For over 100 years, Sikh Americans have proudly served in our nation’s military. Unfortunately, restrictive policies put into place in 1981 directly violate religious rights and equal opportunity for Sikhs and other religious minority service members, posing barriers to this tradition of honorable and capable service.

The Sikh Coalition, in partnership with McDermott Will & Emery (McDermott), launched a campaign in 2009 to end religious discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces and eliminate the ban on religious articles of faith. This campaign continues today in collaboration with the law firm of Winston & Strawn LLP, and more than 60 Sikh Americans are now serving with religious accommodations achieved by advocacy, legal action, and improved policies.
2009 A bipartisan group of 43 representatives and 6 senators request that Secretary of Defense (SecDef) Robert Gates provide individual religious accommodations for two Sikh clients seeking to serve in the U.S. Army. These historic first individual accommodations are granted to Captain (CPT) Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi and CPT Tejdeep Singh Rattan.

2010 CPT Rattan and CPT Kalsi graduate from Army Basic Officer Leadership Training. A third client, Corporal Simran Preet Lamba, receives the third individual religious accommodation and graduates from Army Basic Training.

2014 A bipartisan group of more than 100 representatives, 15 senators, and over 20 civil rights organizations send separate letters to the Department of Defense (DoD) urging equal opportunity for all Sikhs to serve in the U.S. military.

2015 In April, the U.S. Army releases rules that make it possible for observant Sikhs to request religious accommodations for their articles of faith. The prior procedures had forced turbaned and bearded Sikh recruits to violate their religion while asking for a religious exception to serve. This improved rule allows observant Sikh recruits to contract with the Army before requesting a religious accommodation, and to continue to practice their religion while the Army assesses their requests.

In June, a federal judge rules that the U.S. Army violated RFRA by denying an observant Sikh student, Iknoor Singh, his rights, and holds that he must be allowed to enroll in Hofstra University’s Army ROTC program without shaving his beard, cutting his hair, or removing his turban in the Singh v. McHugh case.

In November, 27 retired U.S. generals send a letter to SecDef Ash Carter, calling on the DoD to eliminate the prohibitive ban on Sikhs serving in all branches of the U.S. military.

2016 The Sikh Coalition and McDermott, partnered with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, prevails in litigation to permit a Sikh soldier, CPT Simratpal Singh, to begin maintaining his articles of faith while serving in the U.S. Army.

The Sikh Coalition, McDermott, and the Becket Fund initiate litigation against the U.S. Army to permit three Sikh soldiers--Specialist (SPC) Kanwar Singh, SPC Harpal Singh, and Private Arjan Singh Ghotra--to serve with their articles of faith. The Army grants long-term religious accommodations to all three of these Sikhs.
2017 On January 4, the U.S. Army updates uniform and grooming policies, making it significantly easier for observant Sikhs and other religious minorities to obtain accommodations to serve with their religious articles of faith intact, and to keep those accommodations throughout their career of service in the Army. This leads to a new wave of accommodations for Sikh soldiers.

2018 In June, an observant Sikh represented by the Sikh Coalition seeking to serve in the U.S. Navy is denied the right to maintain her religious headwear unconcealed by Navy headwear, and the Navy fails to provide her with an enduring accommodation. She is also penalized with a discharge that requires approval prior to re-enlistment in any military branch.

2019 The U.S. Air Force updates its uniform and grooming policy to include religious accommodations for observant Sikh airmen and officers. In June, with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Sikh American Veterans Alliance (SAVA), Airman 1st Class (A1C) Harpreet Singh Bajwa receives a landmark religious accommodation to serve in the Air Force.

In September, A1C Sunjit Singh Rathour, also represented by ACLU and SAVA, becomes the first Sikh to complete both Air Force Basic Military Training and Technical Training while wearing a turban, beard, and unshorn hair. That same month, A1C Gurchetan Singh, represented by the Sikh Coalition, becomes the first observant Sikh to receive an accommodation to serve in the Air National Guard.

2020 In February, the U.S. Air Force announces a clarified policy regarding uniform and grooming accommodations for religious minorities, including Sikhs. The specifics and processes detailed in the policy track very closely with the U.S. Army’s 2017 landmark change; while there are certain limited circumstances under which a religious accommodation may not be permissible due to safety considerations, the policy appears to be otherwise comprehensive.

In March, the U.S. Navy announces its own policy clarification relevant to religious minorities. While the change allows uncovered religious headgear for the first time ever and provides an accommodation process for beards, uncertainty persists as to how widely these new policies apply across all Navy duty types. The Sikh Coalition remains engaged with Navy leadership to seek clarification.
For more than 30 years, members of Congress have, on a bipartisan basis, urged the U.S. Armed Forces to grant religious accommodations to those who wish to serve while adhering to their sincerely-held beliefs.

The Sikh Coalition and a range of other organizations continue to work towards an inclusive military force that has access to the widest-possible talent pool to effectively address modern threats.

“No American should ever have to choose between following his or her religious tenets and serving the country with honor. That’s not who we are as a nation.”