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TESTING THE FAITH

Christian chaplain to be court-martialed?

Clergyman says higher-ups punishing him for praying in Jesus' name, Navy disagrees

Posted: May 4, 2006
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By Ron Strom

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The Navy chaplain who went without food for 18 days to protest the service's prayer policy says he is being punished by his superiors – and could be court-martialed – for praying in Jesus name, in uniform, at a press conference outside the White House.

Navy officials, however, say it was simply the attendance of Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt at the March 23 event with former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore that violated policy, not any specific prayer.



Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt

"I am not guilty of anything but saying prayers in Jesus name in front of the White House," the Episcopal chaplain told WND.



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Terri Davis is the public affairs officer at the Naval Station Norfolk, where Klingenschmitt is stationed.

Davis pointed out the recent charge against the chaplain involves his allegedly disobeying a "regulation or an order."

"This stems from his appearance, in uniform, at a press conference," the spokeswoman said. "This has absolutely nothing to do with him praying. This has to do with his conduct as an officer and being there in uniform."

Davis pointed out Navy regulations prohibit an officer from appearing in uniform and expressing political or personal views. Klingenschmitt counters that he did not express a political view at the press conference but simply prayed.

"His attendance at the political news conference where political, partisan, religious or social views were being express" is the issue, Davis said.

Klingenschmitt points to a Feb. 21 Navy policy that states: "Religious elements for a command function, absent extraordinary circumstances, should be non-sectarian in nature."

A command function is an official Navy event outside the traditional chapel or worship-service setting. By punishing Klingenschmitt, the chaplain contends, the Navy is stretching its "command function" requirement to every public event at which a chaplain wears his or her uniform.

Klingenschmitt believes the March 23 event qualified as one appropriate for his wearing his uniform since the Navy Uniform Regulation "permits a member of the naval service to wear his or her uniform, without obtaining authorization in advance, incident to attending or participating in a bona fide

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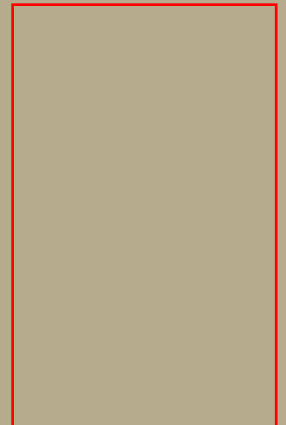
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religious service or observance."

On Friday, Capt. Lloyd Pyle presented the charge to Klingenschmitt. The chaplain had a choice of accepting a letter of reprimand or insisting on his rights to a court-martial. He has chosen the latter.

Pyle's letter said Klingenschmitt violated the Navy policy by "wrongfully wearing his uniform while attending and participating in a news conference in support of personal views on political and religious issues."

The event was meant to protest against the Navy policy requiring non-sectarian prayers in all but chapel settings.

As WorldNetDaily reported, in January Klingenschmitt received a letter from his commanding officer recommending he not wear his uniform at an earlier White House event, but not prohibiting it.

"If, despite my recommendation, you choose to participate in this [White House] event in uniform, you should limit your participation, while in uniform, to the 'bona fide religious service or observance,'" stated the letter.

In January, then, the chaplain broke his 18-day hunger strike by praying at the White House in uniform, for which he received no discipline.

"They gave me prior, written permission to wear my uniform, so long as I only said prayers," Klingenschmitt explained. "And that's all I did."

Klingenschmitt said Navy personnel contacted the Washington Post Friday as a sort of pre-emptive PR move. The Post published a story about the charges against him Saturday.

The chaplain described the two White House

events, saying, "On 7 January, I wore my uniform in front of the White House and I never got punished. But on 23 March, I wore my uniform in front of the White House and I got punished. At both events, all I did was say prayers."

"All I did was say prayers at a press conference," he said. "I did not make any political speeches. The Navy is characterizing the prayers themselves as political speech."

After the February Navy policy came out, Klingenschmitt filed a whistleblower complaint with Secretary of the Navy Donald C. Winter, which is part of the reason, he claims, the service is punishing him.

The chaplain says he now is waiting for the next step in the disciplinary process, either the dismissal of charges or a referral to court-martial.

"The maximum penalty should I go to court and lose is dismissal and five years in prison," Klingenschmitt noted.

Concluded Klingenschmitt: "It's painfully ironic that on the National Day of Prayer, when people should be praying for America, the government is punishing a chaplain for his prayers."

Davis noted the Navy has not yet determined whether or not the chaplain's case will go to court-martial.

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