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Attachments:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Constitutional Abuse Raises Ire of The American Legion

Washington (July 8, 2009) - "Tipping the scales of justice - even a little bit -- is wrong," says the leader of the nation's largest veterans' service organization as he reacted to the latest legal actions on behalf of the Westboro Baptist Church. The Kansas-based church's founder, Fred Phelps, and his followers proclaim that the United States is being punished for its lax attitude toward homosexuality by the deaths of American soldiers. This has led to the church group protesting at the funerals of and memorial services for slain warriors. They carry such placards as, "Thank God For Dead Soldiers."

"It is clearly their constitutional right to challenge any law that infringes on First Amendment rights, but what about the First Amendment rights of our fallen heroes, their families and friends?," asked David K. Rehbein, national commander of the American Legion. "I want everyone to know that The American Legion will continue to fight for the rights of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice as well as their survivors and friends as they pay their final respects."

It is now being reported that a Maplewood, Mo., statute restricting such demonstrations as staged by Phelps and followers during and after private funerals is being challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on the basis of being overly broad and a violation of the First Amendment.

"Regardless of the ultimate legal ruling, it will not absolve Phelps and his group for uttering what I consider to be the very definition of hate speech," Rehbein, who just returned from Iraq, said. "It is our hope that the president, Congress, the Supreme Court and state legislatures - working together -- will find a way to limit such despicable behavior; that someday human decency will prevail and this type of misconduct will be banished forever.

"Once the ACLU finishes attempting to defend the rights of Phelps, I hope it will join with The American Legion and the vast majority of Americans who believe the privacy rights of fallen heroes, their families and friends should be protected and preserved as they are allowed to mourn and grieve without wanton harassment," Rehbein concluded.

With 2.6 million members, The American Legion is the nation's largest veterans service organization. The Legion traditionally works hand-in-hand with members of Congress, leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs and other key stakeholders to assure appropriate funding and policy making on measures and issues affecting the military's active duty, National Guard and Reserve personnel, veterans, and their families.

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