetery employees and volunteers at 125 national cemeteries. It is our understanding that the change in policy was prompted by one complaint at Riverside National Cemetery in California.

In this particular case, someone objected to one of the many

religious references in the flag-folding ceremony. We find it appalling that the change in policy may prohibit national cemetery employees and volunteers from reciting the 13 steps, and that the ban extends to Veterans Services Organizations like the American Legion and the VFW, which often provide volunteers to assume flag-folding duties and the playing of Taps at veterans' funerals.

Religion and government must interact while co-existing in society. In 1997 the Supreme Court decision Agostini v. Felton identified three primary criteria for determining whether a government action has a primary effect of advancing religion: 1) government indoctrination, 2) defining the recipients of government benefits based on religion, and 3) excessive entanglement between government and religion.

It is clear the 13-flag recital, if requested by the family, does not reach the threshold established by the courts.

In our opinion, the outright ban of this ceremony made to provide uniformity in military funeral services at military

cemeteries is an unnecessary response. The folding of the flag is a solemn moment at a military funeral and for many families of veterans it has tremendous meaning.

The very essence of a funeral is spiritual and if a family wants the 13 steps recited they should make that choice, not some bureaucrat in Washington.

Our veterans deserve better.

We request that you reconsider this decision and adopt the policy that the recitation of the flag-folding ceremony shall be allowed if the family of the deceased makes the request. We feel our veterans have rightfully earned this honor if the family of the deceased so chooses.