

Revised rules set for prayers by Air Force chaplains

By Julia Duin
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The Air Force yesterday released revised guidelines on religious observance that say chaplains need not recite prayers incompatible with their beliefs, but that also encourage "non-denominational" or "inclusive" prayer in public situations.

The move won tepid praise from evangelicals, who see the move as progress but not close to a guarantee that they can pray "in Jesus' name."

Meanwhile, White House domestic policy adviser Claude Allen, a key aide who had sided with evangelicals on the issue, resigned abruptly Wednesday after five years with the Bush administration. His short letter to the president called it "the best decision for my family."

In a Jan. 22 conversation with Rep. Walter B. Jones reported in The Washington Times, Mr. Allen promised the North Carolina Republican that President Bush would pressure Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld into allowing military chaplains to be more explicit about their faith.

According to a military source, Mr. Allen resigned to protest the White House's refusal to lean on the Pentagon about the issue.

Mr. Jones, who led a petition drive by 74 members of Congress to allow chaplains to pray as they wish, called the guidelines "a step in the right direction," but also said: "I think more progress can be made in assuring that Christian military chaplains can pray in the name of Jesus Christ and all military chaplains can pray according to their faith."

The guidelines were the result of months of fine-tuning after complaints last spring about proselytizing by officers and cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

Chaplains will not be required to participate in public prayers that are incompatible with their beliefs, according to the guidelines, but public prayer should not "imply government endorsement of religion."

Specifically, the Air Force guidelines say, "non-denominational, inclusive prayer or a moment of silence may be appropriate for military ceremonies."

Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, a former naval chaplain who helped draft the revised guidelines, told Jewish Week that the bottom line is that chaplains cannot pray in Jesus' name at official ceremonies.

"We are trying to balance the rights of people in the military with the rights of that uniform and the responsibilities that go with it," he said.

"There's nothing subtle about what Resnicoff has done here," said Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, a Navy chaplain who went on a hunger strike in front of the White House during the Christmas season to push for similar changes in Navy policy.

"There is no substantive change" he said. "The word 'nondenominational' is absolutely unacceptable. They are regulating the content of the prayers when they say that word. What they really mean is: 'no Jesus.' "

The document seems to allow some proselytizing by chaplains. Although superiors must be "sensitive" to whether their beliefs may appear to be official policy, they still "enjoy the same free exercise rights as all other airmen," it says.

Evangelical Protestants, who have grown increasingly numerous among the several thousand active-duty chaplains, wanted far more.

"Initially, I thought the statement was a step in the right direction," said the Rev. Billy Baugham of the Greenville, S.C.-based International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers. "But there's a ways to go. We are not totally satisfied [the statement] does not

eradicate restrictions on free speech. As I read it, I do not see praying in Jesus' name is guaranteed."

But Focus on the Family applauded the document.

"We hope these guidelines will bring an end to the frontal assault on the Air Force by secularists who would make the military a wasteland of relativism, where robust discussion of faith is impossible," spokesman Tom Minnery said.

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