

The Air Force Is on a Roll With Its Bible-Bashing Moves

On March 14, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh told members of the House Armed Services Committee that there was no war on **religious liberty**.

“The single biggest frustration I’ve had in this job is the perception that somehow there is **religious persecution** inside the United States Air Force,” the general told lawmakers. “It is not true.”

If that’s true, perhaps Gen. Welsh could explain why a Bible was removed from a POW/MIA Missing Man Table at Patrick Air Force Base in Florida. The removal of the Good Book was first reported by the Gannett-owned newspaper *Florida Today*.

Base officials confirmed to Fox News on Monday that the entire Missing Man Table display had been removed from a dining hall because of the Bible. A press statement said the inclusion of the Bible ignited “controversy and division.”

Missing Man Tables are a long-honored military tradition. The tables serve as a reminder of the plight of brave Americans who are missing in action or who are being held as prisoners of war. The display includes a white tablecloth setting with an inverted glass, a plate with lemon and salt, a single rose, a candle and a Bible.

Each item is an integral part of the Missing Man Table and Honors ceremony, according to the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

“The Bible represents the strength gained through faith in our country, founded as one nation under God, to sustain those lost from our midst,” the official ceremony document states.

However, someone at Patrick Air Force Base objected to the **Bible's** placement on the table.

The following is the Air Force's explanation of what happened:

"The 45th Space Wing deeply desires to honor America's Prisoners and War (POW) and Missing in Action (MIA) personnel. Unfortunately, the Bible's presence or absence on the table at the Riverside Dining Facility ignited controversy and division, distracting from the table's primary purpose of honoring POWs/MIAs. Consequently, we temporarily replaced the table with the POW/MIA flag in an effort to show our continued support of these heroes while seeking an acceptable solution to the controversy. After consultation with several relevant organizations, we now intend to re-introduce the POW/MIA table in a manner inclusive of all POWs/MIAs as well as Americans everywhere."

The Air Force did not say when the Missing Man Table would be returned. Nor did it say whether the Bible would be included in the display. It also declined to explain what it meant by the word *inclusive*.

Retired Lt. Gen. Jerry Boykin, now an executive vice president with the Family Research Council, denounced the Air Force Academy's actions.

"I'm still looking for somebody in a leadership position in the Air Force with an ounce of courage," he told me. "They buckle to an extreme minority group every time, and constitutionally they are simply wrong."

Rep. John Fleming, R-La., told me the Air Force seems to be the worst offender when it comes to attacks on religious liberty.

"It's very disconcerting that all it takes is for someone to be offended by that, and it comes down," he said. "The First Amendment is very clear on this. Speech may offend some

people—in this case, maybe Christianity offends some people in the Air Force—but that doesn't matter. We're still allowed to speak about our closely held beliefs."

Fleming accused the Air Force of ignoring the law.

"Since when does one unnamed, unknown individual have veto power over the First Amendment rights of all people in the military and in this case the Air Force?" he asked.

Ann Mills-Griffiths is the chairman of the National League of POW/MIA Families. She told me she was glad the Air Force base is going to reinstall the Missing Man Table, but she wonders if the new display will include the Bible.

She said the Bible is "part of the Missing Man Honor ceremony, and we hope it will be restored to what it was."

"Our country is one nation under God," she said. "It doesn't seem outrageous or unreasonable to have the Bible on the table."

Ron Crews, executive director of the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty, told me he hopes the Air Force will restore the Bible to its rightful place. He called it a symbol of hope and courage for military personnel and their families.

"It is sad when military traditions honoring our POWs and MIAs are trumped by pursuits to remove any vestige of the faith that has sustained our warriors since Valley Forge," Crews told me.

Earlier this month, a cadet at the Air Force Academy removed an inspirational Bible verse from a whiteboard hanging outside his dorm room. Air Force officials said the cadet "voluntarily" removed the verse after someone complained.

However, Liberty Institute attorney Michael Berry says he was told by officials at the Air Force Academy that had the cadet not voluntarily removed the verse, he would have been ordered

to remove it.

Berry told the incident was a clear denial of the cadet's right of freedom of religious expression.

"He said, well, the Air Force's official policy—and this is coming from the very top, from the Pentagon level—is that the term 'free exercise of religion' does not extend to speech of this kind," Berry told the news organization. "Either verbal speech or writing a verse on a whiteboard, he said, would not fall under the protection of free exercise of religion as it is written in the First Amendment."

I would certainly be remiss if I did not extend my thanks to the staff of *Florida Today* for first reporting this latest incident of religious liberty under attack.

General Welsh's remarks from March 14 bear repeating. He claimed there is no religious persecution happening in the Air Force. If that's the case, sir, what have you done with the Bible?

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