

US Joint Chiefs chairman declares homosexuality “counter to God’s law”

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General Peter Pace, the outgoing chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, elaborated on his views regarding the “immorality” of homosexual activity on Wednesday while testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Pace, who has served for two years as the country’s highest-ranking military officer, is due to leave his post on September 30. Asked by Democratic Senator Tom Harkin to clarify views that he first expressed in March of this year, Pace declared, “We should respect those who want to serve the nation, but [we should] not through the law of the land condone activity that, in my upbringing, is counter to God’s law.”

Elaborating on these antidemocratic conceptions, Pace declared, “As a nation we should not enact laws that make it the law of the land that certain types of activity are acceptable.” In other words, laws should be based upon religious conceptions of what is and is not moral behavior. According to Pace, “My upbringing is one that says that sex other than [between] a man and a woman inside the bonds of marriage is a sin.”

My responsibility is to “obey the law of the land and object if something is either illegal or immoral,” Pace insisted. He issued the caveat that “any nation that does not take advantage ... of the contribution of any part of its population is doing a disservice to itself.” That is, gays and lesbians should not be prevented from serving as cannon fodder in the military, but they should be denied basic democratic rights.

In March, Pace caused controversy when he said in an interview, “I do not believe the United States is well served by a policy that says it is OK to be immoral in any way.” His latest comments go even further, and provide an indication of an increasingly prominent outlook within the political and military elite—one that combines authoritarian conceptions with the active

promotion of Christian fundamentalism.

What is the foundation of Pace’s assertion? It is that “God’s law”—as interpreted by General Pace—should form the foundation of human law. At one and the same time, Pace managed to express his complete contempt for two basic democratic principles: the separation of church and state and civilian control of the military.

The hypocrisy of Pace’s comments was particularly glaring given the main purpose of the Senate hearing, which featured testimony from Pace, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte. The three defended a request from the Bush administration for \$190 billion in additional funding for the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Pace has helped supervise a military operation that has killed an estimated 1 million Iraqis, and nearly 3,800 US soldiers. The military has overseen the indefinite detention and torture of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay and facilities in Iraq. It has launched two brutal wars in the past six years, and is actively planning for a third war against Iran. Vice President Dick Cheney is reportedly pushing for the use of nuclear weapons in this conflict.

Presumably for Pace, all of this is perfectly moral. But sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage—this is against “God’s law.”

Pace’s comments provoked outbursts from antiwar protestors at the hearings, combined with chants of “Thou shalt not kill.” Robert Byrd, the Democratic chairman of the committee, who earlier in the hearings had sought to posture as an opponent of the war, cleared the room.

Neither Harkin nor any of the other senators on the committee sought to draw attention to the antidemocratic content of Pace’s view that part of his responsibility as military commander is to prevent

“immoral” activity. Harkin countered meekly that “we have to be careful about what we say,” and suggested that Pace’s comments could be “hurtful” and “demoralizing.”

Pace framed his comments as a defense of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, developed in 1993. Soon after coming into office, President Bill Clinton suggested that the military’s Uniform Code of Military Justice should be revised to eliminate those sections prohibiting homosexual activity. This provoked furious opposition within the military brass, which Clinton accommodated with the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy—a policy that essentially reaffirmed the previous proscriptions.

Pace’s comments are not the first instance of a top military official defending a position on explicitly religious grounds. The most infamous prior example was that of Lieutenant General William Boykin, former deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, who declared in 2003 that various world leaders hate the United States “because we are a Christian nation.”

To an audience of Southern Baptists, Boykin declared that his ability to capture a military leader in Somalia in 1993 was due to the fact that he, Boykin, “knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real god and his was an idol.”

In 2005, officials at the US Air Force Academy revealed that the academy had received 55 complaints of harassment from students who said they were subject to proselytizing. Officers were accused of promoting national prayer days, advertisements for evangelical Christian organizations, and films—including Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*—that were based on certain forms of Christianity. Jewish students complained of anti-Semitic slurs.

Earlier this month, an atheist soldier filed a lawsuit in federal court charging that his commanders attempted to force him to adopt evangelical Christianity. The soldier says that he was threatened with disciplinary action for trying to convene a meeting of atheists.

The promotion of religion within the military serves a number of functions, including the attempt to foster a unifying ideology among soldiers as morale plummets and opposition to the occupation of Iraq mounts. It also serves to promote an atmosphere of authoritarianism, in which soldiers are taught to believe they have no democratic rights.

The open promotion of religious conceptions intersects with two related phenomena—the promotion of religious fundamentalism within the political establishment as a whole and the elevation of the military as a counterweight to American public opinion.

Both Democrats and Republicans have been complicit in this process. On Wednesday, the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly, 341-79, for a resolution condemning the pro-Democratic Party organization MoveOn.org for an advertisement that referred to Iraq war commander General David Petraeus as “General Betray Us.” The Senate passed a similar resolution last week. The premise of these resolutions is that the military is above criticism.



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