

Syrian opposition figures and others to advance a negotiated transition to a new Syrian Government that will represent all Syrians and prevent the trading in of one set of thugs for another. The Arab Spring cannot be allowed to fail because of brutal repression, the specter of religious fanaticism, a fear of the unknown, or the cynicism born of unmet expectations. The region's many millions must have the freedom to write a new chapter for themselves and their posterity.

In this, the younger Assad has taken a page from his father, who unleashed his troops in 1982 to suppress a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama, an offensive that may have cost as many as 20,000 civilian lives. Indeed, history may be repeating itself as Hama has become a focus of both anti-government activity on the one hand, and the use of extreme violence by the Assad government on the other.

For American policymakers, Syria presents a collection of overlapping and sometimes contradictory challenges. Like his father, President Assad has repeatedly tantalized the United States and the west with the possibility of a new opening, but he has never followed through. Syria's illegal and clandestine nuclear program, its alliance with Iran and its meddling in Lebanon, a policy that culminated in the 2005 murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, form a compelling case that the Syrian people and the world would be better off with a new leader in Damascus.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND RELIGION UNDER ATTACK

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Texas (Mr. POE) for 5 minutes.

Mr. POE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, freedom of speech, the free exercise of religion, two of our most important, fundamental principles that this Nation was founded upon, have recently become under attack by none other than this Federal Government. The authoritarian behavior and attack on the First Amendment rights is an attack now on the veterans that have served our Nation.

Last week, while in Houston, Texas, I met with members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. They shared with me very descriptive and disturbing stories about the aggressive and hostile censorship of religion and speech that is occurring at none other than the veterans cemetery in Houston, the second largest cemetery for our veterans in the United States, next to Arlington, which is right down the street across from the Potomac River.

The director of the Houston National Cemetery, Arleen Ocasio, is accused of attacking the constitutional rights of our military who have fought and died for this country. The very rights that they fought and died for are being under attack by none other than this director. The thought that someone would have the audacity to censor religion and speech anywhere is despicable, but censoring the funeral services of the veterans who spent their

lives protecting the First Amendment is malicious and it's not forgivable.

Director Ocasio is an unelected bureaucrat, a nonveteran who is clearly out of touch with our veterans and the Constitution. And it's unbelievable that she would be put in charge of the sacred burial ground in Houston, Texas.

Here's what the accusations against her are, according to the Veterans of Foreign Wars who I met with. And these are the men who go to those funeral services and are the honor guard for America's war dead that are buried. And here's what they say that she has done. The chapel that is on the premises has been closed. The Bible has been removed. The cross has been taken out of the chapel. We don't know what the chapel's being used for. Some stay a storage place. Some say a meeting place. Some say it's not being used at all. This is what she is accused of doing.

She censors the prayers that are being given at the burial services of our veterans. She's banned the word "God," the words "Jesus Christ" from these funeral services. And it is the very utterance of the word "God" that's put this director in a tizzy, so much so that she wants to approve all the prayers that are given at these private veterans funerals that take place on these sacred grounds.

There are 60 burials a week of our veterans at Houston National Cemetery. And this action has got to cease, this unconstitutional action by the director. It's not the business of the Federal Government to be engaged in anti-religious activity, especially at what some consider to be a religious ceremony, the burial of our veterans. The philosophy behind such politics is anti-Christian, anti-religious, and anti-American.

Mr. Speaker, the First Amendment is first because it's the most important. It protects the freedom of speech, the freedom of press, the freedom of free exercise of religion, and the freedom to peaceably assemble. And that is under attack at this cemetery because the director wants to be in charge and make sure that none of these burials are a religious ceremony. And that's got to stop.

This cemetery, Mr. Speaker, does not belong to Director Ocasio. In fact, I don't think it belongs to the Federal Government. It belongs to the veterans who have served this Nation all over the world in all wars. It belongs to them, and it belongs to their families who bury them. And religious censorship has got to cease at this cemetery. Americans are irate about this government attack on religion. I have heard from numerous veterans and loved ones all over the country who are shocked that this government, our government, would allow such a thing to occur.

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One man in particular stood out who called my office and he was in tears,

Mr. Speaker, because his father, a World War II veteran, was days away from being buried in Houston National Cemetery. And his father had heard about the censorship of religion and speech, and he doesn't want to be buried in that cemetery with other veterans any longer.

So no wonder that so many people are shocked by the actions of this director. After all, it reminds me of the old Soviet Union, the way they used to censor speech and prevent the free exercise of religion.

The First Amendment is sacred. Funerals are sacred; and when our veterans are buried, that soil becomes sacred. And this action has to stop, and if these actions are true, the director needs to be terminated.

The government's attack on the very freedoms that these people have lived and died for is a violation of the freedom of speech and the freedom to freely exercise religion promised to all Americans in the Constitution, and that must be upheld.

And that's just the way it is.

CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN PUERTO RICO

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. GUTIERREZ) for 5 minutes.

Mr. GUTIERREZ. Yesterday, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the National Institute for Latino Policy published this full-page ad in Roll Call, one of the key newspapers here on Capitol Hill.

These respected civil rights and policy organizations have investigated and denounced the civil and human rights crisis in Puerto Rico. They bought a full-page ad to alert Congress about the "serious concerns about civil and human rights abuses against the citizens of Puerto Rico by their government, including the infringement on the rights of free speech, peaceful assembly and freedom from police violence and abuse."

And they make an essential point: If these abuses were happening anywhere in the 50 States, they would not be tolerated. These abuses would be on the front page of every newspaper, as they are in Puerto Rico.

It's time for this Congress to start paying attention. Students and working people, journalists and environmentalists in Puerto Rico are paying attention because the freedoms we take for granted in America are being denied to them each day.

I would like today to remind you what has happened. On this floor I have condemned the use of heavily armed riot squads against peaceful student and labor protesters at the University of Puerto Rico and in the streets of San Juan. I have denounced the beatings of students by police armed with night sticks, the use of pepper spray on protesters and even journalists, the groping of female students.