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Friday, January 27, 2006

Read Congressman Jones' letter to the President concerning the constitutional right of military chaplains to pray according to their faith.

October 25, 2005

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest
Washington, DC 20500-0003

Dear Mr. President:

We are disappointed and gravely concerned to learn that the right of military chaplains to pray according to their faith is in jeopardy. As you may know, the Air Force leadership recently released proposed guidelines that will restrict how Air Force chaplains can pray, and if approved, those guidelines may well be implemented throughout the entire DoD. We believe that the Air Force's suppression of religious freedom is a pervasive problem throughout our nation's Armed Forces, and it has come to our attention that in all branches of the military it is becoming increasingly difficult for Christian chaplains to use the name of Jesus when praying. There are currently no laws or regulations that prohibit chaplains from praying according to their respective denominations or different faiths, and we are deeply concerned that chaplains are now being instructed on what to say when they pray.

Throughout our nation's history, chaplains not only have remained an integral part of our military, but they also have always prayed according to their faith tradition. We believe that if chaplains are chosen to pray before a professional setting, they have a constitutional right to adhere to the religious expressions of their faith. For Christian chaplains, praying in the name of Jesus is a fundamental part of their belief and to suppress this form of expression would be a violation of religious freedom.

The current demand in the guidelines for so-called "no-sectarian" prayers is merely a euphemism declaring that prayers will be acceptable only so long as they censor Christian beliefs. Current surveys in the military indicate that upwards of 80 percent of soldiers identify themselves as Christians, and such censorship of Christian beliefs is a disservice not only to Christian chaplains, but also to the hundreds of thousands of Christian soldiers in the military who look to their chaplains for comfort, inspiration, and support, just as our military soldiers of other faiths look to their chaplains.

While some military members may find certain prayers to be offensive

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and wrongly claim that they are not non-pluralistic, we believe these restrictions raise constitutional issues involving the Establishment, Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses of the First Amendment (There are numerous other offensive provisions throughout the proposed guidelines, including the onerous provision that chaplains can only speak of their faith with officers—the “peer to peer” provision). Officially inhibiting or defining what chaplains can and cannot say in effect establishes an official religion and burdens our military’s chaplains’ right of free speech.

We are requesting that you, as Commander and Chief, protect by Executive Order the constitutional right of military chaplains to pray according to their faith.

With deep concern,

Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress

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