

VFW Outraged by Media Support of Westboro Protestors

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Last week's U.S. Supreme Court filing of a friend-of-the-court brief by 22 news media organizations in support of the First Amendment rights of the Westboro Baptist Church has outraged the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.

"As despicable as their message of hatred is, at least the church has a vested interest in this fight," said VFW National Commander Thomas J. Tradewell Sr., a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran from Sussex, Wis. "The media only filed their brief to protect themselves against potential libel suits."

The case is *Albert Snyder v. Fred W. Phelps Sr. (et al)*, who leads the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., a nonaffiliated church that for years has taunted grieving mourners at military funerals nationwide, calling their deaths a by-product of a nation that tolerates homosexuality.

On March 10, 2006, in Westminster, Md., more than a half dozen Westboro members showed up at the funeral of 20-year-old Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder carrying signs that read "Semper Fi Fags," "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" and "Thank God for IEDs."

His father, Albert Snyder, of York, Pa., sued the church, and in 2007 a federal jury in Baltimore awarded him \$11 million in compensatory and punitive damages, an amount the trial court later halved. The church appealed, and in September 2009, the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va., voided the lower court ruling and ordered Snyder to repay the church thousands of dollars in court costs, an outrageous judgment that the VFW quickly raised money to pay.

In a brief filed earlier with the Supreme Court, which is scheduled to hear oral arguments in October, Snyder's lawyers argue that the church's right to free speech does not trump the family's right to mourn in private. The VFW agrees, and filed its own friend-of-the-court brief to support him, as did 42 members of the U.S. Senate and 48 states and the District of Columbia.

The news media brief, filed by 22 organizations that include the Associated Press, New York

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Times and Hearst, says a tort ruling in favor of Snyder "threatens to expand dramatically the risk of liability for news media coverage and commentary."

"This issue is between a grieving father who lost his son in Iraq and members of a self-proclaimed church who want to use First Amendment free speech protections as a sword and shield at the same time," said the VFW's Tradewell.

"This issue is not about freedom of the press or libel laws, regardless of how the media wants to twist the meaning of their *amicus curiae* brief," he said. "The media is a business with an obligation to conduct proper due diligence in the gathering and reporting of information to the public. The Westboro Baptist Church and its message of hatred is a sickness. Let's not confuse the two."

[Click here](#) for the VFW's *amicus curiae* brief.