

New Air Force guidelines get mixed reviews

February 21, 2006

Posted: 2/21/06

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—Pentagon officials have revised a set of guidelines on religious freedom in the Air Force after complaints from members of Congress and some religious groups.

But the revisions met with mixed reviews from groups with interests in the struggle over religion in the armed services.

“This interim guidance outlines the basic principles we expect all military and civilian airmen to follow as we solidify formal policy,” said Lt. Gen. Roger Brady, Air Force deputy chief of staff for personnel, according to a Pentagon news release.

But Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the revisions look like “an effort to water down” the original draft because of pressure from Religious Right leaders.

The earlier draft, released in August, was intended to address a controversy centered on the religious climate at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

In April, Lynn wrote Pentagon officials a letter complaining that there was a pervasive and systematic bias in favor of evangelical Christians at the government-run school. The letter detailed incidents in which administrators, faculty and upper-class cadets at the academy allegedly promoted evangelical forms of Christianity or harassed cadets of minority faiths.

An outspoken parent of two Jewish cadets and a Lutheran chaplain at the school soon echoed AU's complaints.

Among the allegations were several incidents in which faculty or administrators promoted evangelical groups or beliefs in ways the complainants found inappropriate or coercive—such as repeated attempts to convert non-evangelical cadets and prayers or religious promotions at events with cadets of differing faiths. The charges also included several incidents in which cadets of minority faiths were harassed or humiliated by fellow cadets.

The Air Force issued a report on the academy and the guidelines to deal with the controversy.

But in October, a group of conservative congressmen—led by Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.)—wrote to President Bush complaining about the new guidelines. Jones and his colleagues claimed that the document's proposed solution—that only “non-sectarian” public prayers were appropriate at events where airmen of many faiths would be present—limited the religious freedom of Christian chaplains who wanted to pray in Jesus' name.

“The current demand in the guidelines for so-called ‘non-sectarian’ prayers is merely a euphemism declaring that prayers will be acceptable only so long as they censor Christian beliefs,” Jones wrote.

However, the old guidelines did nothing to prevent Air Force chaplains from giving sectarian prayers at voluntary events where only members of

their faith would be present— such as on-base worship services or Bible studies.

In a nod to Jones' complaint, the revision inserts a line noting that chaplains "will not be required to participate in religious activities, including public prayer, inconsistent with their faiths."

Lynn noted that the revised document contains no similarly explicit protection for regular military personnel.

"This reads like the big problem is that somehow chaplains were losing their right to be religious," he said. "But these regulations and guidelines came out of specific abuses and practices at the Air Force Academy. This is what they were supposed to remedy, and I think that this draft is a real serious retreat from the sensitivity expressed in earlier drafts from minority religious viewpoints."

Lynn also faulted the revised guidelines for deleting a list of specific routine military events in which public prayer would typically not be appropriate. In the original guidelines, examples included "staff meetings, office meetings, classes, or officially sanctioned activities such as sports events or practice sessions."

But the new document simply says public prayer "should not usually be a part of routine official business."

And, Lynn noted, the old guidelines included a separate list of events that, "consistent with long-standing military tradition," could be solemnized with "a brief non-sectarian prayer."

"Because they took out all that specific language, I feel like more and more activities will be included," he said. "They seem to want to hedge all their bets and to be able to have a person in authority pray at many different events and say that, 'Well, this is an exemption to the general principle.'"

Lynn also faulted the revision for shortening the guidelines cautioning officers and upperclassmen against proselytizing their inferiors in the Air Force chain of command.

“This doesn’t have all that language about the significance of a superior officer and a person of lower rank and all those sensitivities,” he said. “It just doesn’t recognize the power differential that caused so many of the problems at the Air Force Academy itself.”

But the Air Force’s Brady said most of the changes simply were to streamline the document.

“We found that we could more effectively express them with leaner, broader verbiage,” he said. “These guidelines help clarify religious respect issues and provide a simple document that is easy for all airmen to comprehend.”

Lynn didn’t accept that assertion. “I don’t think this is a shorter document just because people thought it was too wordy. I think it’s a shorter document because people didn’t want so much emphasis on the rights of adherents of minority religions in the Air Force,” he said.

At least one group that had criticized the earlier guidelines expressed approval of the new ones.

“The guidelines appropriately caution superiors against making comments that could appear to subordinates to be official policy. With that in mind, they properly state that ‘superiors enjoy the same free-exercise rights as all other airmen,’” said Tom Minnery, senior vice president of Focus on the Family.

“Just as important, we hope these guidelines will bring an end to the frontal assault on the Air Force by secularists who would make the military a wasteland of relativism, where robust discussion of faith is impossible.”