

December 17, 2014

Honorable John McHugh
Secretary of the Army
101 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The undersigned members of the Restore Military Religious Freedom Coalition write to express our great alarm about the ongoing controversy regarding disciplinary actions taken against Chaplain (CPT) Joseph Lawhorn of the 5th Ranger Training Battalion.¹

On November 20th, Chaplain Lawhorn participated in a mandatory suicide awareness and prevention briefing. Chaplain Lawhorn gave a presentation describing resources available in handling such grave mental health situations. He went further and discussed his personal struggles with depression, describing the spiritual and religious steps that helped him during those dark times in his life.

As a chaplain, Captain Lawhorn certainly pointed to his Christian faith and reliance on reading the Bible as key weapons in his fight against depression. At no time did he indicate that his solution was the superior way or the only way to handle depression. In fact, Chaplain Lawhorn provided a two-sided handout that included Scriptures dealing with depression and hope on one side, and secular resources on the other.

Simply put, there was nothing wrong with his address to the soldiers. In general, those in attendance reported that Chaplain Lawhorn was an effective, persuasive speaker. The personal dimension added to his impact and authenticity. This strikes us as being a crucial part of what it means to be an effective chaplain. Chaplain Lawhorn demonstrated his capacity to tend to those who are deeply wounded by opening up and connecting on a personal level.

The Army recognizes it has a significant suicide problem among those currently serving and those no longer on active duty. Therefore, the approach offered by Chaplain Lawhorn is precisely what is needed if the Army is going to deal effectively with this crisis. An Army chaplain is not required by the Constitution, any statute, or any regulation to behave like a secular counselor. The chaplain's perspective is spiritual and religious. That is why George Washington established the use of military chaplains in 1775. The spiritual aspect of the human person is as important as the physical.

In this instance, it turns out that someone who attended the presentation was rendered uneasy by the religious references *made by a chaplain*. That person took the story outside the chain of

¹ By the summer of 2013 a number of events had occurred within the U.S. Armed Forces that raised significant concerns about the status of the religious liberties so greatly prized by all Americans. Consequently, a number of non-profit organizations formed the Restore Military Religious Freedom Coalition to defend the religious rights that have long been enjoyed by members of our Armed Forces. More information on the Coalition may be found at this website: <http://www.militaryfreedom.org/>.

command and complained to a private group which posted a story on militaryatheist.org. The story was then picked up by the *Huffington Post*.

Chaplain Lawhorn's superior officer, Army Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade Commander Colonel David G. Fivecoat, rendered his Letter of Concern on his own initiative because the offended soldier never filed a formal complaint. Consequently, Chaplain Lawhorn never had the opportunity to prepare a proper defense before being hauled into Colonel Fivecoat's office on Thanksgiving Day to learn of the initial Letter of Concern.

The Army may not establish a religious institution, church, or religion. Furthermore, it may not attempt to coerce soldiers to hold any particular religious or philosophical belief. However, a person's discomfort with religious ideas or beliefs does not provide him with a veto over the religious expression of others. Chaplain Lawhorn was not evangelizing nor was he preaching to his audience. It is unfortunate that a listener was offended, but as the Supreme Court noted last term in *Town of Greece v. Galloway* "[o]ffense . . . does not equate to coercion."² There was nothing inappropriate or coercive about Chaplain Lawhorn's presentation or the materials he provided.

Colonel Fivecoat assessed the situation incorrectly. Had he waited for a formal complaint to be filed, the matter could have been vetted more thoroughly and dismissed. Instead, he misjudged the law and disciplined Chaplain Lawhorn without justification.

In closing, we request the withdrawal of the Letter of Concern. We also ask that assurances be provided that Colonel Fivecoat's actions will not adversely affect Chaplain Lawhorn's Army career and reputation.

Please reply to the Chairman of the Coalition: Lt. Gen. Jerry Boykin (USA-retired), Executive Vice-President, Family Research Council, 801 G Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001.

Respectfully,



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Freedom X



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Executive Vice President
Family Research Council

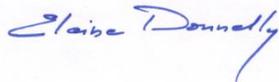


L. Brent Bozell III
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Media Research Center

² *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 134 S. Ct. 1811, 1826 (2014).



Paul Caprio
Director
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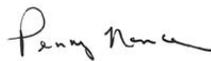
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