

Antiwar US Marine veteran stripped of honorable discharge status

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A US military panel has recommended that decorated combat marine and Iraq war veteran Adam Kokesh be stripped of his “honorable discharge” status for wearing his uniform in an antiwar demonstration.

In March, Kokesh and other veterans participated in a mock military demonstration as part of a protest in Washington, D.C., to mark the fourth anniversary of the Iraq war. The veterans dressed in uniform and reenacted experiences from Iraq, carrying imaginary weapons, patrolling the capital, detaining civilians and reacting to sniper fire.

After a photograph of Kokesh appeared in the *Washington Post*, the military warned Kokesh of possible violations of its uniform code. In an e-mail response to the investigating officer, Maj. John Whyte, Kokesh expressed outrage that the Marine Corps was devoting resources to such matters. He asked the officer, “We’re at war. Are you doing all you can?” Reportedly, Kokesh’s e-mail ended with an obscene suggestion for Whyte.

In response, Marine investigators sought to recommend an “other-than-honorable” discharge for Kokesh. Given such a status, Kokesh would lose some health benefits and would have to repay \$10,800 he received to obtain his undergraduate degree on the GI Bill. He is presently a student at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

On Monday, the three-member panel at a Marine command center in Kansas City stopped short of such a recommendation, but still sought to punish Kokesh by recommending a “general discharge” reflecting “significant negative” conduct.

Responding to the decision, Kokesh commented: “Frankly, I’m very disappointed with this decision and I’m very disappointed with the board members who made it. I do not think it was in the Marine Corps spirit

to take the easy road or to not take a stand. In the words of Dante, the hottest layers of hell are reserved for those who in times of moral crisis maintain their neutrality, and I think that’s what happened here today.”

Gary Kurpius of the Veterans of Foreign Wars condemned the action of Marine Corps. He told the Associated Press, “What the Marine Corps is trying to do is hush up and punish these individuals who served our country, all they’re doing is exercising the same democratic voice we’re trying to instill over in Iraq right now.”

On Wednesday, Kokesh’s appeal for a new hearing was denied. The recommendation now must now be approved by Brig. Gen. Darrell Moore, commander of the Marine Corps Mobilization Command in Kansas City, Missouri. A decision is expected within a week.

According to Kokesh’s attorney Mike Lebowitz, who is also an Iraq veteran, Moore cannot increase Kokesh’s punishment by issuing an other-than-honorable discharge, but can only accept the board’s general discharge recommendation, or reinstate the honorable discharge.

Following the rejection of Kokesh’s appeal, Lebowitz said he is considering filing a lawsuit in federal court on the grounds that Kokesh’s First Amendment rights have been restricted.

Adam Kokesh is a member of the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) and was set to be discharged from the service on June 18. Members of the IRR, for the most part, have left active duty service but still have time left on their eight-year military obligation. Members of the IRR are in effect civilians: they are not paid, have no weekend drills, and no chain of command.

During the Washington protest, Kokesh consciously removed insignias and his name tag to avoid violating

military regulations. Mike Lebowitz explained last Friday, “Anybody in the military would tell you that he was not in uniform, and the report of the military states that Adam made no indication to tell people that he was part of the military, he made it clear that he was acting as a civilian and not as a military member.”

Kokesh was justifiably angered about the resulting investigation. At a press conference June 1, he said, “I knew that the Uniform Code of Military Justice was not supposed to apply to members of the IRR. I was deeply offended to see that Marine Corps resources and tax payer dollars were being used to investigate the political activities of an active reservist. I expressed that in my e-mail, so I chastised him for wasting his time, while Marines are dying every day in Iraq, on such a trivial political issue.”

His attorney added: “This case is important because it affects hundreds of thousands of Iraq and war-on-terror veterans. As the first in a number of cases where the military is seeking to stifle political speech of IRR civilians, we need to draw a line in the sand now in order to protect the First Amendment rights of those who may have picked up a rifle in order to defend our country.”

At least two other members of the IRR are being investigated by the Marine Corps for political speech against the war. Liam Madden has been accused of wearing his uniform at a Washington, D.C., antiwar march in January, and making disloyal statements during a speech in New York in February.

The statements under investigation are described in Marine legal documents obtained by the *Washington Post*: “Sgt. Madden spends several minutes explaining the ‘war crimes’ of the Bush administration. Sgt. Madden claims that the war in Iraq is a war ‘of aggression’ and one of ‘empire building.’ Sgt. Madden explains that the President of the United States has ‘betrayed US military personnel’ engaged in the Iraq conflict.”

The actions taken against Kokesh and Madden are an attempt to intimidate and silence not only Iraq war veterans, many of whom are still in the reserves due to their eight-year military obligations, but also those within the active duty military ranks.

The Iraq war is deeply unpopular within the military. A Zogby poll from last year found that 72 percent of US troops serving in Iraq supported a withdrawal

within the year; 29 percent supported an immediate withdrawal. Since that time, there have been over a thousand more US deaths, with a marked increase in violence over the last year.

Many veterans have returned home disillusioned and angered from their experiences in Iraq, and want to speak out against the war and government military policy. Under conditions of growing antiwar sentiment within the military, the Marines are seeking to make an example of Kokesh and other outspoken veterans.



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