

February 26, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, US Senate
S-230 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker, US House of Representatives
H-232 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Display of the Remains of Reverend Billy Graham

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Speaker Ryan:

The nine undersigned civil rights and religious freedom organizations write to express our deep concern about your announced plan to display the remains of Reverend Billy Graham in the Rotunda of the US Capitol Building on February 28th through March 1st. We, like millions of Americans across the nation, feel that display of remains in the Capitol Rotunda, also known as lying in honor, should be reserved only for those remarkable citizens who have displayed the highest devotion to American ideals of freedom, equality, and liberty. Since our nation's founding, only three Americans have been so honored, and unlike those heroic individuals, Reverend Billy Graham is a controversial and divisive figure. We respectfully urge you to withdraw this misguided plan.

As advocates for civil rights and religious liberty, we are concerned that lying Reverend Graham in honor would needlessly alienate non-religious people, religious minorities, and those communities whose civil rights he opposed and would set a dangerous precedent for government entanglement with religious matters.

Reverend Billy Graham clearly played an important leadership role in the establishment and rise to prominence of the American evangelical movement. Yet, as Americans, we have never given state honors to religious leaders for the advancement or pursuit of their religious vocations. Indeed, to do so would conflict with the very spirit of our Constitution, which prohibits both the establishment of religion and religious requirements for any US office or public trust.

Instead, display of remains in the Capitol Rotunda has been reserved for eminent political leaders, military leaders, unknown soldiers who perished in war, and just three individuals who have been laid in honor for their remarkable bravery. These latter three were civil rights leader Rosa Parks, who fought to end segregation, and Capitol Police Officer Jacob Chestnut and Detective John Gibson, who died in defense of the Capitol.

While some honor Reverend Graham as an important figure in the civil rights movement, others point to his conflictual relationship with leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his failure to consistently stand against segregation. Moreover, Reverend Graham is known for his stance against equal rights for women, admonishing women to be wives, mothers, and homemakers rather than taking a broader role in society. Reverend Graham strongly opposed equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, taking a leadership role in supporting

constitutional amendments to ban same-sex marriage. Finally, Reverend Graham made a number of troubling statements about members of the Jewish faith and denigrated atheists and other non-religious Americans.

Leadership with such a mixed record on civil rights should not be honored in a building that represents all Americans. While we understand that Reverend Graham is a hero to many, we strongly urge you to reconsider this plan.

Sincerely,

American Atheists
American Humanist Association
Center for Inquiry
Equality California
FORGE, Inc.
Mazzoni Center
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund
Pride at Work
Secular Coalition for America