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TESTING THE FAITH

Court-martialed chaplain declares victory

Congressional panel directs Navy to rescind policy barring 'sectarian' prayers

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A Navy chaplain court-martialed for wearing his uniform during a public event in which he prayed in Jesus' name is declaring victory after a congressional conference committee agreed on a compromise rescinding a Navy policy that barred "sectarian" prayers.

"This is a tremendous victory for religious liberty," said Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt in an interview with WND. "Chaplains are free again to pray in Jesus name."

The conferees, working out differences between House and Senate versions of the Defense Appropriation Act, are directing the secretary of the Navy to rescind a Feb. 21 directive titled "Religious Ministry within the Department of the Navy" and a similar Air Force policy enacted Feb. 9.

(Story continues below)

The Navy policy stated: "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



Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt

setting. By punishing him, the chaplain contended, the Navy stretched its "command function" requirement to every public event at which a chaplain wears his or her uniform.

But the move by Congress yesterday, on a bill expected to pass, will provide the basis to overturn his court-martial conviction, Klingenschmitt believes.

As WND reported, a jury of U.S. Naval officers Sept. 14 recommended a reprimand and a \$250 fine per month for a year for Klingenschmitt, who insisted an appearance in front of the White House in which he prayed "in Jesus' name" was a bona fide religious event and he had written permission from his commander to wear his uniform at such events.

But the military judge ruled wearing his uniform during "public worship" is allowed only inside a chapel on Sunday, basing his decision on the policy addressed by Congress.

Klingenschmitt said he hopes Rear Adm. F.R. Ruehe, commander of the Navy's Mid-Atlantic region, who convened his court martial, will "respect Congress enough to never sign my letter of reprimand."

"If this does cost me my career, I don't mind," he said, however, "because other chaplains will now have the freedom that I was denied."

The Navy chaplain, who went without food for 18 days to protest the service's prayer policy, submitted a whistleblower complaint to Sen. Hillary Clinton and other lawmakers in June, charging top naval officials with violating the Constitution by affirming the actions of officers who, he said, barred him from praying in Jesus' name and quoting certain Bible passages during an optional worship service.

The complaint to Congress came after Ruehe and a top Navy lawyer capped an 18-month investigation by ruling the chaplain's superior officer, Capt. James R. Carr, had grounds for punishing him.

Military Judge Anita K. Baker, designated by Secretary of the Navy Donald C. Winter, endorsed the decision by Ruehe to dismiss Klingenschmitt's original complaint as being "without merit."

The subsequent court-martial centered on Klingenschmitt's participation in a March 30 event with former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore in front of the White House.

Klingenschmitt, a minister in the Evangelical Episcopal Church – which split from the liberal mainline denomination in the 1990s – insisted he was being punished by his superiors for praying in Jesus' name, in uniform, at the event.

Based on Ruehe's June ruling, he said the complaint against him also included preaching the gospel at an optional service – a memorial for a sailor.

Klingenschmitt believes the March 30 event qualified as one appropriate for 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 religious service or observance."

In April, 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 chose 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."

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