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Clashing Over Church Ritual and Flag Protocol at the Naval Academy Chapel

By NEELA BANERJEE

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — On Sundays at the Naval Academy Chapel, at a few minutes past 11 a.m., the choir stops singing and a color guard carrying the academy flag and the American flag strides up the aisle.

Below a cobalt blue stained-glass window of Jesus, one midshipman dips the academy flag before the altar cross, and the other dips the American flag.

The dipping of the flag has begun this nondenominational Protestant service at the Naval Academy for 40 years. But in civilian life, the American flag is never to be dipped, and the Navy says, it is not dipped at any other worship service at the academy or at any other installation.

In October, after the academy's superintendent, Vice Adm. Jeffrey L. Fowler, raised questions about the ritual with the academy chaplains, they suspended the flag-dipping because "there was a concern over teaching midshipmen something not practiced anywhere in the fleet," the academy's spokesman, Cmdr. Ed Austin, said in an e-mail message.

But the pause lasted only a few months. Now the flags are being dipped again, and the superintendent, who has held his post since June, has stopped attending the 11 a.m. service. Evangelical Christians and their critics alike assert that the academy had to reconsider after an outcry by congregants and alumni.

"I think the ceremony is fully representative of the highest traditions of our country," said Bob Morrison, who has attended the 11 a.m. service for 12 years and who heads an internship program at the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian group. "It basically says that our country is one nation under God and the nation-state is not the highest authority in the world."

A spokesman for the Navy chief of chaplains, Capt. Gregory G. Caiazzo, said in an e-mail message that different bases developed their own traditions at religious services, and that "such traditions are conducted at the discretion of the command."

Mikey Weinstein, a graduate of the Air Force Academy and president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a watchdog group, criticized Admiral Fowler's decision to allow the practice to resume. "It was an incredible act of cowardice," he said. "The oath he and others have taken is to protect and defend the Constitution, not the New Testament."

Admiral Fowler declined to comment. In an e-mail message, Commander Austin said: "Discussions with the chaplains resulted in suspension of the tradition in the fall of 2007. Following continued evaluation, parading and dipping the flags was incorporated back into the 11:00 Sunday Protestant services."

Each branch of the armed forces has its own flag code, said Clark Rogers, director of educational programs at the National Flag Foundation, a nonprofit organization that promotes respect for the flag. But the United States Flag Code says the flag “should not be dipped for any person or thing,” Mr. Rogers said.

“If the academy called me, I would tell them not to dip the flag,” Mr. Rogers said. “And I’m a very religious person.”

Concern about the influence of conservative Christians in the military has grown since an investigation in 2005 by the Air Force found that Christian staff and faculty members at the Air Force Academy used their positions to evangelize cadets. Conservative Christian chaplains have battled the military to break with tradition and pray in Jesus’ name at military functions.

Now, Specialist Jeremy Hall of the Army, an Iraq veteran and an atheist, is suing the Defense Department, with the help of Mr. Weinstein’s group, because he says his superior officer tried to intimidate him into accepting fundamentalist Christianity.

About 1,000 people usually attend the 11 a.m. service. After the dipping was suspended, “dozens of congregants” wrote the academy backing the practice, Mr. Morrison said. Commander Austin confirmed that most of those who contacted the academy said they supported the practice.

“I like that part of the ritual; it never bothered me,” said Lowell Hodgson, a retired Army lieutenant colonel after a recent service, “and I believe in the separation of church and state.”

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