

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 1053

'Keep the church and state forever separate' - USA House resolution recalls a 150-year-old speech

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On 30 September 2025, U.S. Reps. Yassamin Ansari (D-Ariz.), Jared Huffman (D-Calif.) and Jamie Raskin (D-Md.) – members of the [Congressional Freethought Caucus](#) – introduced a [resolution](#) in Congress honouring separation of church and state and noting the key role it has played in safeguarding religious freedom in America. (Read Americans United's [statement of support here](#).)

The resolution's eloquent language stands in stark contrast to the [ongoing antics](#) of President Donald Trump's Religious Liberty Commission, which continues to be driven by Christian Nationalist organizations bent on undermining the wall of separation between church and state.

Two key speeches

Among other historical references, the resolution highlights two key speeches supporting church-state separation by American political leaders: John F. Kennedy's Sept. 12, 1960, speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association and a speech by President Ulysses S. Grant on Sept. 29, 1875.

Both endorsed church-state separation during their remarks. [Kennedy famously said](#), "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president, should he be Catholic, how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because

his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.”

The Kennedy speech is well known. But what about Grant’s remarks? What led him to [deliver a statement](#) calling for separation between church and state while addressing a meeting of Union army veterans in Des Moines?

Schools marred by sectarian division

At the time Grant delivered those remarks, public schools in the United States (often called “common schools” back then) were growing rapidly – but the schools were often marked by sectarian division. Many public schools were de facto Protestant in character and hosted Protestant prayers and readings from the King James Version of the Bible every school day.

Catholic immigration in the United States had been on the upswing for years. Catholic parents naturally chafed at having their children compelled to take part in Protestant activities in public schools. Their answer was not to remove the prayers but to demand public funding for their own private religious schools.

[Grant biographer](#) Jean Edward Smith noted that Grant decided to use the speech to give “both Protestants and Catholics a stern lecture on religious tolerance and the separation of church and state.”

It’s unclear why Grant chose this particular venue to deliver the speech, but it seems that the matter had been weighing on his mind. Smith calls the speech “the most emotional of his career.”

The Grant solution

Grant’s solution was twofold: a system of free public schools that were secular in nature and no taxpayer aid to religious schools.

“Encourage free schools and resolve that not one dollar of money appropriated to their support, no matter how raised, shall be appropriated to the support of any sectarian school,” Grant proposed. “Resolve that either the state or nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good, common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets. Leave the matter

of religion to the family circle, the church, and the private school, supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the church and state forever separate.”

It was a great solution, and it was eventually adopted in America. Even before Grant’s speech, state supreme courts had begun removing coercive, school-sponsored prayer and Bible reading from public schools, a stance the U.S. Supreme adopted in 1962 and ’63. The Supreme Court in a string of cases from the 1960s and ’70s also curbed direct taxpayer support for religious schools.

A vision denied

Unfortunately, Grant’s vision did not endure. In 2002, the Supreme Court upheld private school vouchers, opening the floodgates of public support for religious education. And the secular nature of public schools, while it holds now, is under constant assault by Christian Nationalists.

Grant had his faults, but his concept of church-state separation was solid and visionary. We’d be a stronger nation today if we had stuck with it. Members of Trump’s reckless commission could learn a thing or two from him as well.

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