

Christian soldiers? Religious freedom in the military: Religious freedom in the military

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

Michael L. "Mikey" Weinstein, a former judge advocate general in the U.S. Air Force, founded the Military Religious Freedom Foundation to address problems of religious establishment in the country's military. His concern began when his son, the sixth member of his family to attend the Air Force Academy, told him about the anti-Semitic insults and strident Christian evangelizing he encountered at the academy. Recently Weinstein's organization and U.S. Army Specialist Jeremy Hall filed a lawsuit naming the Department of Defense and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as defendants. Weinstein, a graduate of the Air Force Academy, is author of With God on Our Side: One Man's War Against an Evangelical Coup in America's Military.

What's the difference between, say, an army captain inviting another captain to a Bible study and an army captain urging people under his command to attend a Bible study?

It's simple: you cannot use your position of military rank to coerce someone under your command to practice or participate in your religion. If you want to scare the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, tell that CEO that someone in the mailroom is being proselytized by someone higher up in the company. It's utterly against Title VII of the U.S. code. It is unacceptable in the workplace. Now transplant that to the U.S. military. All we're saying is that a military captain is at least as constrained as the shift manager at Starbucks. You are not allowed to coerce people under your command.

When you go into the military, you become a constitutional second-class citizen. You accept a curtailment of many of your rights. That means you are very vulnerable. The Department of Defense is so sensitive to coercion that there are rules against a superior trying to sell Tupperware to someone under his or her command. It's that

much more important when it comes to religion.

What is the focus of your new suit against the Department of Defense?

The first lawsuit we filed stems from July 12, 2005, when the number-two-ranked chaplain in the U.S. military, Brigadier General Cecil R. Richardson, was quoted on the front page of the *New York Times* as saying, “We will not proselytize, but we reserve the right to evangelize the unchurched.” This second lawsuit demonstrates what we call a “pernicious and pervasive pattern and practice of constitutional rape.” The issues are far more extensive than we at first thought. What is going on in the U.S. military right now, in effect, is people with religious Geiger counters holding them up to you, trying to determine if you are “unchurched” enough for them to evangelize you.

The crucial issue here is the separation of church and state. Our constitutional framers were so careful to keep religion out of the function of the state that they put it in Clause 3, Article 6, of the Constitution. They said that we would never have a test for religion for any position in the federal government. Right now, we have overwhelming evidence that tests for religion are happening all the time.

Why is the military an important arena in which to wage this battle for religious freedom?

A lot of people say to me, “Mikey, the U.S. military is 88 percent Christian. It is always going to look Christian. That’s just how it is.”

Even if the U.S. military were 100 percent Christian, it can’t ever, according to the Constitution, *look* Christian. All we are saying is that *any* aspect of the federal government—and the Supreme Court has affirmed this in decision after decision—has to be neutral, not only between one religion and another but also between religion and no religion. The federal government can never use any aspect of its power to support any specific religion.

Organizations like the Officers’ Christian Fellowship, the Christian Military Fellowship and the Christian Embassy say openly that they want a “spiritually transformed U.S. military” and that they want “ambassadors for Christ in uniform.” Very high-level people in the military support that anticonstitutional agenda. We also found a three-star general who is having his troops put together a film to chart the relationship of the “end times” to our troop movements in the Middle East and Central Asia. We

also found that a four-star general was passing out pamphlets to his troops inviting them to an off-base church where they can take a class called “Jesus vs. Mohammed: The Lives of the Two Prophets and Why Jesus Is Superior to All.”

Imagine a squadron in the air force that calls itself the “Crusaders” and uses the official air force emblem, along with a giant crucifix next to three stars to represent the Trinity and a Crusaders’ broadsword—in case you didn’t already get the message. Is there anything more potent that our government could be doing to inflame young people in the Islamic world? Can you imagine the fodder for propaganda that we are providing?

I take it your efforts do not make you popular.

You wouldn’t believe the opposition that I’ve faced. We’ve had feces thrown at the house, dead animals left on our doorstep. I’ve been called Satan and Satan’s lawyer. There’s a group of women that calls about once a month and chants into the phone, “Mikey Weinstein. Bullet in the head. Praise the Lord. He’s finally dead.” We’ve had windows shot out. We finally hired a 24-hour protection service.

I’m going to Colorado Springs for my 30th Air Force Academy reunion, at which I’ve been asked to give the invocation, and I’ve received death threats.

This is an important fight for the freedoms this country was founded on. I think of these words from Russian writer Nicolas Berdyaev: “It would be a mistake to think that the average man loves freedom. A still greater mistake would be to suppose that freedom is an easy thing. Freedom is a difficult thing. It is easier to remain in slavery.” This is a lonely, expensive and dangerous business. But we have to defend the Constitution.