

Sparks fly as House GOP blasts contraception mandate

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Exhibit A in the fight over President Obama's mandate for religious institutions to provide insurance coverage for contraception: a ham sandwich.

At a hearing Thursday (Feb. 16) convened by House Republicans to cast opposition to the mandate as a matter of religious liberty, Roman Catholic Bishop William E. Lori invoked the image of a kosher deli forced to sell ham sandwiches.

"The mandate generates the question whether people who believe -- even if they believe in error -- that pork is not good for you, should be forced by government to serve pork within their very own institutions.

"In a nation committed to religious liberty and diversity, the answer, of course, is no," said Lori, the bishop of Bridgeport, Conn., and the point man on religious liberty for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Democrats on the panel objected to the hearing as a male-dominated exercise designed to recast Obama's desire to expand coverage for women's reproductive services as a callous disregard for America's cherished tradition of religious freedom.

Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., the ranking Democrat on the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, sought to steer the discussion to women's health, and how contraception has improved their lives.

"The pill has had a profound impact on their well-being -- far more than any man in this room can ever know," Cummings said.

Cummings accused Committee Chairman Darrell Issa, R-Calif., of "promoting a conspiracy theory that the federal government is conducting a 'war' against religion. He has stacked the hearing with witnesses who agree with his position."

In addition to Lori, witnesses included the Rev. Matthew C. Harrison, the president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; Rabbi Meir Soloveichik of Yeshiva University; and Craig Mitchells, a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

A second panel included representatives of religiously affiliated colleges and health plans. The Democrats originally contemplated asking the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, to testify, according to Lynn, but instead asked a female witness -- a decision Lynn said he understood.

But Issa rejected the Democrat's ultimate choice -- Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke, who has been outspoken about how the Catholic university denied contraceptive coverage to a fellow student whose doctors prescribed the drugs to treat ovarian cysts.

In a heated exchange as the hearing began, Issa said the Democrats had presented Fluke to the committee too late and that, unlike Lynn, she was not an appropriate speaker for the topic of religious freedom.

"She is a student at a well-respected Catholic University. Why in the world is she not qualified?" Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., shot back.

The Obama administration, which first issued the mandate on Jan. 20, had seemed to underestimate the reaction from the bishops and many conservative Christians. Even those who do not share the bishops' theological opposition to birth control nonetheless object to providing insurance for sterilization and the so-called morning-after pill, which some view as akin to abortion.

Last Friday (Feb. 10), the administration modified the mandate, saying that insurance companies -- not religious institutions like hospitals and universities -- would be required to offer free contraception coverage to employees.

Lori and the Republicans' other panelists said the recent accommodation would still force institutions to violate their consciences and subsidize services that contradict their religious beliefs.

Other groups that were opposed to the original mandate say the administration has met critics more than half way, and the bishops should accept the deal.

"The bishops have prevailed," said Nicholas P. Cafardi, a law professor at Duquesne University and a supporter of the president. "Basically I think the bishops should be gracious in their victory."

But the Missouri Synod's Harrison said he would rather go to jail than comply with even the modified mandate. The Obama compromise, he said, still requires religious institutions to pay -- however indirectly -- for services that violate their religious beliefs.

"I will give up my sons to fight" for these liberties, he said. "I will give up every single thing I have."