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Testimony Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, In Support of H.R. 5037, the "Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act,"

David Forte
Cleveland State University, Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, d.forte@csuohio.edu

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of First Amendment law as laid down in Supreme Court precedents, and (2) Is the discretion lodged in the cemetery superintendent to permit exceptions fall within an acceptable governmental interest? I conclude that the answer to both questions is in the affirmative and that the bill is well within constitutional limits.

Mr. Speaker, at this time I ask unanimous consent that Mr. Forte’s statement be included in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD.

I have visited the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq several times over the years.

While always moving and inspiring experiences, one in particular stands out. It was September 11, 2001, where preparation the return to the States. After quite a wait, we were told that they were loading onto the plane the casket of Sergeant Trevor Blumberg, and we would be leaving Baghdad with his body.

I have had few honors as great as that one. I am pleased to say that Mrs. Blumberg has since contacted Representative Rogers’ office to express her and her husband’s support for this bill.

Our Nation’s veterans have made the ultimate sacrifice, and it is appalling to see and hear those sacrifices being disrespected. Unfortunately, throughout the country, that is indeed what is happening and it must stop.

I want to thank Mr. Rogers, Chairman Buyer, and Mr. Reyes for all their work in crafting this legislation and their continued dedication to the men and women of our armed forces.

I would also like to recognize Mr. Paul Taylor and Ms. Hilary Funk, staff on the Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Constitution, for working so closely with my staff and me.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all my colleagues to support this bill.

TESTIMONY OF DAVID F. FORTE, PROFESSOR OF LAW, CLEVELAND-MARSHALL COLLEGE OF LAW, CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY, IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 5037 BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABLED ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, JEFF MILLER, CHAIRMAN, APRIL 12, 2006

I. INTRODUCTION

H.R. 5037, entitled the “Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act,” seeks to limit “certain demonstrations” in cemeteries under the control of a Department of Veterans Affairs Cemetery Administration or on the property of Arlington National Cemetery. The bill defines what constitutes a demonstration disruptive of the memorial services or funerals being held in or within 500 feet of such cemeteries, but allows an exception for demonstrations on cemetery grounds if “approved by the cemetery superintendent.” There are thus two constitutional issues to be confronted: (1) Does the ban on “certain” demonstrations meet the requirements of First Amendment law as laid down in Supreme Court precedents, and (2) Is the discretion lodged in the cemetery superintendent to permit exceptions fall within an acceptable constitutional governmental interest? I believe that the answer to both questions is in the affirmative and that the bill is well within constitutional limits.

II. THE BAN ON DEMONSTRATIONS

Demonstrations are a form of expressive conduct and are a protected interest. All governmental restrictions on expressive conduct, Supreme Court jurisprudence requires application of the O’Brien test, United States v. O’Brien, 391 U.S. 367 (1968). This test, which is also known as the Cox v. New Hampshire test, Cox v. New Hampshire, 312 U.S. 569 (1941).

The Court has declared that both tests have similar standards. Clark v. Community for Creative Non-Violence, 486 U.S. 288 (1984).

Under the O’Brien test, “a governmental regulation is sufficiently justified if it is (1) within the constitutional power of the government; if it furthers an important or substantial governmental interest; if the governmental interest is unrelated to the suppression of free expression; and if the incidental restriction on alleged First Amendment freedoms is no greater than is essential to the furtherance of that interest.” Texas v. Johnson, 489 U.S. at 376. Under the “time, place, and manner” test, government regulations of expressive conduct are valid “provided that they are justified without reference to the content of the regulated speech, that they are narrowly tailored to serve a significant governmental interest, and that they leave open alternative channels for communication of the information.” Clark, 486 U.S. at 293.

It is clear from the text of H.R. 5037 that the purpose of the bill is to assure the dignity of funerals or memorial services held in honor of our fallen dead by preventing demonstrations that are disruptive of those ceremonies. To that end, the bill delineates what kind of demonstrations shall be prohibited, viz., a demonstration within five hundred feet of a cemetery in which a funeral or memorial service is being held.

The bill takes place within a time period from 60 minutes before until 60 minutes after the funeral or memorial service. Furthermore, the bill requires that no demonstration shall be made in which a “noise or diversion” is willfully made and “that disturbs or tends to disturb the peace or good order of the funeral service or memorial service or ceremony” shall be prohibited.

Maintaining cemeteries for veterans is clearly within the constitutional power of the United States Government. Under 38 U.S.C. sect. 2403, the purpose of maintaining cemeteries “as a tribute to our gallant dead” is an important or substantial governmental interest. It is similarly evident from the text of the bill that its purpose is to prevent conduct that is intentionally disruptive of a funeral or memorial service without reference to the content of the expressive conduct. The text does not ban accidental noises present in our modern society near to many cemeteries, such as traffic or the sounds of children playing. Rather, the bill requires that “no demonstration shall take place with the intent of disturbing the tranquility or dignity of a funeral service or memorial service or ceremony.” The ban seeks to protect the tranquility and dignity of a memorial service. It allows the picketer or demonstrator to display whatever kind of sign or device he wishes one hour before or one hour after the ceremony, or at any time if more than 500 feet distant from the cemetery. Those at the cemetery, those who may be traveling to the ceremony.

If, however, a person displays “any placard, banner, flag, or similar device, unless the display is part of a funeral or memorial service or ceremony,” and such a display causes a “disturbance or tends to disturb the good order of the funeral or memorial service.” This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law. This prohibition is closely akin to the first prong of the O’Brien test and is subject to the law.
Thus, under either the O’Brien test or under the time, place and manner test, the statute is drawn to be within Constitutional standards.

Nonetheless, I find one phrase in the bill puzzling. Under section (b)(2), a demonstration is defined as “Any oration, speech, use of sound amplification equipment or device, or similar conduct before an assembled group of people that is not part of a funeral or memorial service or ceremony,” (emphasis added) It would see that a single individual with a bullhorn who disrupts a ceremony might not be covered under this section. Thus, I do not see the use of the phrase “before an assembled group of people.” In any event, the bill argues, that restriction of expressive conduct is even less than would be permitted to be under the Constitution.

III. THE DISCRETION OF THE CEMETERY SUPERINTENDENT

It is a central canon of our First Amendment jurisprudence that permission to engage in expressive conduct cannot be left to the unbridled discretion of a governmental official. City of Lakewood v. Plain Dealer Publishing Co., 486 U.S. 750 (1988). Such a discretion carries with it the dangers of prior restraint, vagueness, overbreadth, and content and viewpoint discrimination. Section 1.218(a)(14) of H.R. 5037 prohibits demonstrations in cemeteries under the control of the National Cemetery Administration or in Arlington National Cemetery unless the demonstration has been approved by the cemetery superintendent. Nonetheless, I do not believe that this section permits unbridled discretion in the cemetery superintendent. Rather, I think that his discretion is well-cubined within and defined by the administrative function the law places upon the cemetery superintendent.

A case directly on point is Griffin v. Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 288 F.3d 1309 (Fed. Cir. 2002). Some veterans were not permitted under federal regulations from placing a Confederate flag at a national cemetery. Placing a flag was interpreted as a forbidden demonstration under 38 C.F.R. sect. 1.218(a)(14). Subsection (i) declares in part, “[A]ny service, ceremony, or demonstration, except as authorized by the head of the facility or designee, is prohibited.” Petitioners asserted that this prohibition gave unconstitional discretion to the administrator of the facility.

In Griffin, the Federal Circuit Court pointed out that cemeteries are non-public forums the regulations of which are subject only to a reasonable basis test. However, although the court permit the context of expression in non-public forums, it may not engage in viewpoint discrimination. The question was whether the discretion given by the law to the cemetery’s administrator broadened with it the danger of viewpoint discrimination. After all, a Confederate flag carries a different viewpoint from the Stars and Stripes.

The Federal Circuit found that the Supreme Court had applied the viewpoint discrimination doctrine only in traditional public forums or in designated public forums. 288 F.3d at 1321. The court seized on in the relevant variable in this kind of case: “We are obliged to examine the nature of the forum because ‘the same conduct in a nonpublic forum may be reasonable if they are aimed at pre

serving the property for the purpose for which it is dedicated.’” 288 F.3d at 1323. Finding the Nationa Superintendent support, citing United States v. Kokinda, 497 U.S. 720 (1990), the Federal Circuit upheld the discretion lodged in the cemetery’s administration. This discretion is necessary to preserve the function and character of the forum.” 288 F.3d at 1323.

The purpose of many non-public forums is normative and preserving the function of that forum may entail restricting opposing normative viewpoints. Schools, for example, are normatively charged with developing students’ character for participation as well-informed and well-developed citizens in our system of representative government. To that end, a school may permit students observe rules of respect and avoid hateful or immoral language. A student with an opposite viewpoint who fails to observe the rules of conduct and expresses such scurrilous and rude language is not protected by the First Amendment. Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier, 484 U.S. 290 (1988). Accordingly, the superintendent of a national cemetery is charged with maintaining the cemetery and its activities “as a tribute to our gallant dead.” Under H.R. 5037 he is granted reasonable discretion to assure that all activities within the cemetery accord with its lawfully stated purpose. He may permit ceremonies or demonstrations or signs or programs that accord with such purpose and forbid those that do not. In doing so, the restriction imposed is “reasonable and not an effort to suppress expression merely because public officials oppose the speaker’s viewpoint.” In this context, I find that the bill’s careful limitations on demonstrative conduct and the limited discretion it gives to cemetery superintendents to be well with constitutional limits.

Mr. SANTOR, Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 5037, the Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act.

Throughout the history of our country, countless Americans have made the ultimate sacrifice so that we could live freely. We owe these fallen heroes a debt of gratitude, and we should guarantee the fallen and their families a peaceful journey to their final resting place.

Mr. Speaker, our military cemeteries are hallowed grounds. During the Gettysburg Address, I believe President Abraham Lincoln said it best:

We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that the nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

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We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that the nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—what is already consecrated. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here; but it can never forget what they did here.

For these reasons, I am greatly troubled that groups exploit the sacrifice of so many Americans. These groups trespass on the memories and hallowed ground of our heroes.

Demonstrations at cemeteries disrespect those who have fallen and the loved ones they leave behind. As they held their lines—we must do the same. This bill strikes a proper balance between the liberties they defended and the respect earned.

I urge the passage of this bill for we must support the brave men and women who have given their all.

Mr. MRUN of Kansas. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 5037, the Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act. This is a much-needed piece of legislation to curb the unfortunate actions of a small minority of people. Although I am glad to have this opportunity to support the servicemembers in my home state of Kansas and around the world, I am disappointed that we even need to frame the discussion.

Unfortunately, some of these servicemembers have lost their lives and their families must now grieve their loss. The families of our fallen servicemembers—our true heroes—should not be subjected to protests, hate-filled phone calls, and other obscenities. No one should experience that, especially not after losing a loved one. That is why I support this bill that will help protect the families of our fallen servicemembers from unwelcome protestors.

Our servicemembers embody the exact opposite of hate by sacrificing their lives so that we can keep ours. I pay tribute to them, and I wholeheartedly support this legislation.

Mr. ORTIZ. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act. I am honored to be a cosponsor of this legislation.

I understand that some of the language in this bill may be offensive to some of my colleagues. I was horrified that members of Topekia, Kansas, based Westboro Baptist Church were verbally abusing—and interrupting—the funerals of service members who gave the last full measure of devotion to this nation. My constituents and I have been revolted by this offensive activity.

It matters not what your individual position is on either war we are currently prosecuting—in Iraq or Afghanistan—certainly we can all agree protesting at military funerals is a cruel and unnecessary hardship on our military families during their most difficult hour.

I respect the first amendment rights of protesters, and I do not believe this legislation would restrict that right. The restrictions placed in this bill would allow families the privacy to conduct funerals, while still preserving the constitutional rights of others.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to support this important legislation. This bill will allow families to grieve without being victimized by those who feel the need to denigrate fallen soldiers and their families at a most private moment.

I ask that all our States pass similar legislation at their State cemeteries, and I urge my colleagues to vote yes on this bill.

Mr. ADERHOLT. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 5037, offered by my colleague from Michigan. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude not only to the fallen soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine, but to all of our families as well. At their darkest hour, their grief does not need to be exploited by those trying to make a political point. This intentional disruption of a brief period of time meant to honor the fallen hero goes against the very fiber of American decency. Free speech and public protests are a right; however, taunting and tormenting families at the very moment they bury