

Is the Capitol Visitor Center 'Left-Leaning'?



This display in the exhibition hall originally -- and erroneously -- touted E Pluribus Unum as the national motto. Photos By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post Photo)

By Ben Pershing

The massive new [Capitol Visitor Center](#) has been open to the public for four days now, and the reviews so far have generally [been good](#). A few critics have found the [design to be uninspiring](#), and others have [complained about the cost](#) of the much-delayed, \$621 million project.

But another subset of critics has emerged this week, and their complaints have nothing to do with the center's price tag or its architectural aesthetics. Their charge: That the CVC's exhibits are too liberal and deliberately ignore or downplay the importance of religious faith in the history of Congress and the nation as a whole.

On Tuesday, Sen. [Jim DeMint](#) (R-S.C.) [issued a strongly-worded press release](#) saying the CVC "fails to appropriately honor our religious heritage that has been critical to America's success."

The theme has been picked up by conservative commentators. [David Brody](#) of the Christian Broadcasting Network [writes](#), "God is real. I have no doubt about that but good luck trying to find him inside the Capitol Visitor Center." And former Speaker [Newt Gingrich](#) has begun [a petition](#) -- with more than 11,000 signatures to date --

proclaiming: "We the undersigned petition Congress to ensure that the new Capitol Visitor Center is historically correct and accurately reflects the centrality of "our Creator" in the founding of America and in its historic development."

What exactly is their complaint?

DeMint spelled out some of the charges back in September [in a speech on the Senate floor](#). Having toured the CVC's exhibits, DeMint said he found them "to be politically correct, left leaning, and secular in nature." Specifically, DeMint objected to a quote enshrined at the center's door from 19th-century Rep. and Sen. [Rufus Choate](#) (Whig-Mass.): "We have built no temple but the Capitol. We consult no common oracle but the Constitution."

DeMint suggested that several other passages in the center's presentation of history downplayed the importance of faith and religion. He was particularly upset that the phrase "E Pluribus Unum" was engraved next to a mockup of the Capitol Dome, along with a note explaining that it was the "national motto." As the South Carolinian pointed out, the national motto is actually, ["In God We Trust."](#)

At least some of DeMint's complaints were addressed before the center opened this week. "In God We Trust" was engraved in a place of prominence in the center, and the incorrect national motto reference was removed. The Pledge of Allegiance was also added, with its phrase, "One nation, under God." But that's not enough for DeMint, who said Tuesday that "more needs to be done."

Obviously aware of these potential controversies, CVC officials included this in the ["Frequently Asked Questions"](#) section of the center's site:

Q: Does our national motto, "In God We Trust," appear in the Capitol Visitor Center? What about other religious references?

A: Yes, our national motto does appear in the Capitol Visitor Center in the House Theater exhibit. References to religion and faith are included in the context of several historic exhibits, and several religious items appear in the displays.

Some examples include Article 3 of the Northwest Ordinance in its entirety; a copy of the Pledge of Allegiance and the prayer said at the opening of the current Congress; a copy of the Bible used to administer the oath of office to Senators until 1882; portraits of the first House and Senate chaplains; information about religious services regularly held in the Capitol in the 1800s, and an unaltered display of the U.S. Constitution highlighting the First Amendment

which established our country's right to the freedom of religion.

Beyond religion, DeMint and a few other critics also allege that the CVC's exhibits reflect a broadly liberal worldview.

In an op-ed published by McClatchy this week, Matthew Spalding of the conservative [Heritage Foundation](#) complains that the CVC's presentation of American history "is Congress' temple to liberals' 'living Constitution,' the eternal font of lawmakers' evolving mandate to achieve the nation's ideals." And, he adds, the exhibit "details the unfolding of liberal progress and the rise of modern administrative government. Everything is about movement away from America's sins (slavery, treatment of Indians, Vietnam) toward congressionally led enlightenment (direct election of senators, voting rights, the New Deal, Medicare)."

So, who was responsible for creating all these allegedly biased and faithless exhibits? Some crazed, atheistic, liberal historian? No -- Congress.

As Eva Malecki, spokeswoman for the [Architect of the Capitol](#), pointed out to Capitol Briefing: "The development and approval of exhibit content in the Capitol Visitor Center was overseen by the [Capitol Preservation Commission](#), a bipartisan commission composed of Senators and Representatives, which also was responsible for overseeing the construction of the Visitor Center."

She added that the CPC has the authority to alter the center's exhibits, should it so desire. So will DeMint keep lobbying his colleagues to make some changes? Capitol Briefing has faith that he will.

By Ben Pershing | December 5, 2008; 12:20 PM ET

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The CPC was charged with overseeing this new visitors center and the exhibits. I think they have failed and maybe a new group of people should be put in who do not use this exhibit for their own political

agenda!!

History books are being rewritten in our schools and now a center that millions of people will visit has misinformation!!!
We need to hold people accountable!!

Posted by: SCSOCAL | December 5, 2008 1:09 PM | [Report abuse](#)

What a crock. Perhaps DeMint should actually read the Constitution and the First Amendment, and consider the idea of E Pluribus Unum. I am SO TIRED of losers like DeMint and the first seceding state that he represents continually trying to exclude people of other faiths and philosophies instead of looking at the common denominator that we are all AMERICANS. We are NOT all CHRISTIANS, and religion has no place taking a prominent role in the Visitor's Center of the Nation's Capitol...unless they intend to include Jewish faith, Hare Krishnas, Buddhism, Native American faith, Scientology, Wiccan, and yes, Islam. And if religion is included, I don't want my taxes used to create a shrine for Oral Roberts or the LDS...I want it to address how religion has guided the decisions made in the Capitol, both for good AND bad. If DeMint and his brethren can't live with that, then I strongly suggest that they cart their sorry butts to Washington National Cathedral or any number of other churches in the Nation's Capital where they can bathe in their religion without forcing non-Christians to pay their taxes to support material that is clearly unconstitutional. And if that still isn't enough, DeMint should go into more suitable job of missionary work if he can't fulfill his obligation to defend and support ALL of the Constitution.

This is the very sort of cr*p that a large majority of Americans said at the polls a month ago that we wanted to see brought to an end...so STOP IT.

Posted by: winngerald | December 5, 2008 1:42 PM | [Report abuse](#)

The crazed theocrats will never stop trying to impose their warped version of history on the rest of us.

Posted by: cassandra13 | December 5, 2008 1:44 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Keep this narrow minded, self righteous, self promoting group out of decisions affecting the Nation!

Tell them to just go back to church and rely on their pleas and prayers for the resolution they want.

Posted by: ChoKum | December 6, 2008 11:10 AM | [Report abuse](#)

The easiest way to keep religion out of government is for the government to end the tax exempt status for churches.

If your church wants to be involved in the political process, I say that's OK. But then it should pay for the privilege just like every other American commercial operation by paying their fair share of taxes on property, incomes, book sales, etc.

DASubbs,
Minneapolis

Posted by: dastubbs | December 7, 2008 9:58 AM | [Report abuse](#)

I was raised in the northeast during the fifties and baptized as a Catholic, but in those years, most citizens never pushed their religious beliefs on others nor did we publicly discuss those beliefs. We held our faith as a personal issue. I was never taught that any other religion was less or more credible than others. It should be kept a personal issue. The question of whether America is a Christian nation was put to rest in 1797 when the Senate unanimously ratified the Treaty of Tripoli and John Adams signed it. It states "the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion". The screaming religious zealots who demand we should make their choice of religion the only worthwhile choice are just dividing worshipers. What would Jesus do? I do understand he told us to pay our taxes. Churches who play politics should pay taxes too. I vote for no God references in our publicly funded buildings along with no or little God name dropping in our Pledge of Allegiance, which never appeared in the original pledge.

Posted by: lhotak | December 7, 2008 11:10 AM | [Report abuse](#)

Is the Capitol Visitor Center 'Left-Leaning'?

If you're leaning right far enough, then yes.

Posted by: nodebris | December 8, 2008 12:29 AM | [Report abuse](#)

Newt, it is NOT a friggin church! It is about our government . It is not a Religious Appreciation Center. Now I know why you idiots

Posted by: majorteddy | December 8, 2008 12:29 AM | [Report abuse](#)

these people are freaking insane

Posted by: formerlylove | December 8, 2008 2:06 AM | [Report abuse](#)

The last thing we need is more Rightwashing around Washington. "E Pluribus Unum" is still the national motto as far as I'm concerned. I don't believe congress has the power to change a motto(as religious congresspeople attempted in 1956). You would think that people who dislike "the movement...toward congressionally led enlightenment" would agree with me. Unless, of course, these people are a bunch of hypocritical idiots.

Posted by: zosima | December 8, 2008 6:12 AM | [Report abuse](#)

The story features the usual Beltway treatment - which ends up confirming one view of urban liberals as insufferably smug and self-satisfied - of 'heavy irony' and air-quotes sarcasm. (The other usual treatment employed by mechanical urban-liberal writers when charged with mechanical urban liberalism is huffy defensiveness.) Far-left PC criticisms of such exhibits (obsessing about race and gender representation) are treated with high seriousness, but more mainstream conservative sensibilities are OK to trash. It's typical. What a bunch of phonies and posers most liberals are. They can't respond to criticism on its own terms, so they just ridicule it - the resort of elites through history.

Posted by: MarkR1 | December 8, 2008 8:58 AM | [Report abuse](#)

Those against separation of church and state appear to be losing the culture wars. Good.

Posted by: ejohnsoz1 | December 8, 2008 9:13 AM | [Report abuse](#)

What else does Demint have to talk about ?

When he's not spazzing out about the employee free choice act, he's trying to ferret out Gays who teach school in SC, and whining that Presbyterians aren't running the country or that the Congressional new visitors center doesn't have pews and an altar.

If Demint(R SC)is the future of his party, as he clearly views himself(not to mention it's "savior"), the GOP is in a lot of trouble and for a very long time.

Posted by: mathas | December 8, 2008 9:16 AM | [Report abuse](#)

It is not offensive to anyone's beliefs to write history accurately. It has no bearing on what the US is today. To deny how our country began is close-minded. People risked their lives to come to the US for religious freedom. Why do we celebrate Thanksgiving? People came to begin new lives free from aristocracy. People came for their God-given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That is history. Is that truly offensive to the many different people who practice different faiths in the US today? To reject our nation's history as is stood is narrow-minded. Why is it so threatening? Yes, we began with religious roots. No one can change that. I am a conservative and am getting very tired of being bullied around by liberals who are so close-minded that they refuse to accept that there are people who could possibly disagree with them. We are tired of it. We are waking up and you will hear more and more from us so get used to it. We will fight for our God-given rights whether liberals/socialists like it or not.

Posted by: evelyn7 | December 8, 2008 9:46 AM | [Report abuse](#)

evelyn7 - yes people DID come to America for their "god-given" rights. The problem is that the Christianists want to define WHICH god gave man those rights. DeMint and his ilk, along with the other christofacists, insist that it was the CHRISTIAN god. THEY want to revise history so that Christ (and not unsurprisingly, his church and his followers) gets the credit for the foundations of freedom.

This despite the fact that Jefferson and the most of the other Founders were strongly inclined toward "Nature's God" and other trappings of the Enlightenment. Our forefathers DID recognize though, that other people might disagree with them, which is why they deliberately chose NOT to specify which "god" blessed America.

You may be tired as a conservative of "being bullied by liberals" because we won't allow our religious rights to be trampled OR history be w rewritten...but hey, unless you've tried being an agnostic in the South, you've got no context of what bullying REALLY is.

Posted by: WilyArmadilla | December 8, 2008 10:35 AM | [Report abuse](#)

"E Pluribus Unum - Out of Many One"

The reporter does a good job of reporting the facts regarding this disagreement. The commentors are not so tied to the real world.

Americans argue constantly about the past, present and future role of religion in our

society. The argument regarding whether that role is accurately represented in the CVC is just another installment - nothing to get worked up over. But 10 of 14 commentors think only the secular side of the argument should weigh in. I guess my question to them is:

What part of PLURIBUS don't you understand?

Posted by: beefelt | December 8, 2008 10:43 AM | [Report abuse](#)

Yeah! Let's put a lot of religious quotations around the CVC (just what we need!), and while we're at it, let's not forget the Freemasons and their philosophy which was instrumental in the founding of this nation!

Posted by: nwsjnky1 | December 8, 2008 12:41 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Yeah! Let's put a lot of religious quotations around the new CVC (just what we need!) And while we're at it, let's put lots of Masonic memorabilia AND quotations there too, to remind us of the instrumental role the Freemasons took in the building of this nation (separation of church and state was one of their ideas)!

Posted by: nwsjnky1 | December 8, 2008 12:46 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Eve 7 writes:

"I am a conservative and am getting very tired of being bullied around by liberals who are so close-minded that they refuse to accept that there are people who could possibly disagree with them. We are tired of it. We are waking up and you will hear more and more from us so get used to it."

Europeans coming to these shores to pursue religious freedom, was but one of the reasons why they came.

And the fact that Demint and Heritage aren't satisfied, that it's too liberal or doesn't fit THEIR view of history should come as no surprise from either of these sources.

I would think that after eight years of the born again dry drunk, messianic frat boy, Texas brush popper and corporate stooge, six of those years dominated by a GOP Congress, it'd be liberals that would be tired of being bullied.

And we heard you all right....these last two elections. It just appears that there are more of us now, than there are of you.

Deal with it !

Posted by: mathas | December 8, 2008 1:08 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Actually religion has played a very important part in our history. Not all of it has been good nor has it been all bad. The most frequent error of those that want to pretend that we were founded as a Christian nation is when they claim that the pilgrims and others came here to achieve religious freedom. That was not at all the case. They wanted freedom to practice their form of religion but insisted that it would be to the exclusion of all others. Religious persecution was a common practice in early colonial America.

Nonbelievers were whipped, Catholics were denied any rights and were accused of satanism, and "witches" were drowned and burned alive. But I suspect that these are not the historical references that the religious right want to see displayed.

With the exception of Washington and Adams most well known leaders among the founding fathers were not practicing Christians. Jefferson had an open war against the Christian church. Madison, the primary author of the constitution, and Hamilton a major contributor to its passage were adamantly opposed to the inclusion of religion in government. (see the Federalist Papers) They had seen the folly of a strong religious influence on government and wanted no part of it. In the end even Adams declared we were not a Christian nation.

In fact injustice in the name of the church goes on today in many parts of the country but most especially in the bible belt of the rural south. But it also exists in sections of every major city. Although the governments of the United States have not always been religion neutral, they should have been. To be so is the ideal of the 1st amendment.

At the risk of being insulting it should be understood that those who choose to do so, may promulgate their imaginary best friend as much as they wish. Just not with any indication of the force of government. (God must be imaginary as no one has ever been in contact with a deity by any of the 5 senses, sight-sound-smell-touch-taste).

Religion should be a private matter. Jesus said so and threatened those of you who say your prayers in public with damnation because "you will have already received your reward". So please keep your superstitions to yourselves.

Posted by: RD123 | December 8, 2008 1:18 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Stop Religious wacko-ism! End tax-exemptions for Religious Organizations! Read Thomas Jefferson's edited version of The Bible. The founding fathers knew what happens when you let the religious whackos into government. We've just seen what happens when the Justice department get's taken over by young Christian zealots who think JC put GWB in the WH! Stop it!

Posted by: thebobbob | December 8, 2008 7:54 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Left leaning or reality based?

Having grown up in conservative churches, I have to say that the charge of 'rightwashing' is dead accurate. Most that I know have no idea how diverse and heretical were the Christian beliefs of the founding fathers (by todays standards), nor the abundance of non-Christian beliefs!

I strongly believe that all of the religious beliefs of the day should be presented, including Tom Paine's atheism/agnosticism, the Quakers who were whipped in Massachusetts, the death penalty for non-Catholics in MD (never enforced), the Christian arguments for slavery, rejection of the trinity in many states/churches, etc, etc. All this is well documented, and not just some fabrication of partisan liberal historians.

Don't just display the pledge of allegence, present the history of the pledge of allegience and it's belated inclusion of 'under God'. Or how late in history (1956) did 'In God We Trust' become the national motto by fiat of Congress (before that the unofficial motto was, you guess it, E Pluribus Unum). (E Pluribus Unum was on coins 80 years before 'In God We Trust' and on the Great Seal of the US from the beginning). If the offending display had said something accurate like "E Pluribus Unum--de facto motto of the US from 1782. In God We Trust--official motto since 1956", Demint would not have been able to replace the previous inaccuracy with his own inaccuracy.

Posted by: Denswei | December 9, 2008 11:28 AM | [Report abuse](#)

So those like Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) want to pick and choose what parts to display of the history our founding fathers laid as the foundation of this country. What about the part where blacks were considered property and only 3/5's a person? How about the part where women had no rights in our founding fathers eyes- indeed were property of their fathers and then their husbands? Neither blacks or women could own property. What about all the other ideas our founding fathers had back then that we have since decided did not fit into the society and ideals we as a nation have morphed into? We don't allow any of the many Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) has just

offended to challenge him to a duel for his offenses because "we the people" decided duels were not the way lawful people acted. We have changed and frankly, unless you were there when our nation was founded, you really don't know what was in the hearts and minds of our founding fathers. What people wrote and how they lived their lives can be two different things. We see that all the time. You know, like the Rev.'s Jim Baker, Earl Paulk, Joe Barron and Haggard to name a few. And let's not forget all the priests who molested children and the rabbi who killed his wife. They stood up in front of their flocks and said (or wrote) something and did another. How do we really know what was in the hearts and minds of those people like DeMint wants to hold up? Was he there? I think the most important part is the actual government part of history that needs to be in the visitor center. The part that shows how we got here from the government point of view, not any of the private part of the lives of those who came before. The real lasting part is what was created as our government, even as it has changed along with our society. Unless DeMint is suggesting he wants to go back to the that time? I would imagine even some of the women on the conservative right would object to being property with no rights and a whole lot of folks who just voted for our first African American president would object to that part of our history coming up again. Do they have a display that shows how the author of the pledge of allegiance did not include "under God" in the pledge? The minister author? How Congress, with the push from the campaign of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men's organization, added those words in 1956? Talk about putting religion in government. Not by the founding fathers. More like those with their own agenda, much like those in 1956. Give it a rest folks. Believe what you want but quit trying to force your belief's down everyone else's throat.

Posted by: alaskan2 | December 9, 2008 4:35 PM | [Report abuse](#)

I have no problem accepting that religion (specifically Christianity) played a role in creating this country. I do have a problem with placing Christian phrases and symbols over every aspect of the CVC. It's called a separation of church and state, practice it Congressmen!

Posted by: DelfinaP | December 9, 2008 5:49 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Interesting reading...After reading these posts i would say that President elect Obama has his work cut out for him.

I voted against Mr. Obama, but, the polls have spoken..he is our president and this is our country...donkeys or elephants, we are all in this together..so get over the hate and

try and understand what this country is about, and that is different opinions and different motivations, live with it and move on.

Posted by: cbrindley | December 10, 2008 12:28 AM | [Report abuse](#)

As usual there's that liberal biased confusion. Freedom of religion does not mean freedom from religion. The early settlers who came here, as we were taught in school, i.e. the Pilgrims, when there was no government of any kind. Indeed there was NO United States. The Founding Fathers were deists for the most part and not Christians, read Thomas Paine and you get a sense of where their heads were. The reference to John Adams in one of the posts fails to mention that while Adams was a Christian he used deistic terms in his speeches because he didn't accept the religious idea the God and Christ "intervened" in lives etc. No one is "imposing" religion on us, certainly not Christianity, but this left leaning congress and Senate certainly has been imposing Islam on us and the idea of a separate set of "rights" for people who don't want to accept the structures of civilized societies and feel they deserve "special treatment and acceptance" and then claim they don't want to be treated differently!

Posted by: vgailitis | December 10, 2008 10:45 AM | [Report abuse](#)

James A. Swanson, Los Altos, CA

www.bushleagueofnations.com [for FREE downloads of entire book]

I'm a progressive Christian who is appalled at the rise of the Christian Reich's upside-down version of Christ and Christianity—Pro-Rich and Pro-War—and the GOP's war on the U.S. Constitution, including the separation of church and state.

Thanks to America's warmongering Christian Reich, being "a Christian" has understandably become a big negative in the eyes of most of the world, and I can empathize with the rapidly increasing number of Americans—especially our younger folk—who have no use for Christianity.

As for me, I have chosen to stay and fight to reclaim my faith from those who use it to support a rightwing imperial agenda.

Christianity remains a powerful weapon in American politics, and we abandon this weapon to the extreme right at our peril.

This attack on the Capitol Visitor Center is just another example of what makes America's rightwing political Christianity so unappealing throughout the world,

especially to Muslims whose hearts and minds we are trying to win.

Newt Gingrich writing about “our Creator” is like reading “Bush” and “compassionate” in the same sentence.

I’m sure other rightwing power brokers will soon add more “Christian” gasoline to this manufactured controversy. Pat Robertson, Bill O’Reilly, James Dobson, Ralph Reed—the list goes on—may we please hear from you?

This and much more is discussed in, "The Bush League of Nations: The Coalition of the Unwilling, the Bullied and the Bribe – the GOP’s War on Iraq and America," by James A. Swanson (2008, CreateSpace Publishing, 448 pages).

By the way, a sidebar in the book (pp. 227-8) contains an exclusive account of Jesus discussing gay marriage with Pharisee Phat Robertson and a group of dusty travelers at a dusty camel stop near dusty Anywhere, Texas. It’s entitled, “Gay Marriage? Haven’t They Been Punished Enough?”

As a gift to patriots everywhere, the entire book can be downloaded for FREE at www.bushleagueofnations.com.

I ask for nothing in return, except that you consider using my book to help restore and build America.

Jim Swanson

Posted by: jimswanson | December 10, 2008 12:57 PM | [Report abuse](#)

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