

5 Reasons to Keep Religion in the Military

Since the United States' founding, American civil and military leadership have taken deliberate steps to meet the religious needs of the military and to prevent it from becoming a purely secular entity. The founders were no strangers to government provision of religious support to the military.

#1: President George Washington. Perhaps no individual had a greater influence in shaping our nation's armed forces than George Washington, its first Commander-in-Chief. He made known his convictions on the importance of religion within the military early in his career while serving as a young Colonel during the French & Indian War (1753-1763). Throughout that time, he repeatedly requested religious support for his troops, explaining:

Common decency, Sir, in a camp calls for the services of a divine, and which ought not to be dispensed with, altho' the world should be so uncharitable as to think us void of religion.

Washington's British superiors refused each of his requests. But Washington believed so firmly that religious exercises and activities were essential to the well-being of his troops that he periodically undertook to perform those duties himself, including reading Scriptures, offering prayers, and conducting funeral services.

Future presidents and legislatures followed Washington's lead, laying a solid foundation for religious expression in the military. After the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, it became evident that reconciliation with Great Britain was unlikely. In response, Congress officially established the Continental Army, and explicitly recommended that "all

officers and soldiers diligently to attend Divine Service.”

Similarly, Congress instructed America’s fledgling navy that “commanders of the ships of the Thirteen United Colonies are to take care that Divine Service be performed twice a day on board, and a sermon be preached on Sundays.”

#2: President John Adams. America’s second Commander-in-Chief, John Adams, was no less insistent that religious expression be promoted in the military. Known as “The Father of the American Navy,” Adams’ presidency saw the U.S. Navy grow from its humble origins, as an organization comprised largely of privateers, into a formidable fighting force capable of defending the nation. During the Navy’s ascendancy under his watch, Adams instructed his Secretary of the Navy, Benjamin Stoddert, on the importance of a Navy chaplaincy:

I know not whether the commanders of our ships have given much attention to this subject [chaplains], but in my humble opinion, we shall be very unskillful politicians as well as bad Christians and unwise men if we neglect this important office in our infant navy.

Congress responded favorably to President Adams’ desire by establishing and providing for naval chaplains, and re-issuing the naval regulations it established during the Revolutionary War, requiring that Divine Service be performed twice each day aboard all naval vessels, and that a sermon be preached each Sunday.

#3: Military Chaplains. The American government committed to the early and continuing priority of military chaplains. In 1789 the first federal Congress passed a law providing for the payment of legislative chaplains. Nearly two centuries later, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of those legislative chaplains, concluding that it “is not . . . an establishment of religion,” but rather “a tolerable acknowledgement of beliefs widely held among the people of this country.” Today, in continuance of the first Congress’

policy, the government directly funds the salaries, activities, and operations of more than 4,500 military chaplains. Despite periodic legal challenges, the Supreme Court “has long recognized that the government may (and sometimes must) accommodate religious practices and that it may do so without violating the Establishment Clause.” This includes military chaplains.

It is important to note that the military chaplaincy is not the outer limit of religious expression in the military. In addition to recruiting and paying chaplains to perform religious exercises, the government may also approve other forms of religious expression that are distinct from a formal chaplaincy, including service members’ religious expression.

#4: President Franklin D. Roosevelt. With its foundation firmly established, the tradition of religious expression within the military carried well into the twentieth century. For example, shortly after taking office, and during the military build-up preceding World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt declared:

I want every father and every mother who has a son in the service to know – again, from what I have seen with my own eyes – that the men in the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps are receiving today the best possible training, equipment, and medical care. And we will never fail to provide for the spiritual needs of our officers and men.

During World War II, President Roosevelt apparently became even more committed to preserving the spiritual fitness of the military. So committed was Roosevelt, in fact, that he directed, at government expense, the printing and distribution of the Bible to troops along with his exhortation that “I take pleasure in commending the reading of the Bible to all who serve in the Armed Forces of the United States.”

#5: The Report to President Truman. Following World War II,

with the emergence of communism as the preeminent threat to American and western European democracies, the battle for ideological superiority commenced. President Harry Truman, wanting assurances that American service members were prepared to combat the rise of communism, convened a commission to examine the role of chaplains and spiritual faith in the military. The commission reported:

*One of the fundamental differences dividing this world today lies in the field of ideas. **One side of the world, to which we belong, holds to the idea of a moral law which is based on religious convictions and teachings. The fundamental principles which give our democratic ideas their intellectual and emotional vigor are rooted in the religions which most of us have been taught. Our religious convictions continue to give our democratic faith a very large measure of its strength.** The other side of the conflict has organized its idea upon a rejection of moral law and individual dignity that is utterly repugnant to any of our religions. Indeed, it has been necessary for the totalitarians to attack and stifle religion because such faith represents the antithesis of everything they teach. **It follows, therefore, that if we expect our Armed Forces to be physically prepared, we must also expect them to be ideologically prepared. A program of adequate religious opportunities for service personnel provides an essential way for strengthening their fundamental beliefs in democracy and, therefore, strengthening their effectiveness as an instrument of our democratic form of government.***

The commission's report was not unfounded. During and after World War II, the U.S. Army surveyed thousands of soldiers about their attitudes toward military service. In 1949, the U.S. Army's Research Branch, Information and Education Division, produced a three-volume record of the survey's results. In *Volume II, The American Soldier, Combat and Its Aftermath*, the U.S. Army surveyed its officers and enlisted

service members about the importance of prayer. Among a list of options that included “thinking that you couldn’t let the other men down,” and “thinking that you had to finish the job in order to get home again,” World War II veterans most frequently identified prayer as their source of motivation during combat. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that a permissive religious climate was essential to America’s combat efficacy during World War II.

The preceding anecdotes are but a sample of the hundreds of historical examples establishing a clear and unambiguous message: the practice of permitting, encouraging, and at times requiring, religious expression within the armed forces was instituted by those who first won America’s independence. And, despite multiple challenges, it has continued uninterrupted since then.

There are many who want our military completed devoid of faith. And yet, as history demonstrates, it is so often faith that is the source of the American service member’s strength. We risk losing this proud heritage of religious freedom in our military if we allow anti-religious freedom zealots to prevail. And if religious freedom can be taken away from our troops, then no one is safe from attack.

If you or a service member, veteran or military chaplain you know is being prohibited from freely exercising their faith, please **call Liberty Institute’s toll-free military hotline 1-800-259-9109 FREE** to report instances of abuse or **submit your online request for legal help today.**

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