



The One True Religion in the Military

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** The thoughts and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or the United States Air Force.*

Over the past several years, the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) has been under scrutiny for issues of religious tolerance that have caused many to wonder, “What on earth is going on at that place?” On the one hand, the same thing is happening at the USAFA that’s happening at colleges across the United States. Students are leaving home (many for the first time) and embarking on individual journeys of self-discovery to meet new people from different backgrounds with different perspectives and to engage with trained faculty who will strive to motivate each of them to discover life’s truths for themselves. On the other hand, unit cohesion, morale, and the Constitution have all been challenged at the USAFA by a growing evangelical Christian community that espouses a duty to proselytize to non-Christians and to the “unchurched.”

The media have done a fairly thorough job identifying cases of religiously intolerant behavior at the USAFA and also on the military’s response and official findings. (Examples also listed in accompanying timeline.) In the popular press, Mikey Weinstein’s 2006 book *With God on Our Side* (“One man’s war against an evangelical coup in America’s military”) offers a very personal and impassioned portrayal of the evolution of the USAFA’s evangelical climate. Our aim here isn’t to retell the stories that brought us here, but rather provide a larger context to help explain why these issues occurred and suggest appropriate action.

The Air Force Academy, located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is quite similar to many other small colleges. With a student body of 4,300, there are approximately 530 faculty members, many with terminal degrees. The core curriculum requires ninety-plus credit hours in the humanities, social sciences, engineering, and basic sciences. Students have the opportunity to select most of the majors available at any world-class institution of higher learning, many of which are accredited by national professional associations.

But it isn’t the similarities between the Academy and other colleges that help one to understand the genesis of problems, but rather the profound differences. Unlike other universities, military academies (West Point and Annapolis included) are part of the Armed Forces, who hire 100 percent of their graduates. (most colleges have no direct connection with their graduates’ employer, and few of their graduates stay on the job for twenty years with many of their classmates). This places an additional requirement that military academies ensure that each admitted student is “acceptable” to work for and alongside other commissioned officers.

Additionally, students (cadets) at the academies are considered constantly “on-duty” and thus live and work in the same environment. Although in most cases college students are free to do as they choose once they’re off-campus, cadets aren’t. They have at best limited authority to

criticize or speak their minds, and, typically, the only allowable place to address a grievance is through an individual's chain of command. But what if the grievance is within that chain of command? Other avenues such as the Inspector General's office or the local Equal Employment Opportunity office exist, but many cadets are unaware of them. And those who do know about them are often reticent to "complain."

Given the homogeneity among the military academies, one still wonders why the Air Force Academy has had publicly visible religious tolerance issues arise, whereas the U.S. Military Academy (West Point) and U.S. Naval Academy have not. Clearly the large evangelical presence in Colorado Springs is a contributing factor. Colorado Springs is home to Focus on the Family, The Navigators, New Life Church, and dozens of other evangelical Christian groups. At the same time, a systems perspective is required to truly understand the underlying issues at the Academy.

In truth, the USAFA is an absolutely amazing place. Located on some of the most beautiful real estate in Colorado, it attracts some of the most capable and dedicated staff (comprised of military officers, noncommissioned officers, and civilians) devoted to the development of recent high school graduates into second lieutenants capable of serving in the Air Force. The Academy is very well funded and its institutional processes well established. So, how is it possible that there could be "scandals" of sexual harassment and religious intolerance there?

Part of the answer is simple, but not obvious: structural instability. The Air Force embraces a culture of mobility, and for good reason. In today's security environment, it's essential that military forces be able to operate globally in joint operations and readily execute their missions. Thus, to ensure that the personnel base has a requisite variety of experiences, the human resources function routinely moves its personnel from place to place in the spirit of "professional development." Every two to four years, officers (primarily) move to new jobs in order to gain a broad base of experiences sufficient to readily adapt to complex and uncertain environments. The philosophy is that by having a wide range of experiences, the individual will be a more capable commander when reaching that point in his or her career. The Academy's military staff and faculty are included in this model of constant turnover.

The fundamental problem here is that the Academy is a developmental educational institution. The focus at USAFA is to transform the student population from kids to adults, from civilians to officers, from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to a single, shared philosophy. To do this, a high degree of expertise in the various mission elements of military training, academics, and athletics is required. But, because the majority of personnel brought to the Academy are active-duty and noncommissioned officers from the line of the Air Force, very few to none of the new commanders, new faculty, or new staff have sufficient experience or expertise in the areas to which they are being assigned to be immediately effective. As an example, each year, 50 percent of the commanders of the cadet squadrons are new, and none of them have ever been commanders before. Similarly, each year, 25 percent or more of the faculty are new. The vast majority don't have terminal degrees in the teaching area assigned, and most have never been instructors before. The key staff positions at the Academy over the past decade show a similar pattern of constant turnover. This means that the students, particularly those in the upper classes, tend to be the most experienced collective body at the institution.

Like at any school, intolerance, harassment, bigotry, cheating, and other bad behaviors exist. The Academy actively pursues a diverse student body from all over the country and recognizes that because each class brings with it many influences from varied environments, conflicts between students along their individual paths of development will occur. But sufficient structures should be in place to facilitate their learning.

One of the axioms of organizational theory is that “every system is perfectly designed to yield the behaviors observed.” So when issues of harassment and intolerance arise, the cadets can’t be blamed entirely. The organizational structure must be analyzed to make the necessary changes.

To the Academy’s credit, it has always been transparent about conflicts that have arisen there. While the school has made some progress in this area, we submit it hasn’t been enough. “Scandals” involving sexual harassment and religious intolerance resulted largely as an effect of a culture that had developed within the Cadet Wing. Regrettably, few officers, faculty, or staff were around long enough to understand that culture, identify its problems, and work to change the behaviors.

My God is Bigger than Your God

U.S. military officers take an Oath of Allegiance to one thing -- not to the President or to the nation generally -- but to the U.S. Constitution. And, as guaranteed by the Constitution there is absolutely no requirement for members of the Armed Forces to be of a certain skin color; a certain gender; or affiliate with, practice, or submit to any religious or spiritual beliefs.

When someone puts on a military uniform, nothing changes with his or her personal or religious beliefs. However, when people submit to wearing that uniform, they are necessarily obliged to another set of values and beliefs—a “shared religion” if you will—and that religion is *patriotism*, whereby their Bible is the Constitution, their cross the U.S. flag.

This so-called religion is necessary to ensure the creation of a shared reality where everyone in the military unit is included and treated with respect. Every leader, commander, and supervisor must be mindful that diversity is one of the greatest strengths in an organization. Each individual must have the freedom to appropriately express his or her views without denigrating the views of others or making others uncomfortable in the practice of their own. Like it or not, this is precisely the fine line the framers drew for us to walk by way of the First Amendment.

Some have challenged the Academy, alleging that their religious beliefs require them to testify to the truth of those beliefs and that to prevent such testimony would limit their freedom of religious expression. Prior to 2005, a recurrent example was an annual advertisement purchased by staff and faculty during the Christmas holiday season and published in the school (base) newspaper. The full-page advertisement included the words, “We believe that Jesus Christ is the only real hope for the world. If you would like to discuss Jesus, feel free to contact one of us!” The ad then listed the names of over 200 faculty and staff of the Air Force Academy, including many senior leaders. Although it’s doubtful that anyone meant for the advertisement to be anything other than a friendly holiday greeting, it ended up identifying the evangelical

Christians in each organizational element. Once any form of organizational power is attached to a particular belief structure and this belief structure is promoted by organizational superiors, it becomes a basis for a discriminating environment. Since proselytizing is part of the evangelical Christian belief system, do those who subscribe to it have the right to proselytize?

The First Amendment tells us the answer is yes. However, it also instructs us that when there is a power differential between superior and subordinate (regardless of on or off-duty status), there can be no forcible discussion of religious beliefs as such could be perceived as an official government endorsement and promotion of a particular belief system. In today's military and political environment, it has never been so important to advocate for the rights of all within the military rank and file to believe as they choose without oppression by superiors. The Constitution is clear on this one—the government will neither entangle in nor endorse any religious beliefs. You always have the right to swing your fists (off-duty), but remember, those rights stop at the tip of my nose.

We now turn to an analysis of the structural problems that can help explain why these issues occurred, and suggest appropriate action.

The Unique Challenges Posed to Evangelical Christians in the Military

We can gain insight into the need for change by understanding the unique challenges evangelical Christians face in a military environment. On the one hand, members of the military live with the fact that they could be asked to surrender their lives at any moment. Those who see combat face life and death issues on a regular basis and are forced to grapple with the fundamental questions of existence in a way those they protect will never face. This means that for many in the military, if not most, religion is part and parcel of their original decision to serve, their loyalty to country and family, and their source of strength in times of great stress. While the 'shared military religion of patriotism' and loyalty to the Constitution are the only common requirements for military service, it's unrealistic to expect the spiritual beliefs of soldiers to vanish once they put on a uniform. Indeed, the explicit enforcement of such a requirement prior to enlistment would likely cause the armed forces to shrink to unacceptable levels.

None of this is a problem for faith traditions that don't proselytize. However, for those in uniform who claim certainty regarding untestable claims and a religious obligation for others to share that certainty, tremendous problems arise. Consider the following set of religious beliefs:

- 1) One faith exclusively possesses the truth of an untestable claim and all other faiths are false.
- 2) Eternal life is the reward for believers in the one true faith.
- 3) Eternal hell is certain for everyone else.
- 4) It is required to share this belief with others.
- 5) It is ultimately incompatible to associate with unbelievers.

The more of these principles a military leader accepts, the more he or she will find leadership challenges lurking around every corner. As you work your way down the list, you are faced with increasing social, moral, and especially constitutional quandaries.

If, for example, someone believes that his faith tradition makes people better human beings, who among his colleagues is he more likely to trust? It goes against everything we know about human nature, especially adolescent human nature, to assume that members of one evangelical faith tradition won't be disposed to prefer members of that same tradition. USAFA cadets of minority faiths have expressed exactly this concern with regard to both their daily lives and their future careers in the military. The military requires teamwork, trust, and equal confidence in everyone in uniform in order to do its job. Special treatment based on race, religious belief, or any other factor unrelated to performance is inimical to morale, harmful to the unit, and jeopardizes the mission. On purely pragmatic grounds, we would argue that the impact of theological disputes on mission effectiveness is one of the most important principles that should guide the regulation of religious speech in the military.

What Is To Be Done?

To address the unique challenges presented by evangelism in the military, we propose changes in three areas: structure, demographics, and culture.

If the Air Force Academy is serious about canceling its membership in the "Scandal-of-the-Month" club, it must recognize that its responsibility for 4,300 eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds who seek a college education makes it fundamentally different from other Air Force bases. Professional staff must have greater latitude to engage controversial topics, including but not limited to religion, in the best traditions of Western intellectual inquiry. Staff should also remain at the Academy long enough to accumulate the necessary expertise to mentor young people, to understand appropriate guidelines for religion in the military, and enforce them from positions of credibility and expertise. Accordingly, we propose that the Superintendent (the highest ranking official at USAFA and a three-star general) should serve a minimum of six years, which is a typical length of time for a college president. He or she should also have the authority to reduce the mobility of his or her support staff without any repercussions to their careers. Likewise, the Commandant of Cadets (one of two one-star generals ranking directly under the Superintendent) should serve a minimum of five years.

The issue of greater tenure for faculty must also be addressed as a remedy for structural instability. The U.S. Naval Academy has tenured civilian faculty, as well as Senior Military Professors. The U.S. Military Academy at West Point has Academy Professors to ensure continuity and experience among its military academicians. Individuals once appointed to these positions can be expected to remain at their respective academy for the bulk of their remaining professional careers, and can develop the expertise necessary to provide continuity and leadership through difficult challenges. USAFA, by contrast, has neither. Two relatively modest proposals to provide 4-year rolling appointments for USAFA civilian faculty and increase the time of military doctoral faculty are currently under review, but have been stalled for some time.

In addition to moving these proposals forward, civilian faculty members who have been at the USAFA for over ten years (fortunately, that number is growing) should be given a greater role in Academy governance. They represent an untapped wealth of institutional memory and professional experience that, if properly utilized, can go a long way towards effective leadership

on the difficult issue of religious expression at a military academy. Similarly, the existing professional development path for Air Force officers who wish to become long-term academics at USAFA should be expedited, approved, and put in place.

Most of the issues concerning religious intolerance and possible unconstitutional actions in the military can be laid at the feet of demographics. Evangelical Protestant Christianity is disproportionately represented at various levels of the military and the chaplain corps; other faiths, along with individuals who profess no affiliation or no religion at all, are underrepresented¹ Some have speculated this is an artifact of the post-Vietnam era when mainline religious denominations that opposed the war dropped out of the chaplain corps, while evangelicals saw the military as a “mission field” and an opportunity to expand their influence. Regardless of the reasons, it seems clear that a greater balance among religious perspectives can only benefit the Armed Forces. There is no reason, as far as we know, why the military can’t more aggressively recruit those from underrepresented religious traditions, including Jews, Catholics, Muslims, and atheists. Such diversity would dissuade religious assertions and improve teamwork, cohesiveness, and the military mission overall.

In an environment like the military, ritual and symbolism are just as important as structure, perhaps even more so. Mission statements and guidance from the senior leadership, even if they seemingly state the obvious, matter a great deal. In this regard, much of the sense of isolation felt by junior military members who don’t share the views of the religious majority would be eased if they could be reassured of a few seemingly obvious but critical points.

The biggest issue for nonmajority military members is the perception, whether well founded or not, that they are seen as second-class citizens, soldiers, and human beings. Statements from commanders and senior leadership throughout the past few years have not effectively addressed this concern. Beyond the mere platitudes about respect, dignity, and teamwork, a direct and forceful affirmation of an essential aspect of military service is needed: All men and women in uniform operate under the same presumption of high ethical standards, loyalty, patriotism, and integrity, regardless of professed religious belief or lack thereof. We would therefore like to see all officers in positions of command publicly attest to the truth of the statement below. We call it the “Oath of Equal Character”:

(Note: We have written it from a Christian’s perspective, but expect “Muslim,” “Jew,” “atheist,” “Buddhist,” “Hindu,” “Wiccan,” “nontheist,” or any other chosen identification would be applied as applicable.)

I am a <Christian>. I will not use my position to influence individuals or the chain of command to adopt <Christianity>, because I believe that soldiers who are not <Christians> are just as trustworthy, honorable, and good as those who are. Their standards are as high as mine. Their integrity is beyond reproach. They will not lie, cheat or steal, and they will not fail when called upon to serve. I trust them completely and without reservation. They can trust me in exactly the same way.

¹ For example, The US is about 80% Christian, while 92% of USAFA cadets are. Jews are 0.4% of the Air Force but 1% of the US, and while 10% of the US professes no religion, only 0.6% of the Air Force does.

It does no good to say, as some clearly will, that the above states the obvious. Our interaction with cadets and officers from nonevangelical, nonmajority faith traditions tells us that they believe their character is impugned on a regular basis because of their differing belief system. If something like the statement above had been articulated clearly and forcefully from the senior leaders at the Air Force Academy, from all Air Force chaplains, and indeed from all Air Force commanders, the religious climate of the Air Force would be very different—and better—today.

Consider, for example, how the following actual situations might have been different had the Oath of Equal Character been involved:

- In 2004 flyers promoting Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* were placed on tables at the Academy's dining facility during the mandatory lunch formation. What if they had been accompanied by copies of the Oath of Equal Character?
- PowerPoint slides at a succeeding lunch formation intended to address religious issues displayed New Testament verses. What if instead they had displayed the Oath of Equal Character?
- Some USAFA instructors are alleged to have begun classes with a statement of faith and/or started examinations with prayer. What if classes had spent time discussing the Oath of Equal Character instead?
- What if, instead of asserting the Air Force chaplaincy's "right to evangelize the unchurched" in a July 12, 2005 *New York Times* article, the two-star general and head chaplain of the Air Force had recited the Oath of Equal Character?

Beliefs remain a right and a privilege, and freedom of conscience is among the oldest and most precious freedoms enshrined in the history of America's founding. But all members of the Armed Forces have taken an Oath of Allegiance to the Constitution of the United States. If they believe that their comrades who don't share their religious beliefs aren't as good as those who do, then they should leave the military and seek another career. Such views are incompatible with ensuring an effective Armed Forces for the United States of America.

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TIMELINE

April 2003: An e-mail message goes out to all Air Force Academy (USAFA) cadets, faculty, and staff from senior leadership promoting the National Day of Prayer. It includes the directive: “Ask the Lord to give us the wisdom to discover the right, the courage to choose it, and the strength to make it endure. The Lord is in control. He has a plan for each and every one of us. If we seek His will in our lives, we will find the ‘peace that passes all understanding.’ May God bless the Air Force Academy, our great Air Force, this great nation, and you.”

December 2003: The Christian Leadership Ministries (a division of the Campus Crusade for Christ) publishes an annual advertisement in *The Academy Spirit*, the base newspaper of the USAFA as they’ve done for the previous twelve years. The full-page advertisement includes the message: “We believe that Jesus Christ is the only real hope for the world. If you would like to discuss Jesus, feel free to contact one of us!” The ad then lists the names of over two hundred faculty and staff, including many senior leaders.

February 2004: Based on write-in comments citing concerns of religious insensitivity in annual faculty and staff climate survey, Superintendent directs his staff to start looking into potential problems in this area.

February (March?) 2004: Thousands of flyers promoting the movie *The Passion of the Christ* appear in the cadet academic and dining facilities. This garners major attention and catalyzes the need for senior leadership to address the appropriate role of religion in official duty environments.

Feb-Oct 2004: Multiple internal inquiries and investigations are made to learn the extent of religious bias, proselytizing, and discrimination within the organization. During this period, experts from the Yale Divinity School are brought in to observe and comment on the pastoral care provided during Basic Cadet Training, applicants’ initial introduction to the training curriculum of the USAFA.

November 2004: The USAFA Chaplaincy unveils a new training program called RSVP (Respecting the Spiritual Values of Persons). Shortly thereafter, the head football coach displays a banner in the locker room that reads: “I am a member of Team Jesus.”

December 2004: The Acting Secretary of the Air Force directs a task force from the Pentagon to visit the USAFA and prepare a report regarding the religious climate.

Jan-May 2005: All cadets, faculty, and staff complete the fifty-minute RSVP training. RSVP II, the second in a proposed series of training sessions on religious respect, is announced.

May 2005: A Protestant chaplain resigns her commission and speaks out in the major media against the established practices of proselytizing at the USAFA.

June 2005: The Air Force issues its Report of the Headquarters Review Group Concerning the Religious Climate at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

June-August 2005: A committee of academics assembled to create the RSVPII training.

September 2005: The Air Force releases “Interim Guidelines Concerning Free Exercise of Religion in the Air Force.”

October 2005: Former cadets (including Michael Weinstein USAFA ’77) file lawsuit against the Air Force for religious discrimination. The Air Force then withdraws a document previously circulated at the Air Force Chaplain School that included the statement: “I will not proselytize from other religious bodies, but I retain the right to evangelize those who are not affiliated.”

November 2005: Senior leadership at the USAFA changes over.

October 2006: Congress repeals Air Force and Navy guidelines on religion. Three days later, the Air Force releases new guidelines. Federal court throws out Weinstein suit given that graduates could not claim their First Amendment rights were violated since they no longer attended the Academy. Weinstein vows to refile more expansive suit in federal court.