



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 5, 2013

Secularist R.I. Governor Caves In to “Christmas Tree”

For the past few years Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee (shown) has refused to officially acknowledge the Christmas tree which stands every holiday season at the Statehouse. Insisting that the state’s forefathers would have disapproved of Rhode Island sanctioning of a Christian holiday, Chafee took to referring to the Christmas tree as a [“holiday tree”](#) in order to enforce the First Amendment’s so-called “separation of church and state.”



So Chafee’s statement this year announcing the lighting of the state’s official [“Christmas tree”](#) made national news. But the governor’s concession is little more than a back-handed insult to those who treasure the uniquely Christian aspects of Christmas. In a rambling and self-serving [official statement](#), Chafee explained that because of the past angry words and supposed misunderstanding over his reasoning for referring to it as a “holiday tree,” he was begrudgingly allowing the invitation to this year’s tree lighting to refer to the state’s “Christmas tree.”

“Despite the myriad of pressing issues facing Rhode Island and the nation, this presumably happy event became a focal point for too much anger,” said the governor in his statement. “Strangely lost in the brouhaha was any intellectual discussion of the liberties pioneered here in Rhode Island 350 years ago in our Charter.”

With a tone of a stern schoolmaster correcting naughty students, Chafee informed his constituents that since he didn’t think that “how we address the State House tree” ought to impact the discussion over Rhode Island’s “lively experiment” of state government, “this year’s invitation calls the tree a Christmas tree.”

Chafee began the “brouhaha” over the state’s tree in 2011 when he insisted that the blue spruce gracing the Statehouse that year be referred to officially as a “Holiday Tree.” Chafee, who changed his party designation from Republican to Independent in 2007, said that eschewing the term “Christmas” was 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 were kept separate.

“I’m just continuing what other governors have done,” Chafee told reporters in 2011 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,” he said.

To be sure, Chafee’s immediate predecessor, Republican Governor Donald Carcieri, had used both “holiday tree” and “Christmas tree” in his holiday correspondence. Other past governors offered no specific nod to Christmas at all, with invitations to “holiday celebrations” featuring a “tree lighting.”

In 2011 the state’s House of Representatives showed its disapproval of Chafee’s anti-Christmas sentiments by passing 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-



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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 Statehouse, what are we going to call it — a candle with sticks?”

Costa was not the only one who criticized the governor. 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 in 2011, John Leyden of Greenwich, Rhode Island, expressed his disappointment, insisting that “it’s not a holiday tree or even an ‘X-mas’ tree. We’re a Christmas tree farm. That’s what the name is.”

The criticism he received in 2011 prompted Chafee to entirely cancel the lighting of the state’s “Holiday Tree” in 2012, opting instead for an event at which children were invited to sing holiday songs.

This year Bishop Tobin was among those commending the governor for bowing to reason and tradition. “Hopefully the presence of a ‘Christmas tree’ at the Statehouse will speak the true meaning of this special season and will allow us all to enjoy the blessings of peace, joy, and fellowship with one another,” Tobin said in a statement.

Representative Costa called Chafee’s flip “fabulous news — a small victory for us who fight the war on Christmas.”

Photo of Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee in front of the tree in 2012: AP Images



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