

# Obama calls religious opt-out in new defence bill “unnecessary and divisive”

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President Barack Obama called a conscience clause for military chaplains in the National Defence Authorization Act "unnecessary and ill-advised."

The NDAA provision ordered that no member of the armed forces may require a chaplain to perform a rite or ceremony that violates the chaplain's beliefs, and that chaplains may not be disciplined for refusing to perform such a ceremony.

The provision, which was introduced by now-former Missouri Rep. Todd Akin, was a response to Obama's 2011 repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Activists seeking religious privilege claimed that army chaplains would be required to "violate their consciences" by administering sacraments to gay people or officiating at gay weddings.

The clause in the bill reads: "The Armed Forces shall accommodate the beliefs of a member of the armed forces reflecting the conscience, moral principles, or religious beliefs of the member and, in so far as practicable, may not use such beliefs as the basis of any adverse personnel action, discrimination, or denial of promotion, schooling, training, or assignment."

But Obama, who declared his personal support for gay marriage last year, said the bill's concerns are unfounded.

"The military already appropriately protects the freedom of conscience of chaplains and service members," Obama wrote on 2 January in announcing his signing of the bill. "The Secretary of Defense will ensure that the implementing regulations do not permit or condone discriminatory actions that compromise good order and discipline or otherwise violate military codes of conduct."

Obama signed the NDAA on 2 January in Hawaii after it passed the Senate on 21 December, saying that although he did not agree with each provision in the 680-page bill, "the need to renew critical defence authorities and funding was too great to ignore."

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