

Christian fundamentalist bigotry reigns at US Air Force Academy

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Evangelical Christians among the officers and cadets at the US Air Force Academy have created an atmosphere of systematic intolerance towards Jewish and non-religious students, according to reports by minority students and investigations by off-campus groups concerned about the rise of fundamentalist bigotry.

On April 19, academy officials revealed that 55 complaints against religious harassment by Christian fundamentalists have been filed in the last four years, including “saying bad things about persons of other religions or proselytizing in inappropriate places,” a spokesman said.

In response to the complaints, the academy has created a program called RSVP, for Respecting the Spiritual Values of all People, which consists of a 50-minute class that all 4,300 cadets are required to attend. Similar sensitivity sessions will be held for the 9,000 staff and employees of the academy.

According to an account published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Mikey Weinstein, a graduate of the academy and lawyer in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who is Jewish, was outraged by the religious bigotry expressed against his son Curtis when he entered the academy. His son was called a “filthy Jew,” among other slurs.

“When I visited my son,” he told the *Times*, “he told me he wanted us to go off base because he had something to tell me. He said, ‘They are calling me a ... Jew and that I am responsible for killing Christ.’ My son told me that he was going to hit the next one who called him something.”

“When I was at the academy, there wasn’t this institutional notion that if you didn’t accept Christ you would burn eternally in hell,” he added. “This is not a Jew-Christian thing, it’s an evangelical versus everyone else thing. I am calling for congressional

oversight and for the academy to stop trivializing the problem by calling it non-systemic. If they can’t fix it and Congress won’t fix it, the next thing to do is go to the federal court and file a lawsuit alleging a violation of the Constitution and civil rights.”

Members of the Yale Divinity School who visited the academy last year sent a memo subsequently documenting the overtly fundamentalist environment. During Protestant church services, they said, cadets chanted, “This is our Chapel and the Lord is our God.” They were encouraged to proselytize to others and “remind them of the consequences of apostasy.” Speakers declared that those not “born again will burn in the fires of hell,” and cadets were “regularly encouraged to ‘witness’ to fellow” cadets.

On April 28, Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AUSCS) issued a report on the academy, including a long list of mandatory religious observances, proselytizing by teachers (many of them officers who are the military superiors of cadets) and allegations by minority students that Protestant fundamentalism is given preferential status at the school.

Barry Lynn, the group’s executive director, said, “I think this is the most serious, military-related systemic problem I have ever seen in the decades I’ve been doing this work... There is a clear preference for Christianity at the academy, so that everyone else feels like a second-class citizen.” He wrote to Defense Secretary Rumsfeld seeking an immediate investigation.

The report said that cadets who declined to attend an evening chapel service were marched back to their dorms by upperclassmen (who have command authority over them) in a procedure they called “heathen flight.” Teachers openly identified themselves

as born-again Christians, called on students to pray before exams, and sought to recruit students to their religious persuasion.

The report explains that the prayers regularly held before routine events at the Air Force Academy, including meals and award ceremonies, would be deemed unconstitutional if held in a public high school or college or a federally financed state-run military training school like Virginia Military Institute. Even non-sectarian prayers which make only a general reference to god are considered a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment, let alone prayers specifically invoking the name of Jesus Christ.

One incident demonstrating the institutional pressure on behalf of Christian fundamentalism is the publication of a full-page Christmas greeting in the academy's newspaper in December 2003, in which 300 signatories, including 16 heads or deputy heads of academic department, three deans and other top officials jointly declare that they "believe that Jesus Christ is the only real hope for the world" and urge cadets to contact any of the signatories to "discuss Jesus."

According to the AUSCS report, "faculty members and other officers who use their official positions to communicate such messages ... are sending a strong and unequivocal message of the Academy's and the United States Air Force's unconstitutional endorsement of religion." It concluded that the evidence showed "systematic and pervasive religious bias and intolerance at the highest levels of the Academy command structure."

The tone is set from the top: the academy commandant, Brig. Gen. Johnny Weida, is a professed "born-again" Christian who addresses the cadets in chapel service and urges them "to discuss their Christian faith" with other students. In an official "Commander's Guidance," he declared that cadets "are accountable first to your God." He also instructed cadets to engage in a call-and-response in which he would shout the word "Airpower" and they would reply "Rock Sir!", invoking the New Testament image of the church built on a rock.

The academy engaged in institutional religious discrimination, denying Jewish and Seventh-Day Adventist students permission to attend off-campus religious events on Saturdays, while permitting

Christian students to attend such events on Sundays. A cadet who wanted to attend a Freethinkers' meeting off base was denied permission, and also denied the right to form a similar non-religious group on campus.

(Colorado Springs, Colorado, the city where the academy is located, is the headquarters of dozens of evangelical Christian groups, including Focus on the Family, the best-financed right-wing fundamentalist pressure group, as well as the International Bible Society and the New Life Church.)

Perhaps the most ominous allegation in the report from Americans United for Separation of Church and State is the following: "At a more basic level, we have been informed that General Weida has cultivated and reinforced an attitude—shared by many in the Academy Chaplains' Office and, increasingly, by other members of the Academy's permanent [staff]—that the Academy, and the Air Force in general, would be better off if populated solely by Christians. A stronger message of official preference for one particular faith is hard to imagine."

The implications of this are quite staggering: it means the Air Force officer corps is being educated not as a military force subordinate to a civilian authority, but as soldiers who are "accountable first to God." Those who will be placed in control of the vast destructive power of modern aerial weaponry, including "smart bombs" and nuclear missiles, are to constitute a sort of praetorian guard of Christian fundamentalists.

Aside from its dire meaning for American democracy, there is the overriding question of mankind's survival: The Pentagon is putting the power to incinerate the human race in the hands of religious zealots who believe in an imminent "second coming" in which Jesus Christ will stage a fiery return. Certainly an officer corps steeped in such a religious dogma will have few moral qualms about the use of nuclear weapons. Quite the contrary, they may well see a nuclear holocaust as a religiously ordained and even desirable way of hastening the "end time."



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