

You Won't Believe Why the Army Is Refusing to Send Honor Guard for Church's July 4 Celebration

For nearly two decades, the U.S. Army has provided an honor guard for an Independence Day celebration at a Baptist church that predates the founding of the nation. But this year—that tradition has come to an end.

Officials at Fort Gordon say they will not be able to send an honor guard to a July 5 service at Abilene Baptist Church because it violates a military policy banning any involvement in a religious service.

“While there are conditions under which the Army can participate in events conducted at a house of worship, we cannot participate in the context of a religious service,” Public Affairs Officer J.C. Mathews told me.

He said officials at Fort Gordon as well as the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate reviewed the church's request and determined they were in fact holding a “religious service.”

“As a result, the Army is not permitted to take part,” Mathews said.

That policy would be an offense to most churches in America—but it is especially offensive when you consider the Army just refused to provide an honor guard for a church whose first pastor was a chaplain in the Revolutionary Army.

Abilene Baptist Church was founded in 1774—one of Georgia's most historic churches and the second oldest in the state. The founding pastor was arrested by a colonial magistrate for

“preaching in Georgia” and the first pastor, Reverend Loveless Savage, was a chaplain in the Revolutionary Army.

“It was an absolute shock,” said Brad Whitt, the current pastor of Abilene Baptist Church. “What a sad commentary on the state of affairs in America—when we cannot even allow the flags to fly if they are in a church building.”

“We’ve had a tremendous working relationship with the fort,” he told me. “We’ve hosted all sorts of events for military families. We really try to show our love and respect and we try to honor our military folks.”

The July 5 church service is scheduled to be a “God and Country”-themed celebration with patriotic music and lots of red, white and blue. Afterwards, the church is hosting a Sunday picnic—complete with hot dogs and hamburgers. And for the sake of full disclosure, I’ve been invited to speak at the church service—as well as eat a hamburger afterwards.

Pastor Whitt said they were genuinely confused by the Army’s slight—seeing how Fort Gordon has been providing an honor guard for the past 20 years.

“They have participated for the past two decades and now they are saying no,” he said. “This is just another example of the secularization of America.”

The church sent me photographs of the honor guard on the main platform of the church in 2007 and 2010. Last year, the church held their service in a local park—and once again—the military sent an honor guard.

So what changed?

Fort Gordon’s Public Affairs Office pointed me to Army Regulation 360-1—dated May 2011.

The lengthy regulation states Army participation must not selectively benefit (or appear to benefit) any religious

group. It also mandates that Army Public Affairs not support any event involving the promotion, endorsement or sponsorship of a religious movement.

According to public affairs, the 2007 church service was designated by the military as a “non-sectarian musical and patriotic program.”

According to the military’s calculations, 80 percent of the program was musical and the other 20 percent included narration and other patriotic elements.

“Because this was not a religious service, our participation was permitted,” he said.

He said the key is not whether the event is sponsored by a religious organization or held in a house of worship.

“Instead, the key factor is, whether or not the event is an actual religious service,” Mathews said.

So it’s OK to invite the troops so long as you don’t pray, talk about Jesus or read the Bible?

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“That’s what makes this so sad,” Pastor Whitt told me. “This is what we’ve come to in our nation—where even just representing the colors is some sort of political thing.”

While the Pentagon won’t allow an honor guard to set foot in a church, they have no problem allowing them to march in a gay pride parade.

Last year the Department of Defense gave permission for an honor guard to participate in Washington, D.C.’s gay pride parade—a historic first. An honor guard is also expected to march in the 2015 Capital Pride parade.

So if a military honor guard can celebrate gay pride in a

public parade, why can't they celebrate American pride inside a Baptist church?

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