



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 2, 2011

Rhode Island Governor Takes Public Stand Against Christmas

According to the Associated Press, Chafee, who changed his party designation from Republican to Independent in 2007, said that eschewing the term “Christmas” is in line with the principles laid down by Rhode Island founder Roger Williams that the state would supposedly be a place where religion and government are to be kept separate.



“I’m just continuing what other governors have done,” Chafee told the *Boston Herald* after a ceremony dedicating a separate “holiday tree” to soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. “I just want to make sure I’m doing everything possible in this building to honor Roger Williams.” To be sure, noted the AP, Chafee’s immediate predecessor, Republican Governor Donald Carcieri, “used both holiday tree and Christmas tree in his correspondence. Other governors have made no specific reference to Christmas at all with invitations to ‘holiday celebrations’ featuring a ‘tree lighting.’”

In an effort to change that tradition, in January Rhode Island’s House of Representatives passed a symbolic resolution declaring that during future yuletide seasons the state’s official holiday tree would be referred to as a “Christmas tree.”

The resolution’s sponsor, Republican Representative Doreen Costa, called Chafee a “Grinch” for his refusal to abide by the legislature’s non-binding measure. “He’s just ... as far left as you can possibly be,” Costa said of Chafee, who, even as a Republican U.S. Senator, held views with which his Democratic colleagues were totally comfortable. “He tries to be politically correct 24-7,” she added. “Nobody’s been offended by calling a Christmas tree a Christmas tree. If we have a Menorah in the State House, what are we going to call it — a candle with sticks?”

Costa was not the only one criticizing the Governor’s designation. Bishop Thomas Tobin, the head of the Roman Catholic diocese in Providence, called Chafee’s decision “disheartening and divisive,” saying that it ignores American traditions and is “an affront to the faith of many citizens.” Added the bishop in an official statement: “For the sake of peace and harmony in our state at this special time of the year, I respectfully encourage the Governor to reconsider his decision to use the word Christmas in the state observance.”

Even the farmer who provided the tree, John Leyden of Greenwich, Rhode Island, expressed his



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disappointment in the Governor. "It's not a holiday tree or even an 'X-mas' tree," Leyden told the AP. "We're a Christmas tree farm. That's what the name is."

One observer across the ocean noted that actions like Governor Chafee's reflect how a faith that once united America now fragments it. Writing in the UK's [Telegraph](#) newspaper, historian [Tim Stanley](#) recalled that in 1959 Rhode Island's Governor, Christopher Del Sesto, "proclaimed a state-wide 'Christmas Party' for people ordinarily too frail to celebrate the holiday. They came on crutches and in wheelchairs and were entertained by Santa Claus and Miss Rhode Island."

Covering the event at the time, [Life magazine](#) described the scene: "For shut-ins, it was overwhelming. Many had not been out in months. Some who had been chatting to each other on the telephone for years now met for the first time.... Said a 79-year old woman, 'I can't tell you what it means to see little children again.'"

What has happened in Rhode Island — and across America — in the past half century that has turned Christmas to a generic "holiday," and given individuals like Lincoln Chafee, and groups like the ACLU and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, the license to demand that the American majority remove their faith from the public square?

"After the 1960s, a generation of political leaders decided that equality was best measured in diversity," noted Dr. Stanley, a writer and historian at Oxford University. "They set about 'stripping the altars' of the public sphere, removing the privileges once afforded to the faith of the Founders. They turned something that was once a given (Christianity's public prominence) into a matter of controversy. They thought they were creating a fairer, more peaceful country, but the War on Christmas controversy suggests otherwise."

Concluded Stanley: "America was once united by its Christian heritage. Today, it is divided by it."

Photo: Gov. Lincoln Chafee



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