



Congressional Prayer Caucus

Congressman J. Randy Forbes, Chairman

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Military Chaplains

By: Congressman Randy Forbes

On July 29, 1775, chaplains were officially recognized as part of the United States Military by the Continental Congress during the Revolutionary War. This of course, was a congress that believed very much in the power and importance of prayer and understood the role our chaplains could play in the lives of people in uniform. After all, this was the same congress that began with a prayer at its initial meeting on September 7, 1774, because they recognized the importance of God's blessings on their land. No one had to tell them the historical importance of prayer in America. They had seen it and they had lived it.

Throughout the 200 years that would follow, the branches of our military would regularly reaffirm the vital role of our military chaplains in periodic regulations. In an Air Force Policy Directive issued on July 1, 1999, and in a Secretary of the Navy Instruction issued on October 12, 2000, there was an emphasis on the "free exercise of religion" by our chaplains and even recognition of their role in advising commands in matters of morale, morals, and spiritual well being. This policy was in keeping with policies that had governed military chaplains for 210 years. In that 210 years there were no significant problems with the way our chaplains performed their duties. They acted appropriately in the circumstances in which they found themselves and their personnel.

Today in the United States there is a well-funded and well-organized anti-prayer and anti-religion movement whose goal is the removal of all vestiges of prayer or religion from the military and the government sector. They often have enormous sway with policy makers who seek first the kingdom of political correctness.

In an effort to accommodate these interests, the Air Force issued interim guidelines for chaplains on August 30, 2005, which significantly broadened the scope of religious regulation on military chaplains specifically. However, even the Air Force realized they had overreached and they revised these guidelines on February 9, 2006. Unfortunately, even the last revision stated among other things that "Leaders at every level bear a special responsibility to ensure their words and actions cannot reasonably be construed to be officially endorsing nor disapproving any faith belief or absence of belief." In other words, you cannot mention God because it could be "construed" to endorse a faith that embraces the concept that God is real.

On February 21, 2006, the Navy took a step further in issuing a new policy guidance that essentially allowed a commander to restrict the nature of the prayer in any command function.

Numerous reports began surfacing in which chaplains of all faiths were feeling they had been marginalized and that their prayers were essentially being edited by their commanders. Some suggested they had stopped being chaplains and were now more like guidance counselors. Others wondered why there was such a rush to change a policy that had worked for 210 years and why that change had taken place so quickly without adequate hearings and input from all sides. In the short sweep of a Secretary's pen, prayer had been relegated to a mere ceremonial salutation.

Fortunately, the Army was far wiser. They concluded after reviewing the practices of their chaplains that "nothing was broken" so they did not need to fix a policy that had worked for 210 years.

When the House Armed Services Committee considered the FY2007 Defense Authorization Act, they fought to reverse the new restrictive regulations issued by the Secretary of the Air Force and the Secretary of the Navy and preserve the policies that had governed the chaplains for 210 years. They inserted language in the bill that simply stated the chaplains could pray according to the dictates of their own conscience. This language was adopted by the House of Representatives on May 11, 2006.

In September 2006 the Senate refused to accept the rollback of these restrictive regulations. They argued that doing so would marginalize chaplains and completely ignored the fact that it was these very regulations that had marginalized them in the first place.

Next, the Senate argued that before they would roll back the restrictive provisions, they should hold hearings on the matter. However, they never asked why hearings were not held in the first place before a 210 year old practice was changed.

Fortunately, Members of the Congressional Prayer Caucus joined with other House Members and united behind the leadership of the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Duncan Hunter. They refused to pass the bill until these provisions were addressed. On September 29, 2006, the Senate agreed to language that directed the Secretary of the Air Force and the Secretary of the Navy to rescind their current policies and reinstate the chaplain provisions that had existed for over 200 years.

The irony of this fight was that one of the greatest chaplains of all time was Senate Chaplain Peter Marshall. If he had been subject to these regulations, he would never have been able to offer almost 95% of the prayers he made in the United States Senate. Yet as Senator Harley Kilgore of West Virginia once said, "Peter Marshall expresses more feeling and says more in his short prayers than all the Senators put together the rest of the day." Perhaps it would do us well to listen to the prayer he offered in the Senate on March 18, 1948:

"Our Father in Heaven, save us from the conceit which refuses to believe that God knows more about government than we do, and deliver us from the stubbornness that will not seek God's help. Today we claim Thy promise: "If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and it shall be given to him." Thou knowest, Lord, how much we need it. Make us willing to ask for it and eager to have it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."