

Conservatives say religious freedom is 'under attack' in military

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Republican lawmakers and conservative activists concerned that religious expression in the military is “under attack” are rallying behind a measure to provide greater protection for religious “actions and speech” in the armed forces.

The amendment, sponsored by Rep. John Fleming, R-La., would specify in the military spending bill that, “Except in cases of military necessity, the Armed Forces shall accommodate the beliefs, actions, and speech” of service members.

Previous spending bills protected the “beliefs” of service members and chaplains, but the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act would expand protections to include religious “actions and speech.”

That move has already drawn opposition from the White House, which says the change would impact commanders’ ability to address conflicts within the ranks.

Members of Congress and a coalition led by the Washington-based Family Research Council released a report Tuesday (July 9) that documented a number of “discrete events” that reflect “a larger picture of the threat to religious liberty that now exists in America’s armed forces.”

“There is a growing list of cases and incidents that point to the fact that religious liberty in our nation’s military is under attack,” FRC President Tony Perkins said.

Incidents in the report include the removal of a painting that included a Bible verse from the dining hall of Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, and an Air Force officer who was told to remove a Bible from his desk.

The Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty, a member of the coalition, is distributing “Religious Liberty Palm Cards” to educate chaplains and service members of their religious rights, with guidance on how to request a “reasonable accommodation for your sincerely held religious beliefs.”

The coalition also created a website for service members to report violations against their religious liberties and request legal aid.

“Political correctness has absolutely destroyed the whole concept of being able to live your faith, which is what religious liberty is,” said retired Lt. Gen. Jerry Boykin, executive vice president of the Family Research Council.

Boykin has come under fire for previous statements about Islam, including that the post-9/11 “war on terror” was a spiritual battle between Muslims and “Christian America” and referring to the God of Islam as “an idol.”

Fleming’s amendment has already passed the House, and a similar amendment by Sens. Mike Lee, R-Utah, and Ted Cruz, R-Texas, has passed the Senate Armed Services Committee. Fleming hopes the Obama administration will leave it intact after saying the amendment “would have a significant adverse effect on good order, discipline, morale, and mission accomplishment.”

“We know the president is very uncomfortable with your religious liberty,” Fleming said.

Mikey Weinstein, founder and president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation and an outspoken critic of proselytism in the military, called the amendment “egregious” and “vile.” Weinstein said that he would immediately sue if the amendment passes, calling it “completely unconstitutional.”

“They’re nothing more than theocrats attempting to put into law the right for military members to bully, abuse, oppress, marginalize and dehumanize subordinates who cannot fight back,” Weinstein said, noting that service members face pressure to follow superiors’ orders.

Members of the coalition said that the language of the amendment does not allow for coercion of rank-and-file service members.

“If this administration is going to continue to tolerate this kind of intolerance, they’re going to lose members of the military that cannot serve if their First Amendment rights are not going to be protected with regard to religion,” Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, said.