

US House Hearing Scrutinizes Military's 'War on Faith'

Some say the U.S. military is now so hostile to religion, many believers in the ranks are afraid of mentioning their faith.

Because of past cases, Congress has specifically ordered the military to stop suppressing religious liberty. But there have been enough new cases in recent months that the House held a new hearing on the subject this Wednesday.

Of those testifying at the Subcommittee for Military Personnel hearing, most believe the military is becoming more hostile to troops' religious liberty.

That belief led some of those panelists to point out the irony that it's the troops guarding Americans' liberty who may be most in danger of losing their own.

Retired Army Chaplain Col. Ron Crews told *CBN News* about one example.

"A Christian officer who wrote an article about 'my faith has sustained me in my career' getting pulled from a Department of Defense newsletter," Crews said. "And at the same time an atheist writes 'atheism sustains me' and that's remaining."

Former Navy pilot Travis Weber, with the Family Research Council, pointed out, "There are still ongoing situations in which service members telling the story of their faith and how it impacts their lives in the service are being suppressed."

Weber mentioned the case of the U.S. Air Force Academy this spring making a cadet remove a religious message he wrote on a dry erase board.

Weber also discussed the Navy Exchange Service Command ordering all Gideon Bibles be removed from Navy lodges in case

their presence might offend someone, an order now on hold after much pushback.

Former Marine officer Michael Berry, with the Liberty Institute, said he worries about the effect on recruiting.

“If we start to see religious liberty being stripped away from our military, I don’t think you’ll see anybody, regardless of their political affiliation, regardless of their patriotic streak or whatever it might be,” he said. “They’re not going to want to join an organization where their religious freedoms are not protected.”

The main opponent of these panelists at the hearing was Michael Weinstein, who told *CBN News* they overlook the actions of overbearing, pushy Christians who intimidate others in the ranks.

Some accuse former Air Force officer Weinstein of waging a war on Christians in the military. But Weinstein said he’s waging a war on aggressive Christian proselytizers.

“The people that they think are victims are the ones persecuting the Christians that we represent,” Weinstein told *CBN News* shortly before he testified.

“We represent almost 40,000 members of the U.S. military and veterans, and 96 percent of our clients are Protestants or Roman Catholics who believe they are being persecuted for not being ‘Christian enough,’” he explained.

But others, like Liberty Institute’s Berry, have a different view of religious freedom. They insist the U.S. Constitution mandates protecting every American’s First Amendment rights, including the right to speak out about and act on their religious beliefs.

“Of the many freedoms that our military gives up, religious freedom is not one of them,” Berry stated.

This apparent war on religion isn't just restricted to the active military.

Berry discussed recent cases where the name of God has been banned from veterans' funerals and prayer "in Jesus' name" banned at a Memorial Day Service. He also mentioned efforts by groups to get crosses at veterans' memorials demolished.

Jordan Sekulow, with the American Center for Law and Justice, told *CBN News* putting crosses on veterans' memorials certainly doesn't represent a violation of the First Amendment or a governmental favoring of Christianity.

"We're a diverse country. Just because there's a cross at a war memorial doesn't mean we don't honor all the veterans regardless of their faith," Sekulow said. "And I think we've done a pretty good job in our country of making sure we do honor those of faith and those who have no faith at all."

But Sekulow warned the attacks on religious expression are becoming both more frequent and are more vicious.

"There are the new atheists—those who file these lawsuits against basically anything religious," he pointed out. "That's something that 20 years ago was rarely seen. They're not the same as the ACLU; they're much more radical."

Despite what he acknowledged can feel like an overly-negative atmosphere toward religion in today's military, Crews—who serves as executive director of the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty—still prays young religious believers will consider joining the Armed Forces.

"We do not want to abandon our military. We want men and women of faith," Crews said. "And there are organizations like ours and others who are going to watch their backs and we're going to be there for them."