

Invoking God's Blessing -- but Whose God?

Military chaplains are asked to keep secular events religion-neutral to avoid alienating troops of other faiths. Some Christians object.

By Larry Gordon, Times Staff Writer
October 7, 2006

When Lt. Cmdr. John Dickens, a Navy chaplain at Camp Pendleton, was assigned to offer a prayer at a change of command ceremony last week, he knew the parameters of his invocation.

He asked for God's blessing on the outgoing Marine officer and for God's help in providing guidance to the new battalion commander. But Dickens, a United Methodist chaplain who recently served in Iraq, was careful not to specifically mention Jesus Christ the way he frequently does during his Sunday services for Protestant troops.

His goal, he said, was to lend a spiritual tone to the otherwise secular occasion, without alienating non-Christian Marines and sailors who were required to attend.

"When you begin to pray in a way that shows a clear affinity to a faith group, that could knock out a lot of people who could otherwise feel included in a prayer that refers to God in a way that all can acknowledge," he explained. "You may wind up doing greater harm in the name of religion than good."

The distinction between his prayer language at public military events and at voluntary church services on base or in the field follows Navy tradition and recent policy.

But those customs are at the heart of a debate about a chaplain's liberty to express his own faith in a secular setting and whether phrases such as "praying in Jesus' name" could offend others and cause divisions in the military ranks.

Earlier this year, Navy Secretary Donald C. Winter issued instructions that religious portions of events such as graduations or command changes should be "nonsectarian in nature" and that chaplains must "be willing to function in a pluralistic environment."

Chaplains faced no restraints in "divine services," such as Easter Mass for Catholic sailors or Passover seders for Jewish Marines.

Pentagon officials say the rules, and similar recent ones in the Air Force, simply reinforced long-standing tradition, albeit in more detailed language.

But the rules triggered strong opposition from some Republicans in Congress and from some religious groups, especially conservative evangelical Christians.

Contending that any limits on prayer violate freedom of religion, they proposed legislation that would allow chaplains to invoke their denominations' beliefs in nonsectarian settings.

"Chaplains do not leave behind their 1st Amendment rights when they put on a uniform," said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Though a military graduation may be a secular occasion, the prayer portion of it is "not a secular moment

anymore. That is a spiritual moment," Land contended.

"We believe if you have a God, you've got to name it. It is disrespectful to our deity, Christ, to not mention his name in prayer," said Billy Baugham, a retired Army chaplain who is executive director of the International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers, a group based in Greenville, S.C.

Nonsectarian prayer "is neutered prayer," said Baugham, a leader in the Associated Gospel Churches.

Land, Baugham and others supported a House version of a defense appropriations bill that stated: "Each chaplain shall have the prerogative to pray according to the dictates of the chaplain's own conscience, except as must be limited by military necessity, with any such limitation being imposed in the least restrictive manner feasible."

Among its supporters were Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter of El Cajon, who is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Todd Akin of Missouri.

Pentagon officials, however, opposed the proposal, as did the major associations of military chaplains.

The Rev. Herman Keizer Jr., chairman of the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, described the House item as "dangerous and really unnecessary." Keizer, a retired Army chaplain who served in Vietnam, said that some people were backing it because they "can't work in a pluralistic setting."

"You should be sensitive to the fact that you have men and women who are from many different traditions," said Keizer, who belongs to the Christian Reform Church in North America, which he described as an evangelical denomination.

The Senate version of the spending bill did not mention the chaplaincy matter, and a standoff between Republicans of the two houses lasted for weeks. Late last month, Sen. John Warner (R-Va), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who said he had not made up his mind about the "conscience" item, urged it be deferred for a full debate at a later time.

Ultimately, the House language was deleted during negotiations with the Senate.

But the bill sent to the White House includes a compromise statement directing the Navy and the Air Force to drop current guidelines and reinstate previous policies.

The effect is not supposed to be dramatic since past customs were similar, if less explicit, military officials said. (The Army had no written guidelines but a spokesman said that Army chaplains generally avoid mentioning, for example, Jesus or Buddha at secular ceremonies.)

But the congressional action has caused confusion that both sides say the Pentagon will need to address. And the issue is expected to be revived in the next Congress.

Akin, in a statement, called the compromise "a first step forward in protecting the 1st Amendment rights of chaplains" and said he intends to reintroduce the "conscience" clause next year. (Hunter did not respond to interview requests.)

Rep. Steve Israel (D-New York) described the congressional action as "a full step forward and a half-step back." Israel, who strongly opposed the original House proposal, said he wants to ensure that any rule changes do not allow the proselytizing and religious coercion that some non-Christian cadets had complained about at the Air Force Academy.

Last year, a Pentagon investigation found the Air Force Academy had failed to accommodate people of non-Christian beliefs and confirmed that professors used their positions to promote their Christian faith.

But the probe did not find "overt religious discrimination" and said incidents of religious intolerance were less malicious than misguided.

The issue of chaplains' prayers also formed the background of the Sept. 13 court-martial conviction of Navy chaplain Gordon J. Klingenschmitt. The Evangelical Episcopal priest disobeyed orders against wearing his uniform at a March news conference in Washington, D.C., protesting what he said were limits on his right to lead prayers "in Jesus' name."

He faces a reprimand and a dock in pay.

larry.gordon@latimes.com