

Navy chaplain convicted for protest

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NORFOLK, Va. (ABP)—A Navy chaplain who has accused his superiors of violating his religious freedom has been convicted by a court-martial for appearing in uniform at a rally to protest military policy on chaplains.

A military jury in Norfolk, Va., recommended that [Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt](#) be docked \$250 a month in pay for the next year and sent a letter of reprimand. The panel convicted him of violating a superior officer's orders by wearing his uniform at a March 30 press event in front of the White House.

The rally was held to protest Navy rules that forbid chaplains from leading sectarian prayers at events where sailors of multiple faiths are present. Klingenschmitt offered prayers and read Scripture at the event, but changed back into civilian clothes before answering reporters' questions.

But the commanding officer at Klingenschmitt's base, Capt. Lloyd Pyle of the [Norfolk Naval Station](#), had earlier ordered him, in writing, "not to wear your uniform for this or for any other media appearance without my express prior permission." Pyle's order came shortly after Klingenschmitt spent 18 days last December on a hunger strike in front of the White House

to protest the policy on sectarian prayers.

Of the conviction, Klingenschmitt said he was only “guilty of praying in Jesus’ name,” according to the Norfolk Virginian Pilot. His attorneys claimed he had the right to appear in uniform at the event because he was conducting a bona fide religious service.

But the jury agreed with prosecutors, who argued the evangelical Episcopalian’s uniformed presence at the press conference alone was sufficient to determine he had violated Pyle’s order and military policy.

During the trial’s sentencing phase, character witnesses both for and against Klingenschmitt described him as firm in his beliefs. His wife, Mary Klingenschmitt, said he was “passionate and dedicated” to his Christian faith, according to the *Virginian-Pilot*.

But the base’s head chaplain, Capt. Norman Holcomb, said he found Klingenschmitt “to be untruthful, unethical, insubordinate, contemptuous of authority ... and a totally frustrating independent operator.”

Klingenschmitt, in a press conference following his conviction, vowed to fight the decision to the Supreme Court, if necessary. “I will continue to pray in Jesus’ name, I will continue to worship in public, and I will not be broken,” he said.

The issue of whether military chaplains may offer sectarian prayers at events where personnel of multiple faiths are present has stirred significant controversy in the past two years. The controversy was first sparked by accusations that evangelical Protestant officers and cadets harassed cadets of other faiths at the [Air Force Academy](#) in Colorado Springs, Colo.

As Klingenschmitt’s sentence was handed down, legislators were wrangling on Capitol Hill over [a provision in a defense-spending bill](#) designed to undercut the Navy and Air Force prayer guidelines.

In May, the House added a provision to the bill that said chaplains “shall have the prerogative to pray according to the dictates of the chaplain’s own conscience, except as must be limited by military necessity, with any such limitation being imposed in the least restrictive manner feasible.” There is no such provision in the version of the bill that passed the Senate.

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