

The Impact of Repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell on the Chaplain Corps

A senior active-duty chaplain weighs in

In the ongoing debate about rescinding the law barring open homosexual behavior in the military, many military chaplains rightly argue that changing the policy threatens their freedom of religion and speech in the military. This threat to chaplains' First Amendment rights in turn will likely impact every soldier's responsibility—as required by Army regulation—to challenge immoral or unethical behavior whenever observed.

It is no wonder that the chiefs of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines are urging Congress to give the Department of Defense (“DoD”) a year to study the effects of implementing the change. They are dealing with a matter which extends far beyond the open service of homosexuals in the ranks. The essence of this debate includes the remaking of the Chaplain Corps itself. The Corps has a unique role—established by DoD regulation and Title 10—to address the moral environment in the military, particularly in that the Chaplaincy's moral authority exist over and above man-made government. If the government, however, can intimidate the Corps from speaking prophetically in the midst of uncertain situations, it can eliminate or control every voice of dissent to any law that the government seeks to impose.

Precedent for this concern is seen in the early 1930s in Nazi Germany. Prior to 1933, the German Army allowed its military chaplains fairly broad freedoms of speech. In 1933 when Hitler became Chancellor, he began to reign in the freedoms of all religious institutions, starting with the signing of the Vatican Concordat on July 20, 1933.ⁱ This agreement with Rome, which was to allow greater autonomy of Catholic priests, actually served to strip clergy of individual responsibility for their actions. Priests in the military would excuse their silence in the face of obvious war atrocities by saying that they were simply following the examples of their bishops as agreed to by the Vatican and the State.ⁱⁱ

Military chaplains and civilian pastors in the German Lutheran Church began to feel the force of these comprehensive changes almost immediately. Leaders such as Deitrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller helped to form the Confessing Church in April 1934 in opposition to the anti-Jewish positions and intolerance of the official church—the Reich Church—authorized by Hitler.ⁱⁱⁱ Almost 10,000 Lutheran pastors enrolled in the Confessing Church and supported its chief statement, the Barmen Declaration, written in May 1934 to oppose the authoritarian control of the Reich Church with its scandalous treatment of Jews and non-Aryans and its refusal to recognize that the Christian church must be free from state control.

It was, however, a confusing time. Thousands of German pastors entered the German Army--the Wehrmacht--as chaplains in a sincere belief that atheistic Bolshevism from Russia threatened all of Europe. These young pastors earnestly wished to minister to the spiritual needs of German soldiers and, to them, Hitler offered the only solution to preserving their homeland and religious freedom. Unfortunately, they came to realize too late the true aims of the Nazis. They quickly found that their responsibilities consisted of little else than leading services, working in hospitals and burying the dead.

In essence, chaplains were limited to sacramental duties with no other expectations of their service.^{iv} Their ability either as individuals or a branch of the German military to give moral direction to the Wehrmacht was nonexistent. And when war came, German units moved with lightening speed across Europe and no religious institutions, to include the Vatican, could temper the genocidal plans of Hitler.

How very different the German chaplaincy in 1933-1945 is to the American military chaplaincy today, where chaplains are expected to provide moral and ethical input to their commanders. We are thankfully far, far removed from the many abuses of Nazi Germany, and repealing DADT will hardly usher in a new era of fascism. But attacking religious liberty in the military to advance a political agenda would be an unwise step down that road. And the handwriting is on the wall that such a move could occur, as senior leaders in the military unabashedly announce that anyone disagreeing with rescinding DADT can vote with their feet and leave the military. Such a statement likely means only one thing: the religious teachings and doctrines held as a matter of conscience by chaplains have to yield to state authority. Such a dangerous decision would pave the way for greater state control over the lives of soldiers, the loss of freedom of speech, and the reengineering of the Chaplain Corps as an instrument of the government to carry out its social policies even when they are directly opposed to biblical teachings.

In that uncertain environment, senior chaplains would be forced to “negotiate” solutions that accommodate the agendas of politicians. Young chaplains would be groomed to blindly follow their leaders and they will be cut off from the very religious authority that makes them a unique—and constitutionally required—asset to the military. The military in turn will lose a critical independent check on its collective conscience. This loss of this moral guidance will be crushing in an institution where taking human life is one of its necessary components, and it will be unprecedented in our nation’s history.

The author is a senior active-duty military chaplain and his name is withheld to avoid censure for expressing these views. The views expressed are the author’s alone and do not represent those of the U.S. military or the Chaplaincy Corps.

ⁱ Mark Hayden, *German Military Chaplains in World War II* (Schiffer Military History: Atglen, Pa., 2005) 24.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Radical Resistance,” Richard V. Pierard. *Christian History Biography*, Oct. 1, 1991.
<http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1991/issue32/3230.html>

^{iv} *Ibid*, 35f.