



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

June 26, 2025

Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Re: Remarks during the 89th Commencement Address at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

Dear Secretary Duffy:

I write in response to your recent comments at the U.S Merchant Marine Academy in which you repeatedly disparaged the nonreligious community and members of non-Christian faiths, claiming those who do not believe in Jesus and the Christian god instead “think they’re god” and are not “good sailor[s].”¹

As the president of American Atheists, a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment, I feel I am uniquely qualified to comment on your remarks.

American Atheists strives to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. As advocates for religious liberty and equality, American Atheists opposes laws, policies, and actions from government officials which favor religion over nonreligion or provide special privileges to religious organizations.

¹ Secretary Duffy Delivers 89th Commencement Address at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, U.S. Department of Transportation (June 23, 2025) (online at <https://www.youtube.com/live/djzR77UVp0Q>).

AMERICAN ATHEISTS

225 Cristiani Street • Cranford, NJ 07016-3214
(908) 276-7300 • www.atheists.org

We represent the growing population of Americans who identify with no religious belief. Recent surveys from the Public Religion Research Institute show that over a quarter of Americans don't affiliate with any religion.² All told, we represent the interests of more than 75 million Americans who have, in your view, fallen victim to either narcissism or delusion.

The cliché that those who don't believe in Jesus and the Christian god instead view themselves as gods evidences a deep-seated hostility toward atheists. It exists solely to slander nonreligious Americans as narcissists who place ourselves above others, a deeply offensive caricature of the many nonreligious service members who have dedicated their lives to defending others and our nation. Later in your speech you went even further, suggesting nonreligious midshipmen are not "good sailor[s]," since they don't believe in a deity that "can calm the seas."

This is both deeply ironic and emblematic of this administration's persistent efforts to place the interests of white Evangelicals above those of all other Americans. In your own speech, you equated the Academy's lack of hot water, rusty showers, mold contamination, and failure to adequately feed its midshipmen — all serious concerns impacting the health and safety of every midshipman and staff member at the Academy — with the removal of a painting of Jesus.³ Apparently you believe it took real "perseverance" for the Christian midshipmen not to have their religious beliefs constantly and publicly affirmed by their school.⁴ If you feel that took perseverance, please consider for a moment the perseverance it must therefore have taken for the nonreligious midshipmen to sit through your remarks disparaging them as poor sailors, narcissists, and even delusional *at their U.S. Merchant Marine Academy commencement ceremony*.

Your attack on nonreligious Americans is just the latest example of a continuing pattern. This administration has repeatedly sided with religious extremists who seek to use the cloak of religious freedom to excuse their attacks on vulnerable people, whether they be religious minority groups like my fellow atheists, LGBTQ+ people, or women seeking access to

² America's Changing Religious Identity, PRRI (September 6, 2017) (online at <https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>).

³ Secretary Duffy Delivers 89th Commencement Address at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, U.S. Department of Transportation (June 23, 2025) (online at <https://www.youtube.com/live/djzR77UVp0Q>).

⁴ Never mind that the commencement ceremony at which you spoke included multiple Christian prayers.

reproductive health care. Your remarks are as contemptible and outrageous as the remarks of officials under the prior Trump Administration.

Former Attorney General William Barr publicly blamed the nonreligious for “the wreckage of the family, [...] record levels of depression and mental illness, dispirited young people, soaring suicide rates, increasing numbers of angry and alienated young males, an increase in senseless violence, and a deadly drug Epidemic.”⁵ His predecessor, Jeff Sessions, at his confirmation hearing, told Senator Sheldon Whitehouse that he “wasn’t sure” if secular people have as good a claim to understanding the truth as people who are religious.⁶

Members of this administration’s Religious Liberty Commission, including Chairman Dan Patrick, have mischaracterized the United States as a “Christian Nation,”⁷ a deeply exclusionary position that flies in the face of the clear intentions and writings of the Framers and is at odds with the plain text of Executive Order 14291, stating that the federal government will “protect all citizens’ full participation in a pluralistic society.” Other members and advisors slandered nonreligious Americans as unpatriotic or immoral enemies who seek to “break up the nuclear family.”⁸

As a nation, we face a great many challenges that we must confront together. But rather than bridge the divides within our nation, your divisive language at the Merchant Marine Academy was another attack on religious equality from this administration under the guise of your twisted interpretation of religious liberty and your appeals to outright Christian supremacy.

⁵ AG Barr Blames Drug Overdoses on Secular Society, The Hill (October 11, 2019) (online at <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/465472-ag-barr-blames-drug-overdoses-on-secular-society>).

⁶ Attorney General Confirmation Hearing, Day 1 Part 2, C-SPAN (January 10, 2017) (online at <https://www.cspan.org/video/?c4643936/sen-sessions-secular-attorneys-equal-claim-truth>).

⁷ Texas Lt. Gov Nominee Dan Patrick's Christian-Nation Politics, People for the American Way (June 23, 2014) (online at <https://www.peoplefor.org/rightwingwatch/post/texas-lt-gov-nominee-dan-patricks-christian-nation-politics>).

⁸ Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick says Christianity is needed more than ever in Texas politics, Rogue Valley Times (May 13, 2024) (online at <https://rv-times.com/2024/05/13/lt-gov-dan-patrick-says-christianity-is-needed-more-than-ever-in-texas-politics/>).

Atheists and the nonreligious are already among the least trusted demographics in the nation⁹, and your comments only serve to deepen that distrust. We are often subjected to harassment at our jobs, rejected by our families and loved ones, and forced to confront near-constant examples of religious privilege in our daily lives.

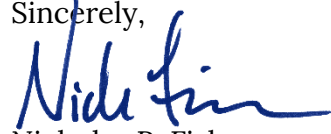
Your attempts, and the continued attempts by this administration to scapegoat the large and growing portion of the American populace who lack religious belief or affiliation, are factually deficient and a betrayal of your pledge to defend the Constitution.

In the words of Justice Robert H. Jackson in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.”¹⁰

Rather than using your position to disparage the nonreligious midshipmen completing their education, I urge you to address the real causes of the challenges faced by the Academy’s midshipmen and build bridges to those who are best positioned to help you meet those challenges head on. As atheists, we believe that it is only through human action that we can solve human problems. Our nation has already tried “the power of prayer,” and we have seen exactly how impotent prayers truly are.

Should you be sincerely interested in solving the problems you decried in your address at the Merchant Marine Academy, now is the time for this administration to act — not recklessly, wrongfully, and harmfully attribute blame to the tens of millions of Americans who are free not to share your religious beliefs.

Sincerely,



Nicholas R. Fish

President

American Atheists

⁹ The Distrust of Atheists, Psychology Today (May 16, 2018) (online at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/poppsy/201805/the-distrust-atheists>)

¹⁰ *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 319 U.S. 624 (1969).