

Chaplain Fasts for Right to Say 'Jesus'

Alan Cooperman, Washington Post Staff Writer
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There will be no Christmas ham today for chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt. The Navy lieutenant has been on a hunger strike since Dec. 20 and says that nothing but water will pass his lips until President Bush "gives me back my uniform and lets me pray in Jesus's name."

Klingenschmitt, 37, held prayer vigils in front of the White House at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. each day last week, attracting small crowds even though the Navy forbade him from wearing his uniform. He has gained a larger following on Christian talk radio programs and in Congress: More than 70 lawmakers signed a letter to the president calling for an executive order to guarantee the right of military chaplains to pray publicly as they wish.

Klingenschmitt's three-year Navy contract expires Saturday, and his commanding officer has recommended against renewal. The chaplain says his troubles stem from his insistence on praying specifically to Jesus rather than to "God," "the Father" or "the Almighty."

Rear Adm. Louis V. Iasiello, the Navy chief of chaplains, says chaplains can pray however they like in sectarian worship services, but that in public ceremonies where attendance is mandatory for sailors and officers of many faiths, they are encouraged to use inclusive wording. If a chaplain is uncomfortable with that, he should decline to give the benediction, according to Iasiello, a Catholic priest.

Klingenschmitt is a minister in the Evangelical Episcopal Church, a tiny evangelical denomination. He said he weighed 186 pounds at the beginning of his hunger strike and has not checked since. "The weight doesn't really start to come off until day 10," he said, noting that he is no stranger to religious fasts.

The White House declined to comment specifically on Klingenschmitt's case.

"The Administration values the contribution of military chaplains to America's troops and recognizes the importance of religious free exercise for military personnel," spokeswoman Alyssa J. McClenning said in a statement.

Although Klingenschmitt may be out of the military next week, his best-known opponent is girding for the long haul. Michael L. "Mikey" Weinstein, who is suing the Air Force over alleged proselytizing at the Air Force Academy, applied last week for tax-exempt status for a new nonprofit organization.

Weinstein, a White House lawyer in the Reagan administration, said he formed the Military Religious Freedom Foundation because it will take years, and lots of money, to "beat back the tide of born-again, fundamentalist, dominionist Christians who view the U.S. military as a mission field."



Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt, a Navy chaplain, began a hunger strike Dec. 20 to protest the service's practice of omitting the word "Jesus" from inclusive prayers in public ceremonies. (Jay Paul)