

Church-state groups seek equal play for atheist concert

by [Jack Jenkins](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Three church-state activist groups criticized the Army for allowing an evangelical concert at North Carolina's Fort Bragg but not making similar provisions for a "Rock Beyond Belief" concert for nonbelievers.

The three groups -- Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina -- on Tuesday (July 5) complained to the Secretary of the Army about events that appear to give "selective benefits" to religious groups.

Fort Bragg hosted a Christian-themed "Rock the Fort" concert last September that was sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and was touted as "evangelistic in nature," according to the three groups.

The groups alleged that Fort Bragg chaplains promoted the event, which received "\$50,000 in financial support, and \$30,000 in logistical and security support" from the Army. Such actions "cannot be squared with (Army) regulations, much less with the First Amendment," the groups said.

The letter also complained that a recent attempt to hold an atheist-themed "Rock Beyond Belief" event at Fort Bragg was not granted the same venue or the same level of financial support.

Additionally, performers -- who included atheist leaders such as Richard Dawkins -- were also asked to provide "statements of intent." The event was ultimately canceled after being "crippled ... with

last-minute restrictions" according to the concert website.

A news release from Americans United urged the Army to "refrain from supporting any event that promotes religion," and to support the atheist event "to the extent that this can be done consistently with the Constitution."

An Army spokesman said he would look into the groups' letter but could not comment further.