

Whitewash of Christian fundamentalist bigotry at US Air Force Academy

By Kate Randall
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A US Air Force panel sent to investigate charges of religious promotion and discrimination at the US Air Force Academy (USAFA) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has issued a report that amounts to a whitewash of the systematic Christian fundamentalist bigotry promoted at the officer training institution.

While determining that officers and faculty members at the academy used their positions to promote evangelical Christian beliefs, and failed to accommodate the needs of non-Christian cadets, the panel said it “found a religious climate that does not involve overt religious discrimination.”

The official Air Force task panel issued its report Wednesday at a Pentagon news conference. The day before, an Air Force chaplain at the academy, Capt. McLinda S. Morton, submitted her resignation from the military. The Lutheran chaplain had previously accused her superiors of proselytizing for evangelical Christianity at the academy. Morton said she had been fired from an administrative job because of her public criticism and had been ordered to deploy to Japan.

The findings of the 16-member panel that “overt religious discrimination” did not occur at the academy are belied by the contents of the report itself. Many of the instances of religious bigotry referred to by the panel were previously documented in a Yale Divinity School study as well as a report by the Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AUSCS), both issued in April of this year.

The *Report of the Headquarters Review Group Concerning the Religious Climate at the U.S. Air Force Academy* contains a “Chronology of Events” section reviewing the period from April 2003 through early June 2005 at the institution. Even a cursory review of this chronology reveals that the academy sanctioned an atmosphere of religious discrimination in violation of the First Amendment to the US Constitution and the separation of church and state.

In April 2003, the USAFA commandant, Gen. Johnny A. Weida, released a USAFA-wide e-mail publicizing the National Day of Prayer—which was seen by many cadets, faculty and staff as “inappropriate use of position to endorse religion and was exclusionary,” according to the report. (It should be noted that the National Day of Prayer was signed into law by Ronald Reagan in 1988 following overwhelming support in Congress from both Democrats and Republicans.)

In September 2003, General Weida—who describes himself as a born-again Christian—spoke at a Protestant retreat for academy

freshmen and introduced a “J for Jesus” hand signal, to which cadets were instructed to reply, “Rocks!” Weida later used this hand signal at a briefing for cadets that was not designated as a specifically Protestant event.

In December 2003, the Christian Leadership Ministries (CLM) bought an advertisement in the USAFA’s base newspaper, *Academy Spirit*, which included the messages, “We believe that Jesus Christ is the only real hope for the world” and “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.—*Acts 4:12.*” The ad was signed by more than 250 individuals, including key USAFA personnel.

In February 2004, flyers advertising *The Passion of The Christ*, Mel Gibson’s film about the crucifixion, were placed at some 4,000 place settings at the cadet dining facility. Cadets reported they felt under pressure to see the movie. The report notes: “Jewish cadets told the team they encountered anti-Semitic comments that they believe ‘The Passion of The Christ’ flyer event inspired.”

Following complaints over the incident, Gen. Weida spoke to cadets during a noon meal about religious tolerance. “During his remarks the daily announcements, set to an automatic timer, continued to be displayed on the dining hall’s theater-like projection screens. One announcement that appeared on the screen during his talk included a Bible quote,” the report states.

A cadet who identified himself as an atheist, who is now a USAFA graduate, said in May 2004 that he perceived a “pervasive problem” of religious intolerance and a “systematic bias” against any cadet not espousing Christian views. He charged that leadership at the highest levels of the academy implicitly endorses Christianity.

According to the report, he complained of “comments, prayers, songs with religious references (e.g., God Bless America) at official (mandatory) ceremonies, religious messages at the footers of numerous emails, and a squadron mural with a religious reference.” The USAFA chaplain staff denied his request for permission to form a SPIRE group for Freethinkers, an organized group of atheists, on the basis that the group was not “faith-based.” The USAFA superintendent reportedly commented to him that “there are no atheists in foxholes.”

For one week in July 2004, a visiting group from Yale Divinity School attended USAFA Basic Cadet Training (BCT), an annual event for newly arriving freshman held each summer. Following

completion of BCT, Dr. Kristen Leslie and Chaplain MeLinda Morton wrote a memo citing “consistent specific articulations of Evangelical Christian themes during general Protestant services” in the course of BCT.

A “contemporary service” attended by some members of the Yale Divinity School team was led by a chaplain who was an ordained minister endorsed by the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, an evangelical, Pentecostal denomination. Cadets at this service were encouraged to chant, “This is our chapel and the Lord is our God,” and were called on to “pray for the salvation of fellow BCT members who chose not to attend worship.” The chaplain has denied the allegation that he pressured cadets to tell classmates they would “burn in hell” if they did not comply with a particular doctrine.

In November 2004, the USAFA head football coach hung a “Team Jesus” banner in the locker room. The banner was removed the same day following complaints from the athletic director.

The Air Force panel’s contention that such blatant acts of religious promotion and intimidation—tolerated by the academy hierarchy and practiced by leading USAFA personnel—do not constitute “overt religious discrimination” is preposterous.

The information gathered by the official Air Force panel substantiates the charges made by the studies initiated by both the Yale Divinity School study and the Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Other corroborating material has appeared in the press, including an account published in the *Los Angeles Times* quoting Mikey Weinstein, a graduate of USAFA and a lawyer in New Mexico, who said his son Curtis, a sophomore this past school year at the academy, had been called a “filthy Jew.” “They are calling me a...Jew and that I am responsible for killing Christ,” Curtis told his father.

In the “Background” section of their report, the Air Force panel attempts to justify the pervasive religious atmosphere at the academy. They claim the USAFA is challenged with balancing the First Amendment’s prohibition against the state “establishment” of religion with its bar on state interference in “the free exercise thereof.”

They write: “Inherent in military service is the very real potential that individuals may be asked to forfeit their lives in defense of the Nation. Again, for some individuals the ability to withstand the privations of military service and face the prospect of death in the performance of their duties requires the strength of character that is founded upon their religious faith.”

The fraudulence of this approach is exposed by the First Amendment itself, which clearly states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

If leaders at the US Air Force Academy—which trains young men and women to serve as officers in a branch of the US military—promote and tolerate religious discrimination against non-Christians, and openly espouse evangelical views in the course of official academy functions, this is clearly a violation of these Constitutional protections against the “establishment” of

religion.

However, among the Christian-right forces which dominate the Bush administration and the Republican Party, and which are exercising increasing control over the functioning of all aspects of government in the US, any affront to the effective institutionalization of Christian fundamentalism is heresy and akin to religious persecution.

Colorado Springs, where USAFA is located, is home to more than 100 evangelical Christian organizations, including Focus on the Family, the New Life Church and the International Bible Society.

Tom Minnery, Focus on the Family’s vice president of public policy, commented following the release of the Yale Divinity School study on the Air Force Academy, “If 90 percent of cadets identify themselves as Christians, it is common sense that Christianity will be in evidence on the campus.... I think a witch-hunt is under way to root out Christian beliefs. To root out what is pervasive in 90 percent of the group is ridiculous.”

Representative David Obey (Democrat of Wisconsin), a Catholic, was denounced by fundamentalist forces for proposing language in an amendment to a Defense Department appropriations bill that called on the secretary of the Air Force to develop a plan to ensure that the Air Force Academy “maintains a climate free from coercive religious intimidation and inappropriate proselytizing by Air Force officials and others in the chain-of-command at the Air Force Academy.”

Representative John Hostettler (Republican of Indiana) attacked Obey for waging “the long war on Christianity in America [that] continues today on the floor of the House of Representatives.... Like a moth to a flame, Democrats can’t help themselves when it comes to denigrating and demonizing Christians.”

In fact, the majority of congressional Democrats have remained silent on the controversy at the Air Force Academy, fearful of being cast as “anti-Christian” and lacking in the supposed moral values espoused by the Christian right.

The debate over the role of religion at the USAFA serves as a warning. It is an indication of the type of military officer corps that is being trained—one accountable not to civilian authority and constitutional principles, but based on the most backward of ideologies. The education of a military leadership “accountable first to God”—placed at the head of US imperialism’s destructive arsenal of weaponry—poses ominous implications for both democratic rights and the safety of the world’s population.

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