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Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20515-6015

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May 25, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We are deeply troubled to learn that Department of Veterans Affairs Cemeteries in Texas and Utah contain graves of German prisoners of war with swastika-adorned headstones and messages honoring Hitler.

Allowing these gravestones with symbols and messages of hatred, racism, intolerance, and genocide is especially offensive to all the veterans who risked, and often lost, their lives defending this country and our way of life. It is also a stain on the hallowed ground where so many veterans and their families are laid to rest. Families who visit their loved ones, who are buried in the same cemeteries with the Nazi soldiers whom they fought against, should never have to confront symbols of hatred that are antithetical to our American values.

VA's decision to leave the swastikas and messages honoring Hitler in place and ignore the calls to take them down is callous, irresponsible and unacceptable. We understand that these cemeteries were not under the jurisdiction of VA at the time these headstones were installed, but now that they are under VA's jurisdiction, there is no excuse for VA to continue to maintain these headstones, instead of replacing them.

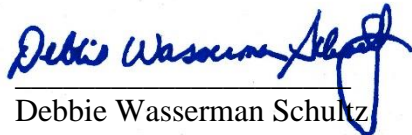
VA has claimed in its public response on this issue that they cannot replace these headstones because the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 requires federal agencies to protect historic resources. That law protects resources of extreme historical significance for, as the statutory text states, "the inspiration and benefit of present and future generations." We should certainly all agree that honoring Hitler on the headstones of German soldiers who took up arms against the United States is not in line with the law's intent.

It is particularly troubling that VA's refusal to replace these offensive headstones comes at a time when documented antisemitic incidents in the United States have reached a new high.

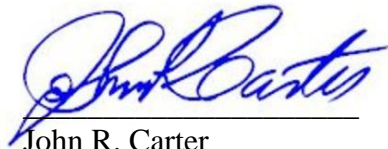
VA has a responsibility to our service members and veterans to treat their burials and final resting places with the utmost respect. VA has acknowledged this responsibility in its own policy on headstone markers, saying “VA will not inscribe any emblem on a headstone or marker that would have an adverse impact on the dignity and solemnity of cemeteries honoring those who served the Nation.” There is no question that the swastikas and inscriptions on these specific headstones have an adverse impact in honoring those who served.

While leaving gravestones in VA National Cemeteries unaltered may have been a long-standing bureaucratic policy, that is no excuse for allowing it to continue. We ask that you eliminate this antiquated policy and begin the process for removing these gravestones or having them altered immediately. It is never too late to do the right thing.

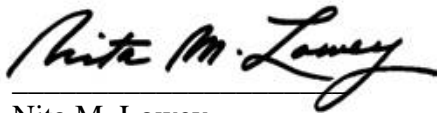
Sincerely,



Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
Chairwoman  
Subcommittee on Military Construction and  
Veterans Affairs



John R. Carter  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Military Construction and  
Veterans Affairs



Nita M. Lowey  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Appropriations



Kay Granger  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Appropriations