

US soldiers punished for not attending Christian rock concert

Ed Hightower
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The US army is investigating accusations by soldiers that a commanding officer banished them to their barracks when they refused to attend a Christian rock concert at Fort Eustis, Virginia in May of this year.

Army spokesperson Colonel Thomas Collins told the Associated Press that the allegations against the officer, if true, would be contrary to Army policy. They also represent a clear violation of the separation of church and state and serve as the latest evidence of the impunity with which Christian fundamentalism is supplanting constitutional governance of the American military.

The first report of the concert and punishment of those who did not attend came from the Military Religious Freedom Foundation's (MRFF) web site. The group said multiple soldiers contacted them complaining about the incident, including those who suffered punishment for refusing to attend the concert. Mikey Weinstein, president of the MRFF, told the AP that Christian-themed events were "ubiquitous" in the military.

The concert was one of the "Commanding General's Spiritual Fitness Concerts," and featured the band Barlow Girl. According to the band's web site, BarlowGirl is "tender-hearted, beautiful young women [they are three sisters] who aren't afraid to take an aggressive, almost warrior-like stance when it comes to spreading the gospel and serving God."

Major General William E. Chambers, a self-described born again Christian, created the Commanding General's Spiritual Fitness Concert series at Fort Eustis when he was the commanding general there. MRFF reports that the Department of Defense has spent at least \$300,000 on Christian musical acts for the series.

In letters to MRFF, punished soldiers described the extent to which superiors at Fort Eustis pressured them

to attend the concert:

"[W]e were informed that instead of being dismissed for the day, the entire company (about 250 soldiers) would march as a whole to the event. Not only that, but to make sure that everyone is present we were prohibited from going back to the barracks (to eliminate the off chance that some might 'hide' in their rooms and not come back down) ... A number of soldiers were disappointed and restless. Several of us were of different faith or belief ...

"We were marched back to the company area. To our dismay there was still no sign of us having a choice. We started marching to the theater. At that point two Muslim soldiers fell out of formation on their own....

"Those of us that chose not to attend (about 80, or a little less than half) were marched back to the company area. At that point the NCO issued us a punishment." Soldiers were locked in their barracks, and were denied use of phones, media, and books. Violators were threatened with further punishment.

National Guard Private Anthony Smith was one soldier at Fort Eustis reprimanded for refusing to attend the concert. "My whole issue was I don't need to be preached at," Smith told the AP. "That's not what I signed up for." Smith also contacted the MRFF about the incident.

Smith told Truthout.org that he and 20 other soldiers resolved to complain to the barracks' Equal Opportunity (EO) office, which is charged with ensuring fair treatment to personnel in terms of race, gender, religion, and other characteristics. EO officials discouraged him and his colleagues from filing a complaint, warning that such actions would create a "paper trail" and a "timeline." Gradually, all but Smith and one other soldier dropped their complaints.

Ten days after the concert and punishment, Smith

wrote a letter expressing his deep concern to superior officers, but never delivered it. He later provided it to Truthout.org. The portion quoted below is notable for its defense of the constitutional principles reviled by Christian fundamentalist officers such as Gen. William Chambers:

“On May 13 the [non-commissioned officers] at Ft Eustis issued us a directive (equivalent to a law which we must obey) that we march towards a religious destination. In my mind that was an unlawful directive. Not only that but it was undermining the fundamental motive of me being in the United States altogether. I felt betrayed that in this instance the intent of the constitution seemed present only on paper but not in practice, that whoever is in charge might be turning to the oppressor the founding fathers were escaping from ... “

The reprisals against Smith and others, as well as the very existence of the Commanding General’s Spiritual Fitness Concerts are the latest exposures of a broader process of Christian fundamentalist indoctrination of military personnel by the highest ranking officials, promoted and funded through the Pentagon itself. The evangelization of the military is deeply antidemocratic, producing a layer of officers and soldiers who can be trusted to carry out the brutalities of imperialism abroad and violate constitutional rights at home.

Concerning the Pentagon’s investigation of the reprisals, one can be fairly sure a whitewash is forthcoming. This is precisely what happened in the Air Force’s report on rampant Christian fundamentalist bigotry at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs in 2005.

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) and its highest teachers and administrators were implicated in condoning and promoting evangelical Christian views in separate reports by Yale Divinity School and Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Instances in the reports included an academy-wide email from the commanding officer in 2003 calling attention to the national day of prayer, the promotion of Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* in February 2004 and the football coach’s hanging of a “Team Jesus” banner in the locker room.

The resulting investigation did not find a climate of “overt religious discrimination.”

Nor did any section of the ruling elite, Republican or

Democratic, seriously oppose these brazenly unconstitutional efforts to evangelize the officer corps and soldiery.

The revelations from Fort Eustis reveal that five years later, the push to convert the US military into an avowedly right-wing Christian force, has continued.



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