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Romney regrets leaving non-believers out of his faith speech

By Thomas Burr

WASHINGTON - Former presidential candidate Mitt Romney, once criticized for leaving out atheists and non-believers when he delivered a much-touted speech on faith in America, now says he missed a chance to discuss their role in society.

Romney, who addressed his Mormon faith on Dec. 6 to allay concerns by hesitant voters, was criticized for asserting in that pre-primary speech that, "freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom."

This week, Romney said he is still convinced of that, but that he regrets omitting atheists and agnostics from his initial address.

"Upon reflection," Romney said at the Metropolitan Club in New York City, "I realized that while I could defend their absence from my address, I had missed an opportunity - an opportunity to clearly assert the following: non-believers have just as great a stake as believers in defending religious liberty."

If a society decides to outlaw a faith or ordain a state faith, it may be the non-believers who are first likely to be condemned, Romney said. And such an action, in the end, should scare everyone, he added, because an attack on someone because of what they believe - or don't believe - hits at the very idea of religious liberty.

"A coercive monopoly of belief threatens everyone," Romney said, according to prepared remarks, "whether we are talking about those who search the philosophies of men or follow the words of God."

Romney delivered those remarks at a ceremony where he received an award for "expanding the free expression of religious faith in the public square," by the Becket Fund. The fund - which gave Romney and his wife, Anne, the Canterbury Award - is a Washington-based public interest law firm that promotes religious tolerance.

"At every turn, [the Romneys] had to explain their faith - to defend the good and venerable teachings of the Mormon church," Ann Corkery, a former U.S. diplomat, said as she presented the honor. Corkery's remarks were included in a release by the Becket Fund, which includes Sen. Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican and fellow Mormon, on its board of directors.

"The Canterbury Medal is awarded to those who refuse to compromise their principles and faith, and do so 'resolutely.' If there were additional honors for graciousness in defense of their faith, for modesty and sheer decency, we would be conferring those medals as well on Mitt and Ann Romney," Corkery said.

Romney cautiously reiterated his thoughts from the Texas religion speech that freedom requires religion, though he took pains as well to say that he didn't mean to suggest that "truth can only be found in religion or that morality exists only among believers."

Still, he said, the foundation provided by religion "makes us

better men and women."

Romney largely wrote his own remarks for the Texas speech, delivered less than a month before the first votes were cast in Iowa. To what degree the speech helped or hurt his campaign is unclear. But Romney indicated he was proud to have addressed the subject.

"This was not a speech I was forced to give," Romney said. "It was a speech I wanted to give. I felt that I had a unique opportunity to address, in a very public way, the role of faith in America."

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