

Wednesday, September 27, 2006

This is a civics lesson. This 27, is a lesson whose elements can't be found in "How a Bill Becomes a Law," the fine little primer available in the lobbies of most congressional offices. No, some of the elements of this story belong in an HBO special with a parental advisory: strange bedfellows, backroom brawling, religion, hypocrisy and intrigue.

The story begins two years ago, when the Lutheran chaplain at the U.S. Air Force Academy complained to me that many cadets were experiencing harassment and discrimination based on their religious beliefs. In one report, a military chaplain told an interfaith gathering of cadets that some would "burn in the flames of hell." In another, cadets were forced to march back to their dorms in so-called "heathen flights" if they refused to attend a specific prayer service.

Now, I believe that people in the military should be allowed to pray how they want, when they want and to whom they want. But they should not be pressured or demeaned based on their choices. That is unfair. It also undermines military strength.

As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, my principle role is providing the resources for a strong and effective military. That means ensuring that our troops maintain morale, strict discipline, and cohesion. When troops are divided along religious lines, that "unit cohesion" is degraded. That is why longstanding Pentagon guidelines require that military chaplains show sensitivity, tolerance and respect for all service members -- regardless of religious perspective.

There is another reason as well. Since there aren't enough military chaplains to guarantee that every religion is represented in every military unit and on every military base, chaplains frequently find themselves supporting the literal life and death spiritual needs of service members outside their religion. The exigencies of war may place a Catholic soldier in the arms of a Protestant chaplain for example. In order to provide comfort, the chaplain must be welcoming rather than repelling.

This year, a group of Republicans on the Armed Services Committee have tried to change these standards, arguing that they are a form of "political correctness." They have inserted language in the annual Department of Defense budget authorization that sounds innocuous: giving military chaplains the right to pray "according to the dictates of their conscience..." But, the new language specifically purges the existing Department of Defense regulations requiring sensitivity for all faiths.

To rectify this "oversight," I offered an amendment. It retained the Republican language word-for-word, and simply added that military chaplains shall demonstrate "sensitivity, tolerance

and respect to service members of all faiths." Who could be against that? Incredibly, my amendment was defeated by a party-line vote in the Armed Services Committee. And then again by a party-line vote in the House Rules Committee.

Meanwhile, the Senate passed its version of the Pentagon budget -- retaining the Department of Defense requirements for religious tolerance.

Here's where the civics lessons, the strange bedfellows and the backroom brawling enter the picture. Because the House and Senate bills had discrepancies, they had to be reconciled in a House-Senate conference. There, the House Republicans refused to budge on the chaplains issue. I found myself in a unique alliance with the Secretary of Defense, the individual military services, fifteen religious groups (including the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the American Jewish Committee and the Evangelical Chaplains Commission), the Republican Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee (Senator John Warner), Democratic leaders of the House and Senate Armed Services Committee and many military leaders. Together, we have been opposing a position that is so stubborn that the Department of Defense budget authorization has been stalled for weeks.

And here is where the hypocrisy comes in. Some of the same Members of Congress who reflexively criticize any "micromanagement" of our military commanders in Iraq are now willing to strip our military commanders of their authority to decide on morale and unit cohesion issues.

Congress will recess this Friday, and return after the November elections. At a time of war, our military budgets should not be held hostage to a kind of "religious war."

We should embrace religious expression in the military. But the military is the last place that should demean or discriminate based on religious preference. If any religious leader in America was told he or she could not preach a specific view, I would contribute to their legal defense fund. But when a religious leader chooses to wear the uniform of the United States military as a chaplain, he or she has a special responsibility to worship in accordance with the dictates of personal conscience and to demonstrate sensitivity, tolerance and respect to service members of all faiths. Anyone who has put on a military uniform and sacrificed in the defense of freedom should not be demeaned or discriminated against while defending that freedom.

And I hope that those who disagree will not continue to hold up the defense budget at a time of war.

Posted by: SI