

Atheists Demand Removal of Historic Jesus Statue

First it was the Pledge of Allegiance. Then it was the National Day of Prayer. The atheist group even attacked the national motto. In its latest strike against Christianity, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) is calling for a Jesus statue to be removed from a Montana mountainside.

The statue of Jesus Christ, a World War II memorial, has graced the side of Big Mountain in Whitefish, Mont., for nearly 60 years, but it may no longer stand watch over the valley if the FFRF has its way.

The memorial was erected in the 1950s by WWII veterans and Knights of Columbus members inspired by monuments they saw in the mountains of Europe during the war. But the anti-Christian organization calls it a “ruse and a sham.”

The statue rests on a 25-by-25 foot spot of land leased from the U.S. Forest Service since 1953. Although it symbolizes a significant piece of history and heritage of Montana, the Wisconsin-based FFRF is pleading with the Forest Service to end the lease, which would force the statue to be removed.

The permit for the memorial expired last year. Although the Knights of Columbus applied for renewal, they were denied after concerns that it violates the Constitution’s Establishment Clause for promoting any religious doctrine.

“The fact is the Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld the constitutionality of war memorials and other symbols of our history and heritage,” writes Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, or the ACLJ. “The display in Montana is constitutionally sound and is not a violation of the Establishment Clause.”

A media coordinator for the Forest Service's Northern Region, Phil Sammon, said the decision was based on case law.

"Our people live in the community and we appreciate the historical significance of the statue," *Whitefish Pilot* reported him saying. "We really understand the importance of the statue and we're doing our best to work with the Knights to find a solution."

The Forest Service withdrew its denial for the 10-year lease renewal, putting it on hold.

"It has always been clear to us that there are strongly held values associated with this monument and that it is important to the community," Flathead Forest Supervisor Chip Weber said in a statement.

The ACLJ is asking supporters to stand up to the FFRF and sign a letter to the U.S. Forest Service, asking that they allow the Jesus statue to stay put. More than 33,000 people have signed the petition so far.

"Let the federal government know that this display is not only part of the history and heritage of Montana, but a constitutional war memorial," Sekulow pleads. "We are urging the Forest Service to renew the lease without delay."

In addition the the ACLJ, Montana Congressman Danny Rehberg is bringing attention to the issue.

"It's really too bad that a few individuals from out-of-state are so eager to ruin something that almost everyone in the community supports," he said.

Rehberg has sent multiple letters to the Forest Service and applauds their temporary protection of the monument.

"This decision to give us more time to find a more permanent solution is great news, but it's only the first step," he said in a statement. "Now we've got to make sure this historic

World War II monument is protected for generations to come. All of the credit for this temporary reprieve belongs to the thousands of folks from all over the country who refuse to let this injustice stand."