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Navy chaplain on hunger strike

Claims Navy is trying to kick him out because he prays in Jesus' name.



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TRANSCRIPT

MSNBC

Updated: 2:29 p.m. ET Dec. 22, 2005



Tucker Carlson
Anchor, 'The Situation'

If you thought Saudi Arabia was the only place a man could get in trouble for using the word "Jesus," think again.

A Navy chaplain has gone on a hunger strike outside the White House because he's afraid of being fired for saying "Jesus" during prayer. Lieutenant Gordon James Klingenschmitt wants President Bush to issue an executive order allowing military chaplains to pray according to their individual faiths.

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Lieutenant Klingenschmitt joined Tucker Carlson to tell his story.

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To read an excerpt from their conversation, continue to the text below. To watch the video, click on the "Launch" button to the right.

TUCKER CARLSON: Lieutenant, thanks for coming on.

LT. GORDON JAMES KLINGENSCHMITT, CHAPLAIN: Thank you, Tucker. And I appreciate your show.

I am a Navy chaplain who is still ineligible for contract renewal. I cannot reenlist right now, and the Navy cannot produce one document that says I'm allowed to reenlist. In fact, I've seen three documents that say they're still trying to kick me out of the Navy because I pray publicly in Jesus' name.

CARLSON: How does that work? I mean, I'm not doubting your story, but I kind of am. You're a Navy chaplain. You are paid by the government to talk to sailors about religion.

KLINGENSCHMITT: That's right.

CARLSON: So how is it that you're not allowed to use the word "Jesus" when you're a Christian chaplain?

KLINGENSCHMITT: Well, I have a document, and it's on my website. And a chief of Navy chaplains told me that if I pray in Jesus' name, I'm denigrating other faiths. And so they want me to pray privately in Jesus' name, but if I use the "J" word in public, then they say that I'm offending other people.

Well, I asked my commanding officer on my ship, USS Anzio. I said, "Sir, why don't we share the evening prayer? It's a tradition at sea. And let my—let my Muslim sailor come on and pray to Allah, and let my Jewish sailor come on and pray in Hebrew, let my Roman Catholic pray in the name of the father, and son, and the holy spirit. And I'll just pray in Jesus' name every fourth night. And we can take turns."

He said, "No, Chaps, I'm not comfortable with that. You keep saying the prayer, but from now on, I want you to pray Jewish prayers." And so I obeyed him. For eight months I only prayed out of the Psalms. But after those eight months...

CARLSON: Wait a second, you're not—you're not a rabbi.

KLINGENSCHMITT: No, I'm not a rabbi.

CARLSON: Why would he want you to pray only Jewish prayers? That doesn't make sense.

KLINGENSCHMITT: Well, to be more inclusive of my Jewish sailor, I suppose, but after those eight months, he still told a Navy board in writing to end my career. And here's the phrase he used...

CARLSON: Just make sure I have this straight. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but was the rabbi required to use the word "Jesus" in his prayers?

KLINGENSCHMITT: Oh, good heavens, no.

CARLSON: Was the Imam required to use the word "Jesus" or "Adonai" in his prayers?

KLINGENSCHMITT: They teach all chaplains just to pray to God and say amen. In fact, they have mandatory lectures at the chaplain school, but my commanding officer told them to end my career. After 14 years of great fitness reports, I'll be out on the street, without a job, no retirement. My wife and daughter evicted from military housing, because I pray in Jesus' name.

And the Navy has yet to produce one document, saying that I'm allowed to reenlist. Despite their double speak and their backpedaling now, they're coming out with statements saying, "We're not really going to fire him." But show me the documents. They have yet to put it in writing. And my contract expires 31 December of this year. And I'm wondering, are they going to let me reenlist or not?

CARLSON: So you want to reenlist, just to be absolutely clear about this? You want to stay in the Navy.

KLINGENSCHMITT: Absolutely. I want to stay in the Navy and I want to pray publicly in Jesus' name, but on Friday, admirals in the Pentagon, claiming to speak for the president of the United States, stripped me of my uniform for all public appearances. They said, "You can't pray in Jesus' name in public, unless you're wearing civilian clothes."

And so that's when I had enough. I began this hunger fast, and I'm asking the president of the United States to sign an executive order, protecting all of our military chaplains' right to pray according to their diverse faiths. Seventy-four congressmen have asked for this. 125,000 Americans signed a petition.

CARLSON: Hold on. Just to be clear. You would like to see chaplains who represent each faith, I think there are four, right? It would be Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim, each chaplain to be able to represent his own faith publicly?

KLINGENSCHMITT: I'm just asking the president to enforce the law that's been on the books since 1860. It's been public law. U.S. Code Title 10 says that we can pray according to our own faith and not according to the government's faith.

I even have a letter here from Senator Clinton who supports me. And I just wonder, is the president—has he lost control of his admirals? Is he going to let them run roughshod over the evangelical chaplains? You know, 65 Navy chaplains are involved in a class action lawsuit because of this. They've been suing since 1999.

CARLSON: But wait. This doesn't make sense, Lieutenant. I mean, here you have a president, who is known throughout the world as a fire-breathing evangelical. Everybody knows that President Bush is an evangelical Christian, a Methodist, a church-goer, who's on your side. That's what everybody thinks he knows, anyway. Why hasn't the president signed this executive order? I'm completely confused.

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KLINGENSCHMITT: Well, I was on a conference call with the White House staffer who's handling this issue about three weeks ago. And they said they just haven't heard enough public outcry about this yet.

So I'm wondering if anyone in your audience cares about this and would call the White House tonight, at 202-456-1414, and just ask the president of the United States to sign an executive order, allowing military chaplains to pray according to their diverse faiths.

You know, since the American Revolution, we've been allowed to pray however our bishop wants. Since 1860, it's been public law. But only in 1998 did the Navy chief of chaplains sign a policy memorandum, which is posted on my web site which says that if I pray in Jesus' name, that I ought to exclude myself from participation as the prayer giver, because I'm insensitive to other faiths. That's ridiculous.

CARLSON: Let me—let me make a prediction, Lieutenant Klingenschmitt. You are fasting now. You will not be fasting for long. I have the feeling that a lot of people are going to be outraged by this story, and the White House will hear from those people.

KLINGENSCHMITT: All the documents are on my web site, and I'm just asking the public to call the president...

CARLSON: All right.

KLINGENSCHMITT: ... 202-456-1414. He has asked to hear your opinion about this.

CARLSON: Well, he's going to hear it. I have no doubt. Lieutenant, good luck. Thanks for coming on.

KLINGENSCHMITT: Thank you, sir.

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