

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 8, 2013

The Honorable Chuck Hagel
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hagel:

We write you to express our concern about a Department of Defense (DoD) policy that affects a group of our religious constituents who are an important population in New York and Virginia.

Under current DoD policy, implemented in 1988, members of the Sikh faith are unable to serve in the military unless they abandon their articles of faith—namely maintaining unshorn hair, beards, and wearing a turban. While we appreciate the importance of military protocol and understand the importance of unit cohesion, we do not believe that any American should have to choose between his or her religion and service to country. We ask that you take all necessary steps to ensure that this policy is rescinded.

Sikhs fought bravely in defense of our nation in World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War and were allowed to serve while maintaining their own standards of appearance. In addition to their history of military service in America, Sikhs serve in the militaries of Great Britain, Canada, and India, among others, and as United Nations Peacekeepers—often working closely with American troops in troubled regions. The accommodation of “relaxed grooming standards” of many U.S. Special Forces units—while clearly necessary for specific missions—demonstrates that facial hair and other physical attributes do not necessarily diminish military performance.

Our military has a long and distinguished history of training individuals from diverse backgrounds and communities to achieve one, unifying goal: to protect and defend the United States. By disallowing members of the Sikh faith the ability to fully practice their religion while serving, the military denies itself access to the important talents and abilities of these individuals who are willing to fight and die for our nation. Including Sikh Americans will enrich the military’s understanding of diverse cultures, languages, and religions, thereby allowing us to fully appreciate not only the rich fabric of our own country, but also the lands where we send our service members into harm’s way.

Over sixty years ago, President Harry Truman declared, “*there will be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed forces without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.*” These words are especially relevant in today’s modern world. We urge you to abide by the spirit of this message and allow all Sikh Americans to serve without giving up vital aspects of their religion.

Thank you for your service and for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand



Tim Kaine