

House bill would remove limits on military prayer

By Amy Fagan

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Tucked into a massive defense authorization bill that the House will vote on this week is a provision aimed at giving military chaplains more freedom to pray as they see fit.

The language was crafted by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter, California Republican, and Rep. Walter B. Jones, North Carolina Republican, and is part of the defense bill approved by Mr. Hunter's panel last week.

Mr. Jones and others have long complained that some military chaplains feel restricted in how they can pray and have been encouraged, in some instances, not to pray in Jesus' name.

Mr. Hunter said it is "folly" to tell chaplains to "start editing prayers."

"I think this is good for chaplains of all faiths," he said of the new provision.

A Pentagon spokeswoman wouldn't comment on the matter because it involves pending legislation.

The provision would establish that, in each branch of the military, chaplains "would have the prerogative to pray according to the dictates of their own consciences, except as must be limited by military necessity." It says that whenever such military necessity is cited, "it would be imposed in the least restrictive manner feasible."

The Navy has a policy that asks chaplains of all faiths to consider the views of their audience before invoking specific religious beliefs. That appears to be similar to the Air Force guidelines from February of this year, which read in part that "nondenominational, inclusive prayer or a moment of silence may be

appropriate for military ceremonies or events of special importance when its primary purpose is not the advancement of religious beliefs."

Some chaplains have complained publicly that they've been asked to use general terms in prayer. Late last year, Mr. Jones and other House members demanded that the White House step in, and the White House was receptive. But Mr. Jones said this new bill's language will make the issue clear and enshrined in law.

"I'm very pleased," he said Friday, adding that it will "guarantee the First Amendment rights to our chaplains that have been challenged in recent years."

"This language helps to restore the privilege of that chaplain to pray as his faith calls on him to pray," he said.

He conceded that the language isn't a complete "home run," but said it's a "major step," and he plans to talk to senators in coming weeks to help ensure that the provision remains in the bill and becomes law.

Capt. Jonathan Stertzbach, a Christian Army chaplain serving in Iraq told The Washington Times in January that he and chaplains of other faiths were being pressured to offer only nonsectarian prayers. He was silenced by his supervisors soon after his public statements.

Navy chaplain Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt filed a formal complaint against the Navy policy in March, but naval officials have said Lt. Klingenschmitt has exaggerated the policy's reach.

In summer 2004, an optional worship service performed by Lt. Klingenschmitt reportedly offended some in attendance, and he received a "poor fitness" mark on his permanent record, which he is fighting to have removed.

Lt. Klingenschmitt, who also held an 18-day hunger strike in front of the White House over the military prayer issue, got into more trouble recently for appearing at a March 30 event in front of the White House after he'd been forbidden by his superior from making press appearances while in uniform without getting permission. The one exception was if the chaplain is offering a prayer, which Lt. Klingenschmitt says he did. He was given the choice of a formal reprimand or a court-martial, and he has chosen the latter.

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