

# *Secular Coalition for America's Lobby Day 2019*

by Herb Silverman

Each year the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) organizes Lobby Day in Washington, D.C., arranging individual visits to Capitol Hill for attendees. Before telling you about this year's recent Lobby Day events, however, I'll give a little background on SCA.

The mission of SCA is to increase the visibility and respectability of nontheist viewpoints, as well as to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government.

SCA provides a unified voice in Washington for nontheist issues. In 2002 they started with only four national member organizations and now they have nineteen, covering the full spectrum of atheists, humanists, and other secular Americans. SCA also facilitates cooperation and strategic coordination between member organizations. The nontheist movement has often been compared to "herding cats." Uniting secular Americans into a cohesive community requires vigilance, determination, and a significant investment of resources. The end result, however, is well worth it.

When SCA was founded, its member organizations were educational nonprofits with strict limits on lobbying, so SCA incorporated as a political advocacy organization to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans.

SCA operated as a volunteer organization for its first three years. Board members and volunteers from the four founding member organizations maintained a website, raised funds, and issued action alerts. **Lori Lipman Brown**, a former Nevada State Senator, was hired as the Coalition's first director and lobbyist in August of 2005. Associate director **Ron Millar** joined the SCA staff, initially as legislative associate, two weeks later. SCA immediately began a full time program of lobbying, media relations, and outreach, advocating for those millions of Americans without god beliefs. Located in Washington, D.C., SCA lobbies Congress, the White House, and federal agencies on issues of concern to our constituency. We want to show our representatives that atheists and humanists are not asking for special rights, but we do expect and demand equal rights.

In 2007, SCA announced the results of a contest to identify the highest-ranking elected official to publicly acknowledge a nontheistic worldview. **Representative Pete Stark** (D-CA) became the first member of Congress in U.S. history to so declare.

In 2008, SCA organized its first Lobby Day event, and since then has held one every year. I've attended all of them. Each year seems to have been more effective than the previous year. Attendees from around the nation are briefed on the most pertinent legislation and issues related to church-state separation, and trained on how to advocate effectively. SCA arranges appointments for us with our senators and congressional representative, or with their staff members. We are also coached on how to engage and build relations with our members' offices on the local level throughout the year.

Last year, **Mark Sanford** was my South Carolina congressional representative. He was at another meeting, so we talked to one of his staff members. But Sanford came out of his meeting because he knew me and wanted to discuss our issues. Despite his foibles, I've always found him to be good at communicating with his constituents. Shortly after his

nationally-televised Appalachian Trail apology, I saw him at an airport. When he apologized to me, I told him that he didn't have to apologize for adultery, which was his personal business. But I was upset by his press conference apology "to people of faith across South Carolina, or for that matter, across the nation." I told him implicit in his apology was that people of faith are expected to be more moral than people without faith, and that those of us without religious faith are no less moral.

At the time, I happened to have a copy of my book, *Candidate Without a Prayer* with me. Sanford saw it, and said he planned to buy a copy. So I gave him mine. I would have liked to have seen his reaction when he read the first paragraph:

*"South Carolina is too small for a republic and too large for an insane asylum," observed Congressman James L. Pettigru, shortly after South Carolina seceded from the Union in 1860 and declared itself a republic. Had television existed, no doubt many of its politicians at that time would have been fodder for late-night comedians. I've lived in South Carolina since 1976, and stories that make our local politicians famous no longer surprise me. The comedy group Capitol Steps takes its name from the escapade involving former congressman John Jenrette, who had sex with his wife on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in the late 1970s. More recently, our former governor Mark Sanford had sex with his "soul mate" in Argentina, which he mistook for the Appalachian Trail. Come to think of it, South Carolina may not be "too large for an insane asylum."*

At SCA's 2018 Secular Awards Dinner, **Representative Jared Huffman** (D-CA) made a historic announcement that a Congressional Freethought Caucus had been established. Congressional Caucuses are formal groups of congressional members with shared goals, interests, or ideology. This was a milestone for nonreligious Americans in the constant and continual struggle for inclusion in the political process and recognition as a constituency.

The Congressional Freethought Caucus (CFC) promotes public policy formed on the basis of reason, science, and moral values. It protects the secular character of our government by adhering to the strict separation of church and state. CFC opposes discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, as well as religious and nonreligious persons. CFC champions the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide. It also provides a forum for members of Congress to discuss their moral frameworks, ethical values, and personal religious journeys.

Initially there were four members in the Caucus, and now there are twelve. See:

<https://secular.org/governmental-affairs/congressional-freethought-caucus/>

Four members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus were at the 2019 Lobby Day events. At the reception on Thursday, September 26<sup>th</sup>, the evening before our visits to the

Hill, **Representative Sean Castin** (D-IL) spoke about his work on climate change. **Representative Jerry McNerney** (D-CA) said there were closeted nontheist members of Congress who are not yet ready to come out. He mentioned one who told him, “Religion is what politicians talk about when they don’t want to talk about ethics.”

McNerney added, “Morality is what you talk about when you don’t want to talk about religion.” Talking to McNerney later, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that he, like me, is also a mathematician.

**Rita Swan** received the SCA Lifetime Achievement Award at this reception. Swan speaks and writes about child abuse and neglect related to religious or cultural practices. After their son died in 1977 because of their faith in Christian Science, she and her husband left the church and became advocates for the rights of children to medical care. In 1983, they founded Children’s Healthcare Is a Legal Duty (CHILD), a national membership organization.

CHILD disseminates information about ideological child abuse and neglect, opposes all religious exemptions from child health and safety laws, lobbies for rights of children to equal protection, and files amicus briefs in support of those rights. Swan has testified before legislative committees in 15 states and at a United States Senate staff briefing. CHILD’s work in coalition with state organizations has gotten religious exemptions from child neglect laws repealed in nine states and prevented exemptions from being enacted in several other states.

In her outstanding acceptance speech, Swan talked about some strange religious exemptions she helped overturn. For example, she was instrumental in repealing the religious exemption from wearing bicycle helmets in Pennsylvania.

On Friday morning before heading to Capitol Hill, we heard from **Representative Jamie Raskin** (D-MD) and Representative Huffman, co-founders of the CFC. Raskin has sponsored anti-blasphemy laws, one of the two issues we planned to advocate on Capitol Hill that afternoon. He also mentioned his personal confidence in reason and science. Raskin closed with a meaningful quote for us today, by **Thomas Paine**, which he modified for modern sensibility, the one that begins, “These are the times that try men’s and women’s souls.”

Representative Huffman talked about how good it felt to be out and publicly honest about who he is. He and the others in the CFC were pleasantly surprised by how much support (and contributions) they got from constituents and from others around the country. He thought that they might soon have as many as twenty members in CFC. He also brought up the Project Blitz playbook, and how Christian nationalists are shaping state law using a distorted definition of “religious freedom” to attack equality. This includes LGBTQ rights, access to reproductive healthcare, and attempts to inject religion into public schools.

**Barry Grant**, a former addict now serving as Director of Outpatient Programs for the Hope House Treatment Center in Crownsville, Maryland, spoke about what was at stake in personal terms. Grant rejected a faith-based, 12 step program, fought for an alternative secular program that fit his individual needs, and now fights to ensure others can have that same life-altering experience.

Prior to heading to Capitol Hill, we were prepped on how to advocate for two issues: access to secular addiction

recovery options for all Americans, and a resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy and apostasy laws. These are not only issues of concern to secular Americans, but also is an inclusive vision of religious freedom.

Participation in Lobby Day visits also remind our elected officials that the secular community is an active, engaged part of their constituencies and that we are invested in a wide range of issues. These in-person visits allow us to tell stories that members of Congress don’t often hear. Visiting their offices is the highest impact advocacy in which we can engage. For instance, we can tell them that 25.5 percent of Americans are nonreligious, and that number is growing; that there are 64 million religiously unaffiliated adults in the United State, more numerous than Catholics or mainline Protestants; and that the median age of the unaffiliated is 37 while the median age for white Evangelical Protestants and white Catholics is 55.

SCA is working to make our voices heard on Capitol Hill, but they can’t do it alone. When SCA staff lobbyists walk into a congressional office, their political clout is determined by how many voters your elected official have heard from. Your voice is important to get real change in Washington and in state capitols all over the country. Even as we fight against religious privileging on the federal level, some of the most egregious violations occur at state levels. I should know. I live in South Carolina!

Your congressional representatives need to know that secular Americans like you are an important part of their constituency. If you haven’t already done so, please logon to [secular.org](http://secular.org) and sign up for Action Alerts about upcoming legislation. The more members of Congress who hear from our community, the more attention they will pay to our issues. Please become active on our issues at the local level and visit members of Congress in your home district.

As SCA continues to grow and gain influence, I look forward to one day seeing an America that respects atheist and humanist viewpoints, and an America where the influence of religion is contained within the walls of churches, not the halls of Congress.



Pictured above at the Secular Coalition for America’s (SCA) reception, left to right are **Debbie Allen** (SCA’s Acting Executive Director), **Jared Huffman** (California Democratic State Representative), **Rita Swan** (founder of the Children’s Healthcare Is a Legal Duty), **Sara Levin** (SCA’s Director of Governmental Affairs), and **Barry Grant** (Director of Outpatient Programs at the Hope House Treatment Center).