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March 23, 2006

Navy Secretary Implements New Prayer Guidelines

by Pete Winn, associate editor

Pro-family legal experts raise warning flags over directive.

A new policy imposed by U.S. Secretary of the Navy Donald C. Winter tells chaplains to pray only "nonsectarian" prayers when they are part of any function outside the chapel doors.

Navy Lt. Gordon J. Klingenschmitt said the policy means naval commanders can now dictate when a prayer is said and what it can contain. He said that violates the First Amendment rights of chaplains like him.

"The basic gist is that a chaplain's speech is only covered inside the chapel," Klingenschmitt told CitizenLink. "But if we talk about Jesus outside the chapel, we can be punished by our commanding officers with the full authority of the secretary of the Navy."

The guidelines say, except for religious services, no prayers can be said onboard ship or at public events without the prior approval of a commanding officer.

Navy spokesman Lt. William Marks, however, said the Navy is not saying a chaplain can't say "in Jesus' name" in a prayer — but he did say that prayers in public ceremonies, such as retirements or promotions, should reflect the Navy's "pluralistic" audience.

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"A chaplain will not be censored during a religious service," Marks explained to CitizenLink, defining "religious service" as a worship service, Bible study, prayer service or similar "divine services."

"But for nonreligious command-sponsored events," he said, "the commander will consult with a chaplain, and based on the event, the audience and the wishes of the person involved will determine the extent of a chaplain's participation."

Even at that, Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, still called it an intrusive policy.

"We went through this with the Air Force, and we ended up getting it resolved there, but anytime you start telling chaplains how to pray, it gets me concerned," he said. "It's not a good thing to be doing."

Mat Staver, president of Liberty Counsel, said the guidelines need to revert to what they were.

"The real problem with these particular guidelines is that they have completely reversed approximately 225 years of naval history," Staver said. "During that time period, chaplains have been allowed to express their particular faith — whether they are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or otherwise. And I think the Navy should continue that long-standing, constitutional and common-sense tradition, rather than censoring naval chaplains."

Staver said Navy chaplains are unique — they are officers, but do not command sailors or Marines.

"They are commissioned as part of the chaplain service by a sponsoring religious institution," he said. "So, essentially, they are there because of the institution, not because of the military. If the institution withdraws its support then they can no longer be chaplains."

Sekulow and Staver both said their groups are working with Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., to address the issue. The ACLJ is also working with the Navy Department to help refine the policy.

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