In 2003, a senior colleague approached me with a page from the Air Force Academy’s base newspaper that changed the course of my professional career. Consistent with the previous thirteen years, a group of Christian faculty and staff had placed a full-page advertisement in the December issue to celebrate the Christmas season. It read “Jesus is the Reason for the Season,” and went on to say “If you want to know the true meaning of Christmas, come see one of us.” Below this headline were the names of more than 200 faculty and staff members. At first glance, the advertisement seemed to epitomize the intentional complexity of the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Yes, the base newspaper was, in fact, a government-sponsored publication, but it sold advertising to anyone who wished to purchase it, irrespective of religious belief or affiliation. Although this particular advertisement carried evangelical Christian tones, there was no apparent endorsement of Christianity by either the paper or the institutional leadership, or so it seemed. None of the names appearing in the article carried official titles of military ranks.

Prima facia, the advertisement appeared seemingly appropriate, and I asked my colleague why it bothered him so. Incredulously, he replied, “Don’t you see it?” I didn’t. He then started pointing at different parts of the ad, “Right there, that’s the Physics department, and there’s Behavioral Sciences, and here’s Engineering Mechanics.” Indeed, he was right. With the exception of the English Department, every other department was represented, including key institutional leaders to include the future dean, the future vice-dean, the commandant, the head football coach and eighteen of the twenty-two permanent professors, all colonels. Moreover, the names were arranged by organizational element. Through this lens, the advertisement was clearly a latent Who’s Who list of Christians within each department of the faculty. One could argue this was tantamount to an official endorsement by the senior leadership of the institution given nearly everyone had signed on.

As I engaged some of the individuals whose names appeared in the advertisement, I discovered that many did so to minimize perceived risks to their career advancement. When asked by senior faculty members if they would be willing to contribute $5.00 to place a Christmas greeting in the base paper, many junior faculty members replied that it was a small price to pay not be labeled as an “outsider.” One captain succinctly stated, “If the price of admission to this game is $5.00, I’m in. Only a fool would tell the colonel ‘no,’ and I’m no fool.”

Since 2003, I have followed the evolution of religious expression in the military and captured my analysis in For God and Country: Religious Fundamentalism in the US Military (2013). During the early years (2003-2007) while I remained on faculty at the US Air Force Academy, I collected more than 2,000 pages of documentation by students, faculty and staff that told countless stories of institutionally-sanctioned support for Christian fundamentalism, documenting hundreds of examples.

For example, in one case, an Air Force Academy bus driver stopped the bus in the middle of the road and told Jewish cadets they could “Get off the bus!” when they asked him to change the radio station from a Christian fundamentalist talk-radio program. The incident was reported up the chain of command, and no meaningful action was ever taken by organizational leaders.

In another example, a cadet attempted to report dozens of cases of religious harassment he had faced as an Atheist cadet to the organization’s Military Equal Opportunity Officer. In the initial interview with the cadet, after going through the documentation, the officer (a captain) looked at the cadet and said, “I understand your complaints, but it breaks my heart that you’re an Atheist and I want to talk to you about coming back to the flock and accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.” Again, this
incident was ignored by Air Force Academy leadership. All told, there were more than a hundred documented incidents such as these that were suppressed until news of the religious scandal broke in November 2004.

During my four years on faculty, I had become a de facto advocate for the minority faith (or no faith) cadets who had no voice. The religious climate at the Air Force Academy had become sufficiently poisonous for them because the “weren’t Christian enough”—the accusation for many Catholic and nonevangelical cadets—they sought support in a confidant and mentor. For dozens of these cadets, I became that person until I was unexpectedly reassigned from the Academy in 2007.

One of the first cadets to seek me out was Casey Weinstein from the Class of 2004. Casey’s father would eventually form the civil-rights organization that would become the principal watchdog group for abuses of religious freedoms within the military realm. It was Mikey Weinstein who started as an angry parent in 2003 and has since emerged as the nationally-renown civil right activist and founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation.

I share part of my personal story to make clear to anyone who reads the following paper that I am biased. I believe in a clear separation between church and state. The Founding Fathers knew well what they were doing when they authored the First Amendment, allowing one’s freedom to practice their religious beliefs along with the freedom to express one’s thoughts without fear of reprisal. However, I also believe the Founding Fathers recognized the dangers of what could happen if the country favored one religion over another and endorsed it, explicitly or implicitly. Based on my research over the past decade, it has become patently clear to me that within the walls of the military, a significant number of leaders at all levels have become so accustomed to crossing the line between church and state, they no longer see a need to separate their religious beliefs from their actions as officials of the federal government.

In For God and Country, I chronicle the most egregious actions of military leaders who are fundamentalist Christians and have been allowed to act with impunity to embed their religious views into the very fabric of military culture. Acting patiently and tenaciously, they have been very effective in creating an institutional environment that consistently declares “mission accomplished” with each training session that follows, knowing full-well that no real change has been affected.

As the society that pays their way, we cannot continue the implicit support of fundamentalist Christian military leaders that has been afforded to them up until now. Likewise, we cannot expect the foxes who guard the henhouse to affect real cultural change to turn the tide of growing religious fundamentalism inside the ranks of military. What is needed now more than ever is the political will to hold military leaders fully accountable to the rules and regulations already in place.

Some of the greatest displays of courage have come from nameless cadets who have spoken out against the creeping establishment of fundamentalist Christianity within today’s military culture, and sadly, suffered the consequences for doing so at the hands of the accused who remain in charge. We can only hope that our nation’s policy makers can muster similar levels of courage and support the troops in more than just words. This is a call to action.

For God and Country provides a narrative based on a decade of data collection, reflection and synthesis of the most public displays of religiously-motivated behavior by some of the nation’s most senior leaders. Following the articulation of three representative case studies, I offer specific recommendations of “next steps” to return a defensible line between religious expression and the constitutionally-mandated function of the US military.

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