

June 10, 2014

Gen. Mark A. Welsh III
Chief of Staff
U.S. Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20330

Dear Gen. Welsh,

I am aware that, in response to the passage of Section 533 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2013, the Air Force is currently reviewing Air Force Instruction 1-1, which governs expressions of religious belief. I am writing to express my concern, which is shared by Mikey Weinstein and the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, that some of the proposed alterations being reported in the press would be detrimental to military discipline and the rights of service personnel, and to urge you to reject those proposals.

The current Air Force Policy Directive 1 (August 7, 2012) was carefully crafted and responds to what the Air Force itself found to be a climate of religious intolerance for members of minority religions at the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) which came to light in 2004 and 2005. The Air Force's June 22, 2005 "Report of the Headquarters Review Group Concerning the Religious Climate at the U.S. Air Force Academy" clearly recognized that a "religious climate" and "perception of religious intolerance" existed at the Academy, and that that climate has festered as a result of a "lack of awareness over where the line is drawn between permissible and impermissible expression of beliefs."¹ In order to combat this problem, the Air Force adopted Instruction 1-1, which is a model for the entire military.

The Air Force should reject any changes to this regulation that open the door to proselytization among the ranks. The men and women who serve in our nation's Air Force should have the freedom to engage in whatever religious or philosophical views are meaningful to them, of course. But no one should have to worry about being subjected to heavy handed forms of religious coercion or pressure – especially if it emanates from a superior officer. Charges of religious harassment and unwelcome proselytizing are especially disturbing in the context of the command structure within the military and our nation's service academies in which instructors, officers and upper class cadets have virtually absolute command authority over their students and subordinates, creating a unique potential for undue pressure on an individual to conform in order not to jeopardize his or her military career.

¹ The Report of the Headquarters Review Group Concerning the Religious Climate at the U.S. Air Force Academy (June 25, 2005), http://www.marshallfoundation.org/documents/hq_review_group_report.pdf.

As currently written, the sections of Instruction 1-1 that deal with religious liberty are strong statements that balance rights and responsibilities. It outlines the constitutional rights that all members of the service enjoy, but it also makes it clear that the Air Force, like all arms of government, is neutral on questions of theology and faith. This provision strikes a reasonable balance: it recognizes the realities of military service, the importance of accommodating religion, and the need to protect service members from coercive and unwanted proselytization. This is a document of which the Air Force can be proud.

In short, this instruction does not need to be changed; it needs to be followed.

The proposed changes reported in the press,² if accurate, would be a huge step backward and are not reflective of the language in Section 533 of the NDAA. They disrupt the current balance, lifting the rights of even leaders in the military to engage in coercive and proselytizing activities above the rights of other members to serve without such coercion and harassment. This not only violates the rights of these service members, but threatens military cohesion and unity.

Historically, our armed forces have led the way when it comes to the extension of human rights and liberties. Our military pushed ahead on racial integration. The military granted expanded opportunities to women before civilian society. Most recently, the armed services successfully integrated LGBT men and women into the ranks. Despite dire predictions of disaster from some quarters, the armed services led by example and showed America that straight and gay service personnel can and would work together for the good of the nation.

Now it is time for the Air Force and the other branches of the armed forces to lead the way on matters of religion. Surveys show that the military is already more diverse on matters of religion than its civilian counterparts. In light of that, the Air Force is in a unique position to once again show the nation how men and women of many faiths and none can live and work side by side in an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmony.

Altering Instruction 1-1 would be a step backward. I urge you to do all that you can to preserve the spirit of the original instruction as you contemplate changes to this important document.

Sincerely,



Barry W. Lynn
Executive Director

² AF Drafts Instructions to Weaken Limits on Religious Expression, Air Force Times (June 6, 2014), <http://www.airforcetimes.com/article/20140606/NEWS/306060075/AF-drafts-instruction-weaken-limits-religious-expression>.