

US Republican right defends religious zealot general

Bill Vann

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Leading members of the Republican majority in Congress have sprung to the defense of Lt. Gen. William “Jerry” Boykin, the deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, urging Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld not to subject him to disciplinary action. The three-star general has come under fire following media exposure of his bigoted anti-Islamic remarks and statements revealing contempt for the separation of church and state laid down in the US Constitution.

“As elected officials serving in the US Congress, we recognize the vital importance our personal faiths play in helping us make decisions,” said a letter signed by Republican congressmen. It described Boykin’s remarks as “the free religious exercise of his faith.”

Boykin delivered his incendiary comments in full-dress uniform before audiences organized by the religious right. He has repeatedly described the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” as a religious war between Christianity and Islam, while making it clear that he himself answers only to God.

Speaking to an audience of Southern Baptists in Florida in January, Boykin boasted of his capture of a Muslim militia leader during the 1993 US intervention in Somalia. The general said he had seen an interview in which the militia leader had declared that Allah would protect him and his forces. “I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real god and his was an idol,” he declared.

In another comment on the Somali campaign, he described finding a black image on an intelligence photograph taken during a helicopter overflight of Mogadishu, which he concluded was a “demonic presence” over the city. Showing a slide of the photo to his church audience, the general declared: “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your enemy. It is not Osama bin Laden, it is the principalities of darkness. It is a spiritual enemy that will only be defeated if we come against them in the name of Jesus.”

Against the backdrop of slides showing the faces of bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and North Korea’s Kim Jong Il, Boykin told a church audience in Oregon: “Why do they hate us? The answer to that is because we are a Christian nation.” In another appearance, he described “Satan” as the real enemy of the US. “Satan wants to destroy this nation, he wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army.”

Boykin has not limited his religious interpretations to military matters. He reassured the Oregon audience about recent court rulings upholding the constitutional separation of church and state by declaring, “Don’t you worry about what these courts say. Our God reigns supreme.”

In perhaps his most chilling remark, he attributed the installation of George W. Bush as president to divine intervention. “Why is this man

in the White House? The majority of Americans did not vote for him. He’s in the White House because God put him there for a time such as this.”

While reports had surfaced previously concerning Boykin’s proselytizing in uniform, the *Los Angeles Times* and NBC television last week brought together a comprehensive report based on two years’ worth of inflammatory statements, many of them captured on videotape.

Curiously absent from most of the press reports on the controversy was any reference to protests last April when Boykin commanded the Fort Bragg, North Carolina training center for special operations troops. The general used the sensitive US Army base to host a Southern Baptist conference aimed at recruiting pastors to the denomination’s evangelist outreach program.

A letter sent to pastors last March by Rev. Bobby Welch, a close friend of Boykin’s who heads the First Baptist Church in Daytona Beach, Florida, read: “I am writing to you about a once in a lifetime opportunity to join a group of warriors at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School...Major General William G. ‘Jerry’ Boykin has personally invited you and a select group of other [pastors] who have the guts to lead this nation to Christ and revival.” The letter promised that the pastors would be treated to a “live-fire” exercise at the facility’s “shoot house,” followed by a speech by Boykin as well as “informal time” with the general.

The event provoked a formal protest by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a Washington advocacy group, which called the program “a clear violation of the separation of church and state.” It added, “Our military has no business using its resources to aid evangelism.”

Boykin and Welch had organized a similar religious event at Fort Bragg the previous year. The general brushed aside the protests over this past spring’s program, claiming it was no more than what the Special Warfare Center offered to other “civic groups.”

William Arkin, a former military intelligence analyst who documented Boykin’s religious activities for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote in an opinion piece for the paper: “Boykin has made it clear that he takes his orders not from his Army superiors but from God—which is a worrisome line of command...it is both imprudent and dangerous to have a senior officer guiding the war on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan who believes that Islam is an idolatrous, sacrilegious religion against which we are waging a holy war.”

Much of the press furor over the Boykin affair has focused on this last point. The general’s comments have been presented as a public relations blunder that will serve only to inflame anti-US sentiments in the Muslim world and seemingly confirm charges made by radical

Islamist groups that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are part of a concerted drive by Washington to suppress the Islamic faith.

But more troubling is the first charge leveled by Arkin. A senior general who takes his orders not from his military superiors but from divine inspiration conjures up the image of Gen. Jack D. Ripper, the unhinged wing commander in the film *Dr. Strangelove* who orders his planes to attack the Soviet Union.

Boykin heads what is essentially an assassination program run out of the Pentagon. He is in charge of overseeing the Defense Department's "High Value Target Plan," coordinating the activities of military special operations units and the CIA in tracking down and killing those identified by the Bush administration as enemies in the "war on terrorism." Among the targets are bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Taliban leader Mullah Omar and many other lesser known figures.

What if God should tell him that the forces of Satan are operating not only in Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan, but in the US as well? What assurance is there that he would not order political killings here? Nor is it out of the question that a top general who believes God installed Bush in the White House against the will of the American people might hear the same Deity calling upon him to organize a military coup.

Boykin has some experience in the organization of mass killings in the US itself. Having served for 13 years in the ultra-secret Delta Force commando unit, he was one of the principal advisors to the FBI and other forces that laid siege to the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas in 1992, resulting in the deaths of 86 men, women and children.

Despite warnings that the publicity over Boykin's anti-Muslim statements will foment greater anti-US sentiment in the Middle East and further complicate Washington's aims in the region, the Bush administration has proven exceedingly reluctant to take any direct position on the Boykin controversy.

At a Pentagon press conference Tuesday, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld dodged reporters' questions on Boykin's comments, claiming that he had only seen a "poor quality" videotape of one of the general's speeches and had been unable to verify whether subtitles accompanying it were accurate. He announced that the matter would be the subject of an inspector general's investigation requested by Boykin himself, a closed-door process that provides a cover for the Pentagon's and the administration's refusal to comment.

Appearing with Rumsfeld Monday, Marine Corps Gen. Peter Pace, the vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he had spoken with Boykin. Referring to the war on terrorism, Pace stated: "He does not see this battle as a battle of religions; he sees it as a battle between good and evil."

At a press conference held last week, Rumsfeld had dismissed suggestions that the Pentagon should take any action in relation to Boykin's statements. "That's the wonderful thing about this country," said the Defense Secretary. "And I think for anyone to run around and think that can be managed and controlled is probably wrong...Saddam Hussein could do it pretty well, because he'd go around killing people if they said things he didn't like."

But Boykin is not just a military officer expressing his personal religious views. He is a political appointee in his capacity as a deputy undersecretary, who has preached an extremist political gospel while wearing the uniform of the United States Army. Many of his apocalyptic statements echo those made by Bush himself.

He has enjoyed immunity from censure precisely because he is saying things that a key political base of the Bush administration—the

Christian right—wants to hear. His proselytizing in uniform is hardly typical for senior military commanders, and would likely have been called to a halt by his uniformed superiors had it not enjoyed the vocal support of politically connected preachers who wield inordinate power within the Republican Party.

The Defense Department, meanwhile, assisted Boykin in issuing an "apology" that raised more questions than it answered. The general initially included in the written apology a pledge that he would in future refrain from speaking at religious events, but the promise was removed on the advice of the Pentagon's civilian leadership.

Moreover, Boykin's Pentagon editors took a statement reiterating his belief in the religious character of United States as a nation and rewrote it to make it more extreme than the original. Boykin had written: "The evidence that this nation was founded on Judeo-Christian principles is undeniable. We are a nation of many cultures and religions, but the evidence of our foundation is historic."

The statement published by the Pentagon was changed to read: "My references to Judeo-Christian roots in America or our nation as a Christian nation are historically undeniable."

The right-wing cabal in control of the Pentagon's civilian hierarchy evidently believes that Boykin's military/religious evangelism serves a useful purpose. It helps to "energize" the Bush administration's base among the Christian fundamentalist right, one of the few political constituencies that has maintained its support for the war and occupation in Iraq.

That these same views only antagonize the people of Iraq and the entire Middle East, helping to convince more Iraqis to join the forces that are attacking US forces, is no doubt understood by Rumsfeld and company. If the result is more dead American soldiers, that is just another case of what the Bush administration regards as acceptable collateral damage.

Boykin's ravings, and the protection he is receiving from the Pentagon and the White House, underscore the authoritarian tendencies that are growing behind the increasingly threadbare façade of democratic institutions in the US. The broad mass of the American people are deeply opposed to such right-wing forces, but their opposition finds no serious expression within the political establishment and its two parties. This is because no section of the ruling elite is genuinely committed to the defense of democratic rights. Only the independent political mobilization of the working class can provide the basis for such a defense.



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