

Proposal on Military Chaplains and Prayer Holds Up Bill

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Published: September 19, 2006

WASHINGTON, Sept. 18 — A bill that sets the Pentagon's spending levels is being held up by controversy over a provision that would allow military chaplains to offer sectarian prayers at nondenominational military events.

The provision, which is being pushed by Representative Duncan Hunter, Republican of California, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, says "chaplains in each of the military services would have the prerogative to pray according to the dictates of their own conscience." The Senate version of the spending bill, the National Defense Authorization Act, has no such language.

Chaplains can pray according to the traditions of their faith at worship services, where attendance is voluntary. But they are also called upon to offer prayers at mandatory functions, like changes of command, banquets and speeches.

The provision's backers, among them Representative Walter B. Jones, Republican of North Carolina, contend that Christian chaplains in such cases have long invoked Christ.

"What is happening is a move toward more political correctness, towards more secularism in the military," Mr. Jones said. "I cannot believe that the majority of Americans would be offended that a person prayed to his God."

Opponents of the provision and other chaplains dispute Mr. Jones's version of chaplaincy tradition. They say that at mandatory events, the longstanding custom has been to offer a nonsectarian prayer, for example, citing God, rather than Christ.

The Defense Department, the main military chaplains association and a variety of ecumenical groups have spoken against the provision, saying that sectarian prayer would create division within the military.

"This provision could marginalize chaplains who, in exercising their conscience, generate discomfort at mandatory formations," the Pentagon said in a written statement. "Such erosion of unit cohesion is avoided by the military's present insistence on inclusive prayer at interfaith gatherings — something that the House legislation would operate against."

The provision is passionately supported, however, by many House Republicans and evangelical Christian groups, like Focus on the Family, who say that refusing chaplains, especially evangelicals, the chance to pray in Jesus' name infringes on their religious liberty.

"What was a celebration of diversity is now a celebration of exclusion, because they don't want people to be offended except evangelical Christians, when our ordination vows call for us to pray a certain way," said Billy Baugham, a retired Army chaplain and executive director of the International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers, a consortium of nine denominations that sponsor members of the clergy in military chaplaincy.

Staff members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees have been trying to reconcile the differences between their versions of the bill for two weeks. A vote on the bill is scheduled for Tuesday, though that might be scuttled because of disagreements over the chaplain provision, Congressional staff members said.

In the last two years, the military has faced several disputes over religion. In 2004, some staff members, alumni and cadets at the [Air Force Academy](#) accused evangelical Christians in leadership posts of aggressive proselytizing and discrimination. A group of evangelical chaplains have filed a class-action suit against the Navy saying they were dismissed or denied promotions. Last week, the Navy court-martialed an evangelical chaplain, Lt. Gordon J. Klingenschmitt, for disobeying an order and wearing his uniform to a March protest before the White House.

Those disputes and now the fight over the provision stem in large part from changes in the composition of the armed forces and the chaplain corps that have tested religious tolerance, said the Rev. Herman Keizer Jr., chairman of the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, the largest chaplaincy organization and an opponent of the legislation.

More atheists and people from minority religions serve in the military now, compared with the Vietnam era, and more evangelical Christians do, too. Similarly, more evangelicals are in the chaplaincy than a generation ago, in part because the military lost favor with many mainline Christians during the Vietnam War, said Mr. Keizer, who served in Vietnam and retired in 2002 after 40 years in the Army.

Supporters and opponents of the provision do not think the Defense Authorization Act will founder on the dispute over the chaplaincy. But a compromise has not emerged.

Senator [John W. Warner](#), Republican of Virginia and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the issue was so significant that perhaps it should be addressed in legislation separate from the Defense Authorization Act.

“Somehow chaplains have managed these issues and managed them very well over the years,” Mr. Warner said. “I’m concerned about Congress darting in to select one or two sentences without hearing the full spectrum of views on this.”

Representative Steve Israel, Democrat of New York, had asked that the wording of the provision remain, but that a clause be added that chaplains behave “with sensitivity, respect and tolerance” to service members of all faiths. That clause was voted down by the House Rules Committee along party lines, Mr. Israel said.

He said he had called for such language because of his concerns about discrimination and coercion by evangelical Christians. Mr. Jones and other supporters of the provision said such language was unnecessary.

“Sensitivity is only a word,” Mr. Jones said. “You don’t have to tell people of faith to be sensitive.”