

## For Your Information

November 13, 2012| By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

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We observe Veterans Day Monday and honor our fellow Americans who have bravely defended our freedoms and kept us safe and secure.

Especially over the past century, those who've donned the uniform have confronted freedom's most deadly foes. From Nazis in Europe to the Taliban in Afghanistan to al- Qaida around the world, America's adversaries frequently have ranked not only among the world's most violent aggressors, but among its worst abusers of fundamental human rights.

While names and places often change with time, the struggle between freedom and tyranny remains. It is not only America's struggle, but the world's. And it is being waged not solely with armaments but also with ideas.

Since its inception in 1998, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which I serve, has been engaged in this struggle. Inherent in religious freedom is the right of all people to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience dictates, peacefully practice their beliefs and express them publicly without fear or intimidation.

Created by Congress as an independent, bipartisan, federal body through the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, our commission monitors religious freedom conditions around the world and recommends policies that will enhance freedom where it is imperiled. My colleagues and I assess, propose and press for decisive responses to violations ranging from killing, torture and detention to denial of permits to build houses of worship. We seek nothing less than for these concerns to become integrated fully into U.S. foreign policy.

Why is defending religious freedom abroad so vital? Along with being a cherished American value, freedom of religion or belief is a basic right guaranteed by such international agreements as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Equally important, religious freedom violations often is the canary in the coal mine, an early-warning sign that a government is preparing to embark on violent aggression against its neighbors or even the world. As many of our oldest veterans can attest, when dictators with an appetite for conquest emerge, the first freedom they typically threaten is humanity's first freedom, the right to freedom of religion or belief.

In contrast, constitutional democracies and other governments that uphold religious freedom are far less inclined to wage war against each other. In fact, research confirms that nations that respect freedom of religion are more free, peaceful, prosperous, and stable than those that do not. Nations that fail to respect basic rights, including religious freedom, often are plagued by insecurity and instability, war and terror, and violent radical movements and activities.

Standing for religious freedom supports American values, advances universal human rights, and furthers the security and prosperity of the United States and the world.

As we honor our veterans, we can do no less than stand for all they have defended. For the sake of freedom, as well as prosperity and peace, let us honor America's sentinels of liberty by standing for humanity's first freedom across the globe.

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