

Statement of Congressman Doug Collins (R-GA)
Military Personnel Subcommittee
Religious Accommodation in the Armed Services
January 28, 2014

I would like to thank Chairman Wilson for his dedication to this important issue and for holding this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to submit a statement for the record.

I've become increasingly concerned about our service members' ability to exercise their freedoms. Over the past twelve months, a number of incidents have caused many to question if the Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) no longer embrace the religious freedom its soldiers and patients have bled to defend.

A news report came to light just a few months ago of two military chaplains being harassed in a Veterans Affairs chaplain training program in 2012. VA health

programs employ chaplains to minister to patients receiving care. These two seasoned officers were looking to attend to the needs of those in the care of the VA.

The suit claims a VA supervisor repeatedly harassed the chaplains about their Christian beliefs. The supervisor instructed the chaplains not to pray in the name of Jesus, which is an integral component of the Christian faith. Even in the context of a group discussion on faith-based topics, the two chaplains were chastised for reciting Scripture.

The chaplains' spiritual beliefs were belittled on multiple occasions. The harassment by the chaplains' supervisor was so significant that one of them withdrew from the program.

The VA is designed to serve members of the Armed Forces during periods of need and hardship. If the VA bars chaplains from expressing themselves, how can we expect service members suffering from private illnesses to come forward?

Unfortunately, this isn't an isolated event. There are numerous reports of the Department of Defense and the VA permitting open hostility to Christian organizations and those practicing the faith in uniform.

In April of 2013, media sources reported that Army soldiers were being briefed that Christian evangelicals were to be considered extremist organizations in the vein of Al Qaeda. Similar briefings have apparently continued, with a similar incident at Camp Shelby in Alabama last month.

Earlier in 2013, the Southern Baptist Convention's website was blocked from Army, Air Force, Marine, and Navy bases. The Pentagon has subsequently apologized and said there was no intent to restrict service member's access to the site. But when this incident is put into what seems to be a pattern of isolating Christian organizations in the military, an apology alone is not acceptable.

Mikey Weinstein is an ardent critic of Christians practicing in the military. Mr. Weinstein heads the Military Religious Freedom Foundation – but don't let the title of his organization fool you.

Mr. Weinstein believes the phrase “so help me God” should be removed from the US Air Force Academy's honor oath. This same man requested and received time

to speak with top military brass to discuss religious freedom in the military.

This country has fought such tyrants. Freedom of religion has been upheld with the blood, sweat, and tears of the US military. Now there appears to be a strain inside the Pentagon and VA whose mission it is to take away the soul of our fighting force.

Are we now to tiptoe on the very soil that entombs the brave men and women who gave their lives for religious liberty? As a military chaplain myself, I pray not!