

Supreme Court: Giant Cross-Shaped WWI Memorial Can Stay on Public Land

A 40-foot-tall (12 meters) cross-shaped war memorial standing on public land in Maryland does not represent an impermissible government endorsement of religion, the Supreme Court ruled on Thursday in a major decision testing the boundaries of the U.S. Constitution's separation of church and state.

The justices, in a 7-2 decision, overturned a lower court ruling that had declared the Peace Cross in Bladensburg unconstitutional in a legal challenge mounted by the American Humanist Association, a group that advocates for secular governance. The concrete cross was erected in 1925 as a memorial to troops killed in World War One.

The challengers had argued that the cross violated the Constitution's so-called Establishment Clause, which prohibits the government from establishing an official religion and bars governmental actions favoring one religion over another.

The fractured decision saw two of the court's liberals, Justice Stephen Breyer and Justice Elena Kagan, joining the five conservatives in parts of the majority. The ruling made it clear that such a monument in the shape of a Christian cross on public land was permissible but the justices seemed divided over whether other types of religious displays and symbols on government property would be allowed. {eo}

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