

The Government's "Religious Exemption" Process for COVID Vaccines Is a Farce



On Jan. 10, the [Liberty Counsel reported](#) that out of the more than 21,000 requests submitted by members of the U.S. Armed Forces for a religious exemption from the COVID vaccine requirement, not a single one had been approved. A perfect goose egg. Apparently, active duty service members are no longer afforded the rights granted by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Neither, it seems, are civilian federal employees.

I recently [returned to government service](#), following a 23-year military career. In my time working at the USDA Forest Service, I became aware of a handful of colleagues who have requested a religious exemption. So far, I have not heard of a single one that has been approved since submissions began in September 2021. When I say nothing, I mean just that...zip...zilch...zero.

Thinking back to my time as a military officer, I recall when the Department of Defense prioritized honoring diversity and

seeking to accommodate people with a wide array of lifestyles, worldviews, and religious beliefs. I have served along side Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Wiccans, agnostics and atheists. And not once did their religious practices or beliefs conflict with their oath to support and defend the constitution. I had always appreciated that the military could bring so many unique religious perspectives together in overwhelming harmony. Diversity of religious beliefs was what they liked to call a force multiplier. My how things have changed.

My recent experience in civilian federal service along with the DoD's new stance of total intolerance for those who want to make their own health care choices strongly suggests that the federal government's vaccine exemption request process, which is ostensibly aimed at respecting religious beliefs, is a complete farce.

If federal agencies were sincere about treating everyone with dignity and respect, they would have already processed (and granted) these thousands of religious exemption requests instead of keeping their "valued" employees in a holding pattern for months. The evidence is overwhelming that these agencies are stonewalling these requests, while continuing to bludgeon the requestors into submission with repeated CDC and White House talking points about the one-size-fits-all vaccine solution that has absolutely no hope of curbing the pandemic.

Making it up as they go

When the vaccine mandate for federal employees was announced in late July 2021, my agency's leadership quickly tried to assuage rising anxiety by encouraging folks to apply for a "reasonable accommodation" whether religious or medical. No one seemed to be particularly familiar with how the request process worked, but they assured us that there was a process and implied that it was routine. Not to worry, they said.

Those requesting a religious exemption had to submit two relatively simple if not redundant forms: 1) *Religious Accommodation Request Self Certification Questionnaire*; and 2) *Confirmation of Request for Reasonable Accommodation (Religious)*. The forms ask for some basic biographical information and a brief description and justification of the accommodation being requested. Okay. No big deal. Maybe this would be quick and painless, and we could get back to treating each other like human beings again.

However, about two months after submitting my original request (with no status update), I received an email from HR with a [new form](#) attached: *Request for a Religious Exception to the COVID-19 Vaccination Requirement*. Apparently, the previous forms weren't sufficient for employees to express their succinct, religious objection to the vaccine. The underlying message was clear: "Sorry. Try again. What you gave us wasn't good enough."

Here is an excerpt from the email:

Thank you for the information you have submitted so far. On October 8, 2021, a new government-wide/USDA-wide form was released that includes several questions that were not included in previous religious accommodation forms. The answers to these new questions are needed to determine if you are entitled to a legal exception from the vaccine mandate. You can include attachments if your information does not fit within the form. Please complete and sign the attached form(s) and return this to me within 7 calendar days from the date of the email, 11/22/2021. If you choose not to complete the attached form, management may not have sufficient information to conclude that you are legally entitled to an exception.

The language in the new form immediately raised my suspicion as it ferreted imposingly into my religious beliefs and

medical history, two areas HR has historically avoided. The new form's leading questions and requests for more information felt like a trap:

Please describe the nature of your objection to the COVID-19 vaccination requirement.

Would complying with the COVID-19 vaccination requirement substantially burden your religious exercise? If so, please explain how.

How long have you held the religious belief underlying your objection?

Please describe whether, as an adult, you have received any vaccines against any other diseases (such as a flu vaccine or a tetanus vaccine) and, if so, what vaccine you most recently received and when, to the best of your recollection.

If you do not have a religious objection to the use of all vaccines, please explain why your objection is limited to particular vaccines.

If there are any other medicines or products that you do not use because of the religious belief underlying your objection, please identify them.

Please provide any additional information that you think may be helpful in reviewing your request.

Now, I'm not an expert in the sinister art of HR intimidation, but I'm pretty sure most of these questions fall squarely into the category of none-of-your-damn-business. The intent is to trip up the respondent into volunteering information that could be used to justify denial.

In considering my responses, I felt as if I was being judged. I was engaged in an adversarial sparring match that the federal machine had re-engineered to find a legal maneuver

around my constitutional rights – the very thing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 exists to prevent.

“Religious accommodation”...no wait...“Religious exception”

Not only did the new form cross the line of privacy, it contained a subtle revision in terminology that warrants a closer look. The original forms used the term “accommodation” whereas the follow-up form used the word “exception.”

Merriam-Webster defines “accommodation” in a positive light: “an agreement that allows people, groups, etc. to work together.” “Adaptation,” “adjustment” and “reconciliation” are also mentioned, further supporting a respectful connotation. We accommodate those we respect. We accommodate people when we wish to build or maintain a healthy relationship.

In stark contrast, the term “exception” comes off as highly judgmental and serves to further sow division. To quote Merriam-Webster again, an “exception” relates to “someone or something that is different from others; someone or something that is not included; EXCLUSION.” That one’s religious beliefs must be “excepted” implies that they must be inherently wrong or incompatible.

At first glance, this may not appear to be significant, but this revision in terminology reveals a strong bias, if not an outright judgment, against these requestors who are merely asking to continue their employment under the conditions they have worked their entire careers. Whether deliberate or not, the language in the new request form reveals the government’s impatience and hostility towards those who have religious objections to the COVID vaccine. Words mean things after all, and the message could not be clearer: those asking for a religious exemption belong in the “other” category.

Integrity Lost

As someone who has served my country in the military and in the civilian federal service, it is difficult to articulate just how disappointed I am that our government refuses to honor the exemption requests of the very people who have served so faithfully. The evidence is undeniable that these institutions, once viewed with some modicum of trust, have lost their way. Lost their way in failing to recognize the religious freedoms afforded every American citizen. Lost their way by threatening the livelihoods of loyal, hard-working colleagues. Lost their way in failing to hold themselves to a higher standard as public agencies. Whether this lapse in core values is due to negligent incompetence or a more deliberate, sinister attack, only time will tell.

I for one have had enough and am moving on from this agency that demanded I open the most personal aspects of my life to be subject to a bureaucrat's judgment. I encourage others who are in a similar position to do the same. An employer who will not respect you is not worthy of your loyalty and sacrifice. It is time for this oppressive all-in-the-name-of-safety charade to end and for policy makers to remember their oaths. We are, after all, citizens, not subjects.