

Report: No 'overt' faith bias at academy, but insensitivities abound: "Failure to accommodate all members' needs"

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A military panel that examined the religious climate at the U.S. Air Force Academy has found no "overt religious discrimination" but did see "a failure to fully accommodate all members' needs."

While the report issued June 22 did not find institutional abuse, it criticized some officials at the academy for insensitivity, citing "a lack of awareness over where the line is drawn between permissible and impermissible expression of beliefs."

The air force convened a 16-member panel in May to study the religious environment at the academy after numerous reports alleged that students and staff had inappropriately promoted evangelical Christianity at the school.

"I think there were cases where people have said some things, perhaps from a lectern, that were overreaching, forgetting their position, that put cadets perhaps in an untenable position in terms of 'Gee, am I going to pass Physics 101 if I don't agree with this guy?'" said General Roger Brady, the air force deputy chief of staff for personnel, who led the investigation.

While noting that the school's policies regarding religious expression are adequate, Brady said in a press conference at the Pentagon that commanders have not been given "useful operational guidance" as to appropriate boundaries.

Abraham Foxman, national director of the New York-based Anti-Defamation League, welcomed the report. It "confirms many of ADL's concerns" and shows "that change is necessary," he said.

The 100-page report, based on interviews and focus group discussions at the Colorado Springs facility, described several instances in which cadets were “overly aggressive in the expression of their faith.”

Academy superintendent Lieutenant General John Rosa Jr. made frank public admissions last month that serious problems had occurred at the student, faculty and staff levels and that they will take years to fix. Rosa, however, recently announced he will leave soon to become president of his alma mater, The Citadel.

The report did not investigate the case of a former school chaplain, Captain MeLinda Morton, who resigned her commission June 21. Morton, a Lutheran pastor, served as an air force officer for a decade. She resigned after alleging that she had been fired from the academy and ordered to transfer to Japan after she spoke out against anti-Semitism and improper advocacy of evangelical Christianity at the school. The Defense Department’s inspector general is studying Morton’s reassignment in a separate investigation. *-Religion News Service*