

History of the Chaplaincy: Challenges Past and Future

It has never been smooth sailing for the chaplaincy. Starting with James Madison in 1822, people have sporadically questioned the very legitimacy of the institution. Most recently, two lawyers argued before New York's Second Circuit Appellate Court in 1980-1984 that the State was violating the Constitution by providing funds for religious activities such as paying military chaplains and supplying them with religious literature and equipment for religious rituals. In *Katcoff v Marsh*, the Court denied the complaint on the grounds that, without the chaplaincy, the State would be denying the men and women in the military their Constitutional right to the free practice of their religion.

As headlines over the last few years attest, some believe that the chaplaincy of late has tipped the balance in favor of secular over religious loyalties. Navy chaplain Gordon Klingenschmitt declared this rather forcefully by staging a hunger strike on the steps of the Capitol, charging that the leadership had forbidden him to pray in the name of Jesus. When the Navy chaplaincy issued guidelines in 2006 on appropriate ways of praying in a diverse military, director of the International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers Billy Baugham entered the fray. "Once the government becomes the approving authority," he told the press, "the poor chaplain is forced to be an agent of the state." That same year, Mikey Weinstein founded the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, as he puts it, "to directly battle the evangelical, fundamentalist religious right."

The guidelines were revised, the headlines died down. But not for long. When the September 30, 2006 National Defense Authorization Act came before Congress, it contained a provision allowing chaplains to pray as they chose at mandatory nondenominational functions. A tug of war ensued and, after lengthy deliberations, Congress deleted the provision. Some welcomed the decision, others derided it, while it galvanized yet others such as columnist Christopher Hitchens to question publicly the constitutionality of the chaplaincy.

Since then Rep. Walter Jones has repeatedly introduced **a bill** that would authorize chaplains to pray according to the dictates of their faith in all circumstances. Rep. Michele Bachmann reintroduced the bill as an amendment in 2010, and Rep. Walter Jones has introduced bills to this effect four times, the **latest in 2015**.* The issue of prayer has often become the flashpoint for a debate over religion in the military.

The argument centers on the **Constitution**, specifically the **1st Amendment**. The issues are thorny: can the military abrogate a chaplain's free exercise? how should a chaplain behave in a secular institution? if the military requires that troops attend a function, should the chaplain be allowed to impose on them a sectarian prayer? should the chaplaincy disband in an all-volunteer military?

If we are to deliberate these and other questions thoughtfully, we need to know what the chaplains do, what the troops they serve experience, and what answers chaplains in the field, under fire, have come up with that allow them to stay true to their faith and serve their troops.

This is where our documentary comes in.

* the bills are H.R. 6514, H.R. 343, H.R. 268, and H.R. 148, requesting "To amend title 10, United States Code, to ensure that every military chaplain has the prerogative to close a prayer outside of a religious service according to the dictates of the chaplain's own conscience."

See also:

Growing Pluralism

Clergy in Uniform

History: Some Resources

