

Navy Chaplain Guilty Of Disobeying an Order

By Alan Cooperman Washington Post Staff Writer Friday, September 15, 2006; A03

A Navy court decided yesterday to reprimand and dock the pay of an evangelical Protestant chaplain after finding him guilty of disobeying an order by appearing in uniform at a political protest in front of the White House in March.

The chaplain, Lt. Gordon J. Klingenschmitt, said he intends to "appeal by all means possible all the way to the Supreme Court."

Klingenschmitt, 38, who belongs to a small evangelical offshoot of the Episcopal Church, has been a vocal critic of the Navy's policies on prayer in ceremonial settings. He has accused his superiors of pressuring chaplains to offer generic, nonsectarian prayers, and he has gained wide attention and sympathy among religious conservatives.

Over the past year, Klingenschmitt worked closely with [Rep. Walter B. Jones Jr.](#) (R-N.C.) and other members of Congress to push the Bush administration to issue an executive order guaranteeing the right of chaplains to pray "in the name of Jesus." So far, the White House has rebuffed the request.

On March 30, Klingenschmitt wore his uniform at a news conference in Lafayette Square in which former Alabama chief justice Roy S. Moore and others decried President Bush's lack of action on the chaplain's complaints. Klingenschmitt maintained that his only participation in the event was to offer public prayers and that he had prior written permission to wear his uniform when conducting "a bona fide worship service or observance."

During court-martial proceedings this week at the naval base in Norfolk, a military prosecutor, Cmdr. Rex A. Guinn, said Klingenschmitt had received clear orders from his superiors not to wear his uniform at media events or political protests. The event in Lafayette Square, he contended, was not a true worship service or observance.

On Wednesday, a jury of five Navy officers found Klingenschmitt guilty of one misdemeanor count of disobeying a lawful order. Yesterday, the same jury determined his punishment: a formal reprimand and forfeiture of pay at the rate of \$250 a month for the next 12 months.

That would amount to \$3,000, or about 5 percent of his pay. But Klingenschmitt is unlikely to incur the full fine, for two reasons: The jury recommended that Rear Adm. Frederic Ruehe, commander of the Navy's Mid-Atlantic region, suspend the financial penalty, and Klingenschmitt doubts he will remain in the Navy for 12 more months.

"The letter of reprimand is actually the worst punishment because it will be used in a couple of months to kick me out of the Navy in a separate process called an administrative separation board," the chaplain predicted.

Kevin Copeland, a Navy spokesman, said that Klingenschmitt's prediction was "strictly hypothesis at this time" because "the ink isn't even dry on the court-martial yet."

But among the documents that Klingenschmitt introduced in his defense during the court-martial was a March 22 e-mail from Vice Adm. John C. Harvey Jr., the Navy's head of personnel, to Adm. Michael G. Mullen, the chief of naval operations, recommending Klingenschmitt's "involuntarily release" from the Navy "due to lack of career potential."

The e-mail noted: "This officer is the individual who conducted a hunger strike in front of the White House several months ago and has engaged in other actions concerning [Defense Department] and Navy Religious Ministry policies."

Klingenschmitt served as an Air Force officer for 11 years before becoming a chaplain four years ago. He said he believes the e-mail, which was sent eight days before he wore his uniform at the Lafayette Square protest, "proves this is a reprisal against me for my whistle-blower complaints to Congress and the press."

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