

# Death leaves void on religious freedom panel: U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

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The director of a unique federal panel charged with promoting religious freedom worldwide has died after a struggle with cancer.

Joseph Crapa, 63, executive director of the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, died October 25. A onetime high-level staffer to congressional Democrats, Crapa was respected by Republican and Democratic appointees alike.

Crapa had directed the panel's staff since 2002, leading it from an oddly situated fledgling federal agency to one widely respected—and in some cases feared—by foreign-policy experts at home and abroad.

“Joe had sharp political instincts but a soft personal touch,” said Michael Cromartie, the panel's current chair. “He had an unwavering, principled commitment to advancing the work of this bipartisan commission in protecting religious freedom worldwide.”

The panel was established by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act and approved by Congress and then-president Bill Clinton, but it was bipartisan and was not formally part of any branch of the federal government.

Under the leadership of Crapa, a Catholic, the panel gained prominence with regular fact-finding missions and reports on abuses of religious freedom and other human rights in various nations—whether or not those nations are friendly to the U.S.

The commission has nine voting commissioners—three appointed by the president, two by congressional leaders of the president's party, and four by congressional leaders of the other party. The panel makes policy recommendations to the White House and State Department for pressuring regimes—including friendly ones—to end their abuses of religious freedom.

Despite his partisan background, Republican appointees to the commission praised Crapa's work.

"It was an honor to serve on the search committee that recommended Joe Crapa to be the executive director of the commission," said Richard Land, the panel's current vice chair and head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Recently reappointed to the panel, Land said he enthusiastically endorsed "this faithful Democrat who loved America and loved the freedom for which it stands." -*Associated Baptist Press*