

God's Word Versus the Pentagon's Word

The Restore Military Religious Freedom coalition, a group of two dozen like-minded religious liberty organizations, announced Thursday that it is ready to offer assistance to any Air Force Academy cadet who faces repercussions for writing Bible verses on their hallway whiteboards.

The Air Force Academy (USAFA) admitted Wednesday that a cadet leader had to remove a Bible verse he had displayed outside his dorm room because it offended non-Christians and could "cause subordinates to doubt the leader's religious impartiality."

The controversy started when a cadet leader posted a passage of Scripture on his whiteboard with a quote from the New Testament book of Galatians. "I have been crucified with Christ therefore I no longer live, but Christ lives in me," the verse from Galatians 2:20 read.

Friends of the cadet tell me the young man had posted the verse several months ago and considered the New Testament passage as a source of inspiration.

Mikey Weinstein, director of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, told me that 29 cadets and four faculty and staff members contacted his organization to complain about the Christian passage.

"Had it been in his room—not a problem," Weinstein told me. "It's not about the belief. It's about the time, the place and the manner."

He said the Bible verse on the cadet's personal whiteboard created a hostile environment at the academy.

"It clearly elevated one religious faith [fundamentalist Christianity] over all others at an already virulently hyper-fundamentalist Christian institution," he said. "It massively poured fundamentalist Christian gasoline on an already raging out-of-control conflagration of fundamentalist Christian tyranny, exceptionalism and supremacy at USAFA."

Exactly two hours and nine minutes after Weinstein complained to Air Force Academy Superintendent Michelle Johnson, the Bible verse was erased from the cadet leader's whiteboard.

A spokesman for the Air Force Academy confirmed that the religious text was cleansed from the board—even though there is no specific rule against posting religious messages.

"The whiteboards are for both official and personal use, but when a concern was raised we addressed it and the comment was taken down," Lt. Col. Brus Vidal, an Air Force Academy spokesman, told me in a written statement.

Johnson said in a written statement that the verse was removed because there was a "potential perception" problem.

"The Scripture was below the cadet's name on a white board and could cause subordinates to doubt the leader's religious impartiality," the superintendant said.

The original complaint was filed by an unnamed cadet, she added.

"Another cadet promoted a discussion of appropriateness, according to policies that leaders will avoid actual or apparent use of their position to promote their personal religious beliefs to subordinates."

Johnson said the Christian cadet "voluntarily elected to erase the Scripture."

Anybody else have trouble believing that?

The Christian cleansing of the Bible verse led to a small uprising among cadets. At least a dozen cadets posted Bible verses on their personal whiteboards, and some even went so far as to post passages from the Quran. Those verses were not removed, presumably because the cadets were not in leadership positions.

So I posed the following question to the Air Force Academy: Would they have directed a Muslim cadet leader to erase a passage from the Quran? The academy has yet to answer my question—but I suspect we all know the answer.

Retired Army Gen. Jerry Boykin, now with the Family Research Council, told me the superintendent's statement is an example of "politically correct doublespeak."

"What about the rights of the Christian cadets who have a constitutional right to express their individual faith?" he asked. "If a Scripture scares the faculty this much, then it is unlikely that they will be very effective when confronted by a committed enemy who is willing to die for his or her beliefs."

Boykin accused the academy of violating the constitutional rights of the cadets.

"This academy should be training warriors who can deal with difficult situations and determined enemies," Boykin said. "A Scripture is hardly a threat."

Several cadets reached out to me by phone and shared with me their grave concerns about how Christians are being treated at the Air Force Academy. They agreed to be interviewed, provided I did not reveal their identities.

"It's been suggested that we keep our faith to ourselves," one of the cadets told me. "It's even too risky to go out into the hallway and talk to a Christian friend about your faith. It's because there are people here who are so easily offended. If

someone overheard us talking about Christianity, they could file a complaint. They could say we were having that discussion in a public space.”

“It’s gotten to the point where you can’t walk to class without stepping on somebody’s toes,” another cadet told me.

The cadets told me many of their peers are outraged over the anonymous person who complained to Weinstein’s group.

“Whoever did that did so without even addressing the cadet first,” the cadet said. “It’s incredibly disrespectful to the cadet—going behind his back. Is that the kind of officer you want in the military, leading people?”

The cadets said they are sick and tired of the “ubersensitivity” that’s infected the academy.

“People are so apt to be offended by something that is totally respectful,” he said. “If you read the verse the guy put on his door—it’s a personal expression of faith. There’s nothing disrespectful about that at all.”

But the Air Force Academy may not agree with that assessment.

Both cadets told me that yesterday afternoon that they were told by their leadership to “be respectful with what you put on your bulletin board and what you put in public places.”

“The implication was that the Bible verse was somehow disrespectful,” the cadet told me.

Weinstein is vowing to take the Air Force Academy to court unless they punish every cadet who posted a Bible verse on their bulletin boards.

“This is an absolutely horrible, shameful disgrace,” he told me. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such an open rebellion like this happening at any military academy. It’s like they’re sticking their middle finger up at what the academy did.”

Weinstein likened the posting of the Bible verses to racism.

"You cannot put a picture in front of your room of a white person whipping a black person," he said. "You can't put a picture of anything that's denigrating outside your room."

He also wants the military to consider court-martial proceedings against the cadet leader who originally posted the verse from Galatians. He called the cadet a "fundamentalist."

So how does Weinstein define *fundamentalist*?

"When they want to follow the Great Commission in a time, place or manner that violates the Constitution or DOD [Department of Defense] directives," he said. "In this case, this is a perfect example. Putting those messages up are a violation of time, place and manner, and that moves you into the fundamentalist Christianity perspective."

The Restore Military Religious Freedom Coalition announced it stands ready to represent any cadet brought up on charges. The coalition includes the Family Research Council, Alliance Defending Freedom, Liberty Counsel, Liberty Institute and the Thomas More Law Center.

"Suppressing religion is wrong, whether it is done behind an Iron Curtain or in a dorm hallway," says Gary McCaleb, of Alliance Defending Freedom. "Certainly such raw anti-religious discrimination has no place in America's Air Force."

The brave cadets who spoke to me said it's disturbing to watch the academy trample on the Constitution. They said the current state of affairs at the Air Force Academy can be summed up by a message someone had posted on their dorm wall.

"You can't pick and choose what freedoms you're going to defend," the poster read. "You can either defend them all or you can defend none of them."

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hundreds of radio stations. Sign up for his American Dispatch newsletter, be sure to join his Facebook page, and follow him on Twitter. His latest book is God Less America.