

**Remarks By Chaplain (Major General) Douglas L. Carver, USA, Retired
Military Personnel Subcommittee On Armed Services, Washington, DC
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Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished members of the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the subject of Religious Accommodations in the Armed Forces. As a former United States Army Chief of Chaplains, and former Chairman of the Department of Defense Armed Forces Chaplain's Board, I speak today with extensive professional experience on this important topic and with a passionate obligation to ensure the unencumbered religious liberty of the members of the Armed Forces as guaranteed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

I had the humble privilege of serving as an Army Chaplain for over 30 years, following in the proud tradition of our Nation's uniformed clergy who, for the past 239 years, have remained the greatest champions of religious freedom in support of our men and women in uniform.

I speak today in the rich legacy of military chaplains like Army Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun, a true servant of God, who was presented posthumously the Medal of Honor by President Obama on April 11, 2013, for his heroic actions in a North Korean Prisoner of War camp on November 1-2, 1950. For seven months, Chaplain Kapaun poured himself out in sacrificial and selfless service on behalf of his fellow prisoners without regard to their race, color, creed or religious beliefs. Denied

medical care for his critical condition, he nursed the sick and wounded until he succumbed to his own wounds. Chaplain Kapaun's unselfish actions exemplified the important role military chaplains play as passionate advocates of religious liberty and religious accommodation for every service member under a chaplain's personal and pastoral care, regardless of their faith group.

To set the framework for my remarks today, I would like to share a few thoughts on the military chaplaincy in general; then, a few observations on the importance of religious accommodation; and finally, I would like to pose a few comments regarding the perceived state of religious accommodations and religions in today's Armed Services.

The United States Military Chaplaincy was birthed out of the American Revolution. Civilian clergy answered the Nation's call to duty, shedding their clerical robes and donning the uniform of the Continental Army, serving alongside troops from their surrounding communities. They provided their soldiers' weekly religious services, promoted their morale and morality, and were often called in to explain to them the sacred value of their political rights and liberties. General George Washington, Commander of the Continental Army, a staunch supporter of the chaplaincy and an advocate of "general, non-sectarian religion", argued for religious diversity among his chaplains to avoid theological disputes and religious discrimination. The concern for religious liberty within the Continental Army and the Nation was settled by the first two clauses of the First Amendment to the

Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibit the free exercise thereof.”

Since the establishment of the Armed Forces in 1775, military chaplains have successfully performed their religious duties within the constant tension of the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses. Military chaplains have effectively performed, provided, or facilitated religious services for all faith groups, advised military leadership on religious accommodations issues, and remained passionate advocates of religious diversity and freedom of religious conscience for our troops and their families, while balancing the tension between establishment and free exercise. That’s 239 years of defending religious liberty in the Armed Services!

The Chaplaincy’s success in this area is due in part by the way chaplains are appointed to military service. While the Department of Defense establishes appointment criteria for chaplains, denominational faith groups and ecclesiastical endorsing agencies credential and certify professional religious leaders they deem qualified for the unique ministry within a military environment. These religious leaders, in turn, consent to supporting the pluralistic requirements of the Armed Services while, at the same time, maintaining their respective faith group teachings and practices.

Military chaplains live in the constant tension of supporting the military’s religious support mission to all members of the Armed Forces, and that of their respective endorsing agency. As commissioned officers, chaplains are accountable to the same military standards, the Code of Conduct, and the Uniform Code of

Military Justice as any service member. Additionally, they must also remain faithful to the tenets and ecclesiastical standards of their sponsoring faith group.

As the Executive Director of Chaplaincy for the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, I have the responsibility of ensuring that our approximately 1500 Southern Baptist military chaplains meet the standards for military service. At the same time, our denomination of over 14 million members and 45,000 churches expect the Armed Services to honor, respect, and defend the religious liberty and conscience of our pastors in uniform we have entrusted into their temporary care.

In regards to religious accommodation in the Armed Forces, it was my personal experience of 38 years as a commissioned Army officer that the military placed the highest value on ensuring the religious liberty of our troops that they had the complete freedom, in conjunction with the military mission, to observe the beliefs, rites, sacraments and practices of their individual religious experience or tradition. The Department of Defense has historically, although sometimes too lengthy and cautiously, taken extraordinary measures to approve religious accommodation requests unless the accommodation would have an adverse effect on unit readiness, individual combat readiness, unit cohesion, morale, discipline, safety and/or health. Our troops, and most Americans, understand the tension that exists between the religious needs of a service member versus military necessity. I applaud the Department of Defense's policy update on religious accommodation that was published last week. This new guidance will no doubt greatly assist our

military leadership in promoting religious diversity while reducing a perception of discrimination towards those whose religious practices or expressions are less familiar to our troops and the chain of command.

Obviously, a number of guiding principles are necessary to ensure the success DoD's religious accommodation policy in support of our troops. First, military commanders, who are primarily responsible for the religious support mission within their ranks, must remain vigilant, and knowledgeable, regarding any freedom of religion issue. Chaplains play a critical advisory role to their command and staff regarding all matters of religion. The chaplain is the only staff officer in a military organization that has the education, experience, and exposure to religious beliefs, practices, and cultural worldviews to properly advise military leadership in this foundational right as a service member and American citizen.

Second, service members of all ranks, including chaplains, must have the assurance that they may freely exercise their religious liberty, and that they are afforded religious accommodation, within the bounds of military necessity.

Third, military leaders should never use their position or authority to coerce or apply undue command influence in the area of religious liberty. DoD owes to every service member's faith group or religious tradition the protection, respect, and dignity it deserves and as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Further, no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the Armed Services more than others.

Fourth, military chaplains serve our Armed Forces primarily to perform or facilitate religious services for our troops. Chaplains should be encouraged and expected to preach, teach, pray, and counsel in accordance with their personal religious beliefs and in accordance with the dictates of their ecclesiastical organization or agency.

I conclude my remarks today with a plea for this committee to continue to protect and promote legislative efforts to ensure the freedom of religion, religious expression, and the religious conscience of the members of the Armed Services. Seventeenth Century theologian Roger Williams, and founder of the Providence Plantation colony, which provided a refuge for religious minorities in America, was a staunch proponent of “soul liberty” – the belief that every human being has the right to speak, hold, change, exercise, and share what you believe based on the dictates of one’s own conscience. I am concerned about the perceived tension, misinformation, and suspicion regarding an individual’s free exercise of religion and conscience while serving as a member of the Armed Services. Media reports over the last year would suggest that there exists within the Armed Forces a growing ignorance, insensitivity, or intolerance regarding matters of religion and its importance within the life of our troops and the organization. Even more disconcerting is the fact that one’s ignorance on such important matters as religious beliefs can quickly lead to misunderstanding, wrong perceptions, intolerance, and hostility towards those who act and think differently than the majority of the community. In the words of Os Guinness, in his book, The Global Square: Religious

Freedom and The Making of a World Safe for Diversity, “how we deal with our differences in public life, especially those regarding religion, will be a real defining issue for the future of our Nation – and humanity.” Religious liberty, in thought and expression, is the key to a strong and virtuous Armed Forces, a civil society, and social harmony. May we continue to respect, celebrate, and defend the religious liberty established by our Founding Fathers. And, may we strive to always maintain an environment within the Armed Services where our troops have the liberty to be intensely religious and, at the same time, religiously free.