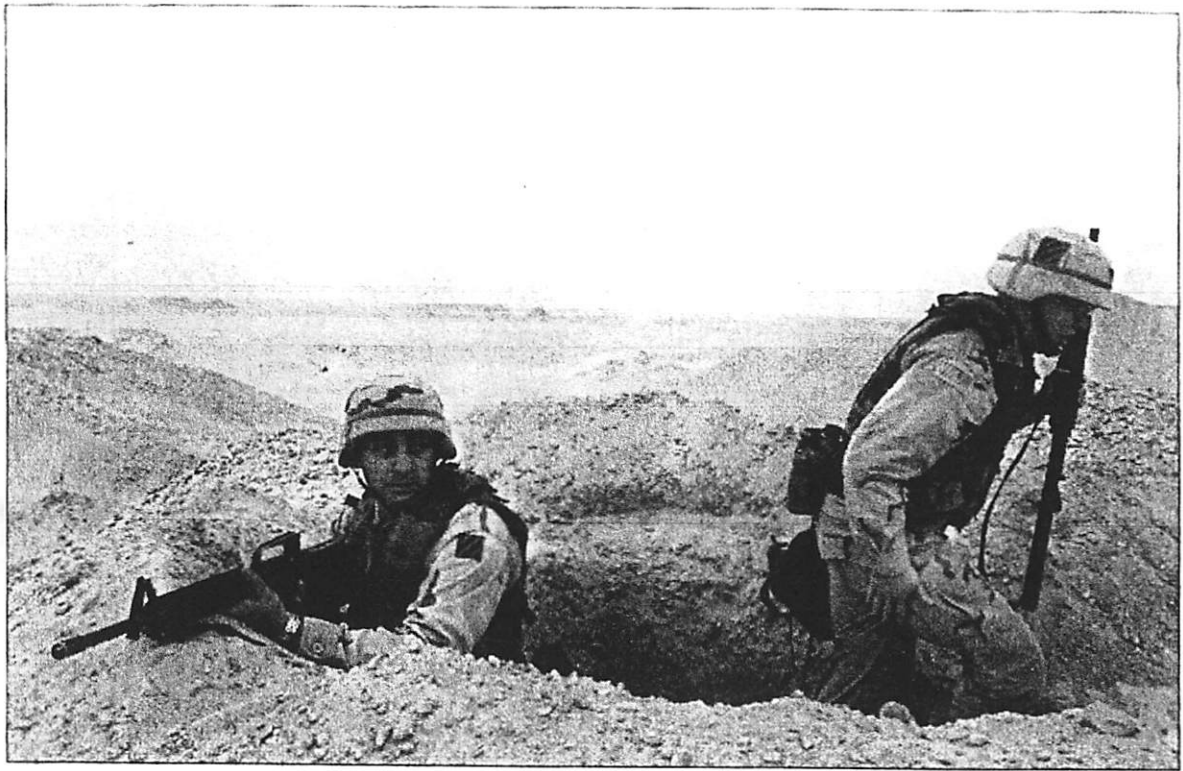


# THE ATHEIST FOXHOLE

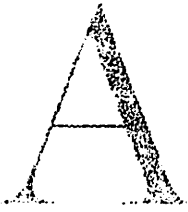


**ACCORDING TO THE BUSH-RUMSFELD PENTAGON,  
GOD CAN NEVER AGAIN BE A COPILOT.**

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**BY ANGELO M. CODEVILLA**

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ARGUABLY THE WORST, MOST GRATUITOUS, most ominous act inflicted on America in living memory was Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's August 29, 2005 promulgation of guidelines for religious expression in the U.S. Air Force—intended as a model for the rest of the armed

forces. Their essence is to forbid anyone in uniform from giving "the reasonable perception that [the Armed Forces, and hence the U.S. government] support any religion over other religions or the idea of religion over the choice of no religious affiliation." However, they place no restriction on anyone who might advocate atheism, or mock, or restrict, or cause discomfort to, the religiously observant in any setting. Indeed they are all about placing the U.S. government's weight against talking about the presence, or praying for the guidance or protection, of God. Meanwhile, the Air Force and other services require their members to take instruction in "sensitive" thought and behavior amounting to a secular religion.

Marginalizing religion among people likely to be shot at is always a bad idea. But discouraging religion in forces once headed by George Washington, whose current members come from the most devout sectors of the modern world's most devout country, at the behest of people scarcely present in those forces, shows incompetence more than evil. Stalin's rules for the Red Army in World War II were more God-friendly than Rumsfeld's.

Until recently, traditions and the habits of servicemen combined with common sense to exempt the Armed Forces from the U.S. government's longstanding *Kulturkampf* against religion in America. Anyone going up to the Secretary of the Air Force's Pentagon office would pass by a huge mural of an Air Force family going to church, with the words, "Here I am Lord, send me." Cadets at the Naval Academy still pray collectively before common meals. Young men away from home for the first time—at least those who do not simply drink and whore—find religious practice a lifeline that keeps them connected to normal human life. The advent of the "All Volunteer Force" in the 1970s increased the proportion of practicing Christians among both officers and enlisted. Since 9/11, the "foxhole factor" has come into play: The number of atheists is inversely proportional to that of bullets flying. In short, there have been the very opposite of popular pressures for secularization.

THE EXCUSE THAT THE MOST recent restrictions on religion are being forced by the courts is insincere. Yes, one Mikey Weinstein filed a suit alleging that the longstanding patterns of behavior at the Air Force Academy amounted to "severe, systemic and pervasive" religious discrimination. But no ruling of the Supreme Court has invalidated them. Nor has any law done so. Yet a few officers wanted to have less Christianity there, and key officials in the Rumsfeld Pentagon agreed. Nor does the excuse wash that the restrictions are necessary for the maintenance of good military order. The pragmatic way to ensure unit cohesion is surely not to displease the many for the sake of the few.

## Stalin's rules for the Red Army in World War II were more God-friendly than Rumsfeld's.

The guidelines are more radical than they seem. "Public prayer," they direct, "should not normally be included"—read, is banned—except in "extraordinary circumstances." The only ones they cite are "mass casualties, preparation for *imminent* combat, and natural disasters" (emphasis mine). In essence, the Bush Pentagon lets the name of God be invoked only when absolutely necessary to provide the equivalent of a shot of hooze, or of a mood-altering drug. Practically, it treats religion as Marx described it: "the opiate of the masses." *Prima facie*, even opening a routine meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance flouts the guidelines, because it affirms that America is anything but indifferent to God.

Worse, the guidelines also permit prayer where, "consistent with longstanding military tradition," there are "change of command, promotion ceremonies, or significant celebrations..."—but only if such "prayer" is emptied of "specific beliefs" and intended "to add a heightened sense of seriousness or solemnity." How patent unseriousness may add seriousness is part of the Bush White House's closely guarded formula for success. It may not have realized that it outdid the judges who had tried to outlaw the Pledge of Allegiance.

THE GUIDELINES PLACE special restrictions and responsibilities on chaplains. Heretofore they had been allowed, even encouraged, to shepherd men of their own denomination, urge members of other denominations to be faithful to

them, and to try to bring the godless to God. Now they are to help restrict their flock's own urges to proselytize, to restrict their own and their flock's religious practices to the guidelines, and above all to give no one the impression that God exists and that it matters. To chaplains who wear the uniform, these are orders. But these orders raise the most fundamental questions of all: What is the chaplain doing in uniform? For whom is he working? To what end?

But does not one serve God by serving His America? Not if America insists that those who love God shut up about it while those who mock him may do so at will.

A chaplain's job has always been inherently problematic. On the one hand he must do nothing to impair his flock's ability to do their military jobs. On the other, he cannot simply be yet another voice urging people to do what they're told regardless of what they might think. His authority comes from God, on whose behalf he cares for the things that are most important to each individual. For Christian chaplains, Jesus' words "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" have offered a practical solution to this conflict. In America, a nation explicitly "under God," the chaplains could counsel people to follow the faith's dictates fully, while obeying orders wholeheartedly because the two did not conflict.

But what can a Christian chaplain under the guidelines say when he reads, or someone asks him about, the Gospel's charge to "go out among all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father..."? Or what can a Jewish one say when several of his flock are disciplined for gathering together in prayer at the times prescribed by the Law? The free exercise of religion involves speaking and acting in public. Clergymen's stock in trade must be to urge religious practice in everyday life. What can they say, what can serious Christians or Jews think, about an organization in which they risk their lives while demanding that they behave in ways that they

believe endanger their immortal souls? It becomes difficult for them to say, I belong here.

It is inherently difficult to believe that one is serving God by working in an organization that will penalize you for speaking his name. But does not one serve God by serving His America? Not if America insists that those who love God shut up about it while those who mock him may do so at will. Whose America is it anyway? It cannot belong equally to people whose views of it are incompati-

ble with one another. The Air Force cadets who charged that a critical mass of evangelicals at the Academy had created an environment they could not stand, and the captain featured in the *New York Times* article that supported them, had every right to tell themselves and the world something like "this isn't me, and this is not my idea of America." And, because their views of America coincided with those of powerful people in Washington, the Bush administration promulgated guidelines congenial to them. But, by the very same token, these guidelines frame an environment unacceptable to serious Christians and Jews.

THE ALL VOLUNTEER FORCE lives by attracting people. Its character, and its size, depend on who finds military service attractive. There may exist a pool of young people big enough to fill America's military who combine appetite for physical challenges, tolerance for danger, a spirit of self-sacrifice, discipline, and patriotism, but who don't really care whether America is "under God" or not, who get along just fine without the Ten Commandments, are more bothered by piety than by homosexuality, and are inspired by "sensitivity" training. And perhaps the social changes forced upon the U.S. military in recent years will bring such people out of the woodwork and into uniform. Maybe America will end up with atheist foxholes. But surely these changes tell the families who now actually fill the Armed Forces that maybe the kinds of people who are making the rules should also be doing the fighting. >

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