

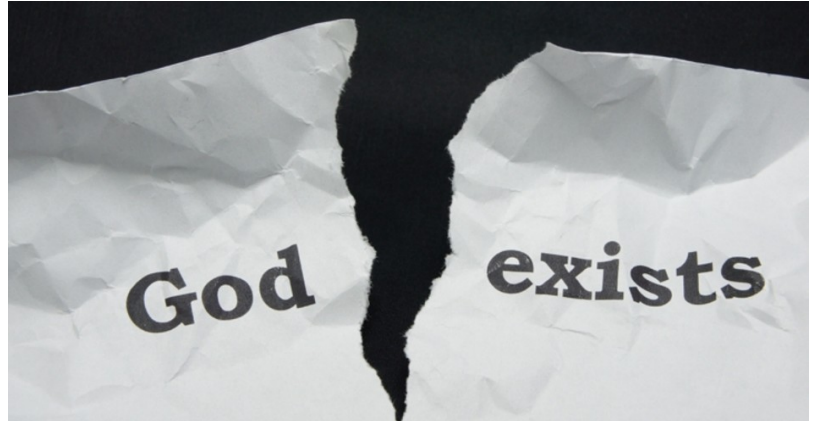


Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 21, 2018

## U.S. Navy Considering “Atheist Chaplain”

A group of over 60 U.S. senators and congressmen are appealing to Navy officials to once more reject the application of an atheist who is trying to force himself into the Navy chaplaincy.

In 2014 Jason Heap, an Oxford-educated former youth minister with a Master’s of Divinity (a requirement to be a military chaplain), sued the Pentagon when his application to become a Navy chaplain was rejected after he revealed that he planned to serve as a secular humanist — i.e., an atheist.



Heap’s suit argued that rejecting him had the effect of impairing “the religious exercise of Humanists in the Navy.” Additionally, the suit charged that the Navy was inconsistent in its accommodation of religious practices for sailors because “it does not consider Humanism to be a religion.”

While a federal court ultimately sided with the Pentagon in the case, Heap has applied once more, and the Navy Chaplain Appointment and Retention Eligibility Advisory Group is apparently recommending that Heap be accepted into the Chaplaincy.

But lawmakers in both the House and the Senate have penned strong letters to Navy higher-ups appealing for common sense to prevail and for the atheist applicant to be rejected once and for all.

The [Senate letter](#), penned by Senator Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), an Air Force veteran and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, admonishes Richard Spencer, Secretary of the Navy, and Admiral John Richardson, Chief of Naval Operations, that allowing Heap to serve in such a capacity “would constitute a grave mistake. Approving a secular-humanist Chaplain is inconsistent with the Constitution and the Department of Defense’s own guidelines. As part of DoD, the Navy has a constitutional obligation under the Religion Clause of the First Amendment to ensure that service members have access to services that meet their religious needs. The Chaplain Corps exists to fulfill this duty. The Supreme Court has ruled that non-religious beliefs may not rely on the Religion Clauses for protection. Furthermore, DoD’s guidelines reinforce the uniquely religious purpose of the Chaplain Corps.”

The letter goes on to point out that the Navy “has sufficient authority to create programs for humanist or atheist service members. The Chaplain Corps is not the appropriate place. The Chaplain Corps serves religious needs, not philosophical preferences. Approving a secular-humanist chaplain would open the door to other applicants representing other philosophical worldviews. Over time, this situation would erode the distinct religious function of the Chaplain Corps.”

In addition to Wicker, 22 other senators signed the letter asking the Navy officials to turn down Heap’s application.

In a similar [U.S. House letter](#), over 40 congressmen address Rear Admiral Margaret Kibben, chief of Navy Chaplains, and Vice Admiral Robert Burke, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations, asking for their decision against Heap. “The Department of Defense’s own guidelines ... reinforce the uniquely religious



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purpose of the chaplain corps,” explain the congressmen, “defining ‘religious organization’ as ‘an entity that is organized and functions primarily to perform religious ministries to a non-military lay constituency’ and defining a religious ministry professional as ‘an individual endorsed to represent a religious organization and to conduct its religious observances or ceremonies.’”

“The chaplain corps serves religious needs, not philosophical preferences, and DOD would be shirking its constitutional duty if it were to inappropriately expand — and thus dilute — the chaplain corps,” the congressmen admonish the Navy brass. “The chaplaincy’s religious component is core to its identity and essential to its role in fulfilling the military’s constitutional obligations.”

In an op-ed piece published by Fox News, Wicker notes: “No one is arguing that atheists do not have the same First Amendment rights of free expression as their neighbors of Christian, Jewish, Muslim or other faiths. This is not the subject of scrutiny. The central question here is how an atheist chaplain can be expected to fulfill a role that, by its very nature, is supposed to serve the religious needs of our service members.”

Wicker concludes with the observation that the “identity of the long-established Chaplain Corps should not be changed for what appears to be a decision based on political correctness. The religious duty of these men and women was apparent before our nation’s founding and continues to be true today.”

Navy officials have not indicated when they will announce a final decision on Heap’s application.

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