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Backward, Christian Soldiers

Stephen Glain | February 10, 2011

Late last summer, Mikey Weinstein broke up a fight between Crystal and Ginger, the guard dogs trained to protect him and his family from a violent reckoning with Christian zealots. For the 55-year-old civil rights activist committed to ridding the US military of religious intolerance, it was a refreshingly secular and evenly matched bout. Weinstein is, after all, famously combative, both pugnacious and profane, with the bearing and sensibility of a mastiff. In the end he prevailed and peace was restored, though at the price of some bad scratches on his arms and a hole in his right hand where a well-aimed canine had struck.

Only wags and heretics would suggest that such a stigmata-like wound places Weinstein in the company of another Jewish prophet who spoke truth to the legions of an imperial power. At the very least, however, his journey from corporate lawyer to patriarch of a tribe of persecuted minorities is worthy of an Old Testament morality play. For the past half-decade, the Air Force Academy alum has labored to reverse the currents of Pentecostalism that course through the US military in general and the Air Force in particular.

It is an asymmetrical struggle, an endless round of Whac-a-Mole with a network of fundamentalist groups that would otherwise level the wall separating church and state with the help of supine, if not complicit, Pentagon top brass. In the battle over the meaning and implications of the First Amendment, Weinstein has staked himself at the fault line between the free-exercise clause and the establishment clause, which simultaneously preclude Congress from legislating a state religion and guarantee freedom of worship.

“The free-exercise clause does not trump the establishment clause,” Weinstein says from the living room of his home, a tastefully designed adobe ranch house in Albuquerque. “Our Bill of Rights was specifically created not for the convenience of the majority but to protect the minority from the tyranny of the majority. From that perspective it is absolutely imperative.”

Since he established his watchdog group, Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), in 2005, Weinstein has built a client base of more than 20,000 mostly Catholic and Protestant—as well as Jewish, Muslim, Wiccan, atheist, and gay and lesbian—members of the military. For them, Weinstein and MRFF are the only recourse for servicemen and -women who have been either punished for their faith or subjected to fundamentalist proselytizing in violation of military guidelines.

Consider, for example, the ferocity with which Weinstein and his undermanned crew of mostly volunteer staff reacted to the Air Force Academy’s recent invitation to Marine Lt. Clebe McClary, a controversial evangelical Christian, to speak at a prayer luncheon. In a January 22 letter to the academy, MRFF argued that McClary’s “intense, unreasoned and psychotic demonstration of unilateral and distorted Christian doctrine” would define the luncheon as “a revival meeting with the purpose of proselytizing and achieving Christian supremacy.” Weinstein then worked the media, landing notices about MRFF’s complaints in the *Washington Post*, *The Raw Story* and DailyKos. He urged groups such as the ACLU and Veterans for

Common Sense to pile on and, on January 31, after the academy refused to budge, he filed a formal complaint in federal court demanding that the academy cancel its luncheon “on the grounds that it is a blatant violation of the plaintiffs’ Constitutional rights as guaranteed by the First Amendment.” (As *The Nation* went to press, a federal district court was set to hear MRFF’s request.)

A similar MRFF onslaught in October compelled its superintendent to release the classified results of a survey that revealed only partial success in its efforts to enhance religious tolerance. It was an important, albeit tactical, concession in what the Pentagon clearly regards as a war of attrition. One of Weinstein’s most recent cases concerns a Christian group at the Colorado Springs–based Air Force Academy that allegedly promotes fealty to God over temporal authority, disempowers women and encourages its members to intermarry. The academy leadership, Weinstein insists, has all but ignored the group and has stonewalled his demands for an investigation.

“They let Mikey throw blows, and they hope one day he’ll get tired and go away, but someone’s gotta be out there,” says Joe Wilson, the former US ambassador and an MRFF board director who famously confronted the national security establishment himself during the Iraq War. “There’s a need to take it to them, knock them back on their heels. Otherwise you lose.”

Asked for comment, a Pentagon spokesman said the Defense Department “places a high value on the rights of military members to observe the tenets of their respective religions and does not endorse any one religion or religious organization.” Under its equal opportunity policy, the spokesman said, of 1.4 million active-duty members of the US military, only fifteen filed formal complaints related to religious harassment and proselytizing in 2009.

The Christianizing of the armed forces, Weinstein believes, has implications for national security as well as for civil rights. In addition to ingrained anti-Semitism, his work reveals a simmering Islamophobia in the ranks that, when flushed to the surface by media exposure, has been leveraged by jihadi groups overseas for propaganda purposes.

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Leading the Pentecostalist charge is a constellation of different groups, none more prominent than Military Ministry, an affiliate of Campus Crusade for Christ, a global outreach network with an estimated annual budget of nearly \$500 million, raised largely from individual donors and congregations, according to the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability. Military Ministry maintains branch offices at the nation’s main Army bases, as well as overseas initiatives like Bible-study programs globally. The group’s mission statement, according to its website, is “To Win, Build, and Send in the power of the Holy Spirit and to establish movements of spiritual multiplication in the worldwide military community.” In a 2005 newsletter, Military Ministry’s executive director, retired Army Maj. Gen. Bob Dees, said the group “must pursue our...means for transforming the nation—through the military. And the military may be the most influential way to affect that spiritual superstructure.”

Military Ministry is particularly well represented at basic training installations like Fort Jackson in South Carolina, the Army’s largest boot camp. According to MRFF researcher Chris Rodda, the group instructs recruits through Bible-study programs that “when you join the military, you’ve joined the ministry,” and it ardently associates conquest on the battlefield with religious conversion. In a 2007 report, MRFF provides links to photos of Fort Jackson troops posing with rifles in one hand and Bibles—some with camouflage covers—in the other. A Bible-study outline distributed by Military Ministry cites Scripture to sanction killing in combat by “God’s servant, an angel of wrath,” to “punish those who do evil.”

Other groups affiliated with Military Ministry include Valor, which targets future officers on ROTC campuses and labors to “help them become disciple makers around the world at their future duty

assignments.” There is also Military Gateways, which concentrates on training agencies like the Defense Language Institute, and through its own array of subdivisions like Sailors for Christ, institutions like the Great Lakes Recruit Training Command and Naval Service Training Command.

Another prominent group, The Navigators, commands “thousands of courageous men and women passionately following Christ, representing Him in advancing the Gospel through relationships where they live, work, train for war, and deploy.” It has a permanent staff presence at military academies and its directors, like their counterparts at Military Ministry, frequently refer publicly to US servicemen and -women as “Government-Paid Missionaries for Christ.” (Pastor Ted Haggard, whose New Life Church was located a few miles from the Air Force Academy, was a familiar figure on campus until 2006, when it was revealed that he had had relations with a male escort and used illegal drugs.) The Navigators was founded in 1933 by Dawson Trotman, a mentor of Doug Coe, himself a prominent if low-key spiritual counselor to political elites in Washington. Coe is closely associated with C Street, an evangelical enclave for politicians and power brokers.

The revivalist subculture within the armed forces is as overt as Washington is loath to confront it. In late September Weinstein sent a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates on behalf of more than 100 Air Force Academy cadets who said they were obliged to falsely assume fundamentalist identities—leaving Bibles and Christian literature and music CDs on their bunks, for example—lest they be singled out for harassment by their commanding officers. Weinstein’s letter, like his previous appeals to the defense secretary, was ignored. Congress is equally reluctant to take on the issue, and even Democratic lawmakers have distanced themselves from MRFF. Board director Wilson said he tried to persuade senior aides to Carl Levin, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to open hearings on some of the outrages Weinstein has unearthed, but to no avail. “What Mikey needs is a political ally, someone to champion his fight on the Hill,” said Wilson from his office in Santa Fe. “But the Christian right is very powerful, and no one wants to wage that war.”

(A source from the Senate Armed Services Committee says there is no recollection among committee members of such a discussion with Wilson, adding that the committee serves in an oversight role when it comes to reports of discrimination and proselytizing in the military. “The way we work is, we ensure the Department of Defense is investigating these allegations as they come up,” the source says.)

Weinstein was born and raised in Albuquerque, the son of a Naval Academy graduate who ultimately became a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. After graduating from the Air Force Academy in 1977, he became a judge advocate general and, after leaving the military in 1989, worked as a Washington-based corporate lawyer and counselor to the Reagan White House. Throughout the 1980s and ’90s, he and his wife, Bonnie, lived a comfortably affluent life in the northern Virginia suburbs, attending their two sons’ sporting events in the afternoons and mingling with other A-listers on the Washington social circuit at night.

That changed abruptly in summer 2004, when Weinstein visited his son Curtis on the eve of his second year at the academy. Over lunch, a clearly agitated Curtis described several occasions when cadets and officers had subjected him to anti-Jewish verbal abuse. His account chilled Weinstein, who as a cadet had twice been beaten unconscious in anti-Semitic attacks. Weinstein filed a complaint; the Air Force responded by launching an investigation that exposed a predatory, top-down evangelicalism at the academy.

Since then, the Weinstains have burned through their savings and retirement funds and leveraged credit card debt to sustain MRFF as a lonely sanctuary for besieged secularists. (MRFF often provides spending money for clients who are no longer in the military and are struggling to get by.) Each day, the group is peppered with appeals for help. During an interview with *The Nation*, Weinstein paused to take a dozen calls and text messages from clients in places from Fort Hood in Texas to Afghanistan’s Helmand province, where automatic rifle fire could be heard in the background.

The MRFF e-mail log is packed with detailed accounts of senior officers subverting with impunity regulations against evangelizing. In one, an Army staff sergeant tells how he and his comrades were forced to endure a Baptist minister's graphic sermon about a girl who was roasted alive in a car crash along with her soul because she had not been baptized, then encouraged to embrace Christ with the help of religious counselors waiting just outside the door. In another case, during an official briefing an officer at a missile air base was treated to a Christian prayer for divine "guidance and direction" when deciding when to launch the weapons under his responsibility.

A First Amendment vigilante, Weinstein is also on intimate terms with its abusers. His hate mail—mostly anonymous and unprintable grace notes from the bosom of white Christian America—casts him as everything from a troublemaking Jew to the Antichrist. (Among Weinstein's many critics is his daughter-in-law's father, who in a June 24 letter in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* derided him as a Christian-hating publicity hound. In response, Amanda Lee Weinstein, who graduated from the Air Force Academy in 2004, wrote a lengthy defense of her father-in-law in *Veterans Today*, as "the one that I call Dad.")

Death threats against Weinstein and his family are routine. Vandals have shot through the windows of the Weinstein family home and painted swastikas and crucifixes on its walls, smeared his door with feces and destroyed his mezuzah, the parchment roll of Hebrew verse traditionally hung on the door frame of Jewish homes. He retains a detail of security and explosives experts, and he has positioned firearms—from a twelve-gauge shotgun to semiautomatic handguns—throughout the house. (Amber, Weinstein's 23-year-old daughter, sleeps with a .357 revolver by her bed.) The guard dogs have been trained to fend off intruders for at least eight seconds, which security consultants estimate is the minimum amount of time the Weinstains would need to get to their guns.

Firearms, however, are not Weinstein's offensive weapon of choice. Armed with a hundred years of case law, he is most formidable in court. In 2004 MRFF was alerted by service members that chaplains embedded in combat units were handing out vernacular-language Bibles in Iraq and Afghanistan in violation of a Pentagon General Order that prohibits proselytizing of any kind. After MRFF took up the case, the Pentagon responded by confiscating and destroying isolated caches of Bibles, although according to MRFF such evangelizing continues in both countries.

In January 2010 Weinstein exposed a private contractor who was supplying rifle scopes to the Defense Department imprinted with coded references to Christ-related biblical verses. After ABC News did a report on the "Jesus rifles," as Weinstein called them, the Defense Department ordered that the scopes be sanitized of any subliminal content.

In April, in response to MRFF demands, the Pentagon withdrew an invitation to the Rev. Franklin Graham, known for his Islamophobic remarks, to speak at a National Day of Prayer Task Force service. In August Weinstein revealed that troops from Virginia's Fort Eustis were confined to their barracks and assigned cleanup duty after they refused to obey their commanders' orders to attend the performance of a Christian rock group. That same month MRFF publicized the mass baptism of twenty-nine marines at California's Camp Pendleton before their deployment to Afghanistan. News accounts of the ceremony, part of a battalion commander-inspired operation called "Sword of the Spirit," were republished by Ansar Al-Mujahideen, a leading jihadi website.

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The number of Muslim service members seeking Weinstein's help has grown geometrically since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the cruel odyssey of Zachari Klawonn is a particularly ripe narrative for the jihadi mill. The Fort Hood-based Army specialist, a model soldier with no reprimands on his record and some of the highest physical-fitness ratings in his unit, has alleged that he was subjected to regular abuse because of his Muslim faith. According to the half-Moroccan Klawonn, who enlisted two years ago at 18, his dream of

being an Army careerist was challenged by a culture of Islamophobia from the day he put on his uniform. “With 9/11, Islamophobia in the military was born,” Klawonn said in an interview. “You can see it in the libraries, the Christian concerts. They look at me like I’m an outlaw.”

While marching in basic training, says Klawonn, troops would mockingly chant “hajji,” a term of respect in the Muslim world for those who make the annual hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. During a prisoner interrogation training exercise Klawonn was instructed by his drill sergeant to play the role of a suspected terrorist—not just for his own unit but for others throughout the day, depriving him of his own training interval. His requests to fast and pray were angrily denied, and his Koran was anonymously seized from his locker and torn to pieces.

The harassment continued at Fort Hood, where he was assigned in November 2008, and intensified a year later after Maj. Nidal Hasan went on a shooting spree at a base medical clinic, killing thirteen people and wounding thirty. After a threatening note appeared on his barracks door, Klawonn was advised by Fort Hood authorities to find quarters outside the base because his safety could not be guaranteed, but he was denied the standard stipend for off-post housing.

On April 27 Klawonn turned to Weinstein, who immediately retained a Dallas-based attorney to represent his new client. Within days, Klawonn was ordered to appear before the second-highest commander at Fort Hood, who demanded to know why he was generating such negative publicity. “Clearly they were feeling the heat,” he says.

With MRFF gathering evidence and interviewing prospective witnesses in anticipation of a lawsuit, things have improved for Klawonn. He has started receiving his housing allowance, and a Muslim prayer room and imam have been made available on base. As the details of his treatment have slowly emerged in the media, the hostility toward him has subsided. Many of the 3,540 active-duty Muslims serving in the military—the actual figure is probably higher, as a considerable number of them are thought to be “closeted”—have expressed their support for Klawonn’s cause. His ambition to make officer grade has survived his ordeal, and he is even considering a career in politics. “We’re going to fix what’s going on at Fort Hood,” he says. “The only thing to do is to be productive and progressive and tackle the problem head on. You lead by example.”

Asked if harassment and discrimination against Muslim soldiers like the kind Klawonn received could have contributed to Hasan’s murderous rampage, Klawonn acknowledges the possibility that it was provoked. Nothing justifies murder, he says, but “the reality is that there was Islamophobia at Fort Hood. Could it have pushed an individual to a breaking point? Absolutely.”

Should Klawonn’s case come to trial, a key witness on his behalf will likely be another victim of religious discrimination at Fort Hood. Zachary Arenz, an Army specialist who turned to MRFF in June, was subjected to sustained abuse not because he is a Muslim but because he is a Jew.

From 2007, when he first reported for duty at Fort Hood, to his departure from the service in June, Arenz was singled out by both flag and noncommissioned officers for his faith. His request for kosher meals in the field was denied, and he was ordered by his platoon sergeant to find a fatigue-colored yarmulke so as “to restrict its visibility.” In his cot after a day of field-training exercises, Arenz was reading Hebrew Scripture; his platoon sergeant loudly demanded to know why the Jews killed Jesus. On another occasion, Arenz returned to his barracks to find a swastika scrawled on the parchment from his mezuzah. At one point, his battalion commander told him that “all Jews make bad soldiers” and that Judaism was “incompatible with military service.” He was even ordered to give his mother’s telephone number to Fort Hood authorities so they could confirm that he was, in fact, Jewish. Eventually Arenz was found guilty in a court-martial of what he says were trumped-up charges of having a cellphone in the field and not being at an appointed place of duty.

During his struggle with the Army bureaucracy, Arenz, a native of Huntsville, Alabama, petitioned his senators and Congressman for assistance, with no success. “I just want my day in court,” he says. “I want to face my tormentors and I want them relieved.”

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In addition to his running skirmishes with religious discrimination, Weinstein can now add alleged predation to his casebook. In October he agreed to represent Jean Baas, who charged that directors of a nonprofit organization called Cadets for Christ prey on Air Force Academy cadets and manipulate them into marrying one another, a common cult practice known as “shepherding.” Baas based her accusations on her experience with her daughter, Lauren, who, she claims, was brainwashed into participating in CFC’s rituals, culminating in her September engagement to a fellow group member.

“They still dictate every move she makes,” Baas said by telephone from her Gulfport, Mississippi, home, where Lauren grew up. “It’s sickening to watch while the Air Force does nothing.”

According to her mother, Lauren was a strong-willed and devout Catholic who attended Mass regularly at Colorado Springs during her first year at the Air Force Academy. In August 2008 she was recruited by a friend and CFC member to participate in the group’s functions, which included weekend spiritual retreats, Wednesday night Bible study on the academy grounds and dinners at the home of group directors Donald and Anna Warrick. Soon, according to Baas, Lauren was disparaging her family members as irredeemable papists. During visits home for holidays and semester breaks, she was sullen and aloof, retreating deep into the fold of Scripture. By March 2009 she had forsaken her dream of becoming an Air Force pilot for the divinely inspired role of wife and mother. That Labor Day weekend, Lauren e-mailed her parents of her intention to marry a fellow CFC member, whom she knew only through Bible study meetings. (Lauren had already formally announced her engagement during a CFC gathering at the Warricks’ home.) In late June Lauren and her fiancé spent several days with her parents in Gulfport, poring over packages of materials provided by the Warricks that enumerated the spousal responsibilities of the “shepherd” and his “sheep.”

Reached by e-mail, Donald Warrick described Cadets for Christ as “a Bible-study group for interested cadets,” many of whom have received early promotions to flag rank. About a third of its members worship with the Warricks, he wrote, while the rest attend services elsewhere, and “all of them are free to come and go from our study as they choose.” The CFC board is aware of the allegations made by Jean Bass and Weinstein’s representation of her, according to Warrick, “and while their reality about what takes place and is taught in Cadets for Christ is far different from our own they are of course free to say what they want, and we wish them well.”

The Baases and their daughter, now stationed at Vandenberg Air Force Base, are completely estranged. “I’m not surprised this kind of evangelicalism exists,” says Baas. “But I am surprised at where it takes place. This is no accident. Someone is allowing these people to operate there.”

A current MRFF client corroborates Baas’s account of Cadets for Christ and indications of at least passive academy support for the group. In an e-mail made available to *The Nation* on the understanding that its author will remain anonymous, the client says her daughter was recruited by the Warricks, whom she describes as “dangerous and destructive individuals.” Just as disturbing, she writes, “is how these folks are at the academy, recruiting some of the brightest and the best, to carry out their mission...right under the unsuspecting or maybe the knowing, leaders of the academy. Then when it is pointed out to them, it is denied. Is that denial out of ignorance or is it to protect? This is why I say that this issue may be much bigger and broader than what appears.”

Asked for comment, Air Force Academy spokesman Lt. Col. John Bryan said the allegations relating to Cadets for Christ are not substantiated. Bryan also stated that “the academy remains committed to

protecting an individual's right to practice any religion they choose, or no religion, provided their practices do not violate policy or law or impede mission accomplishment.”

When Baas petitioned the academy for help, she was told by a chaplain to write a letter to the superintendent but to betray “no feelings, so as not to sound like a crying mother.” In the fall, she came across MRFF during an Internet search and, frustrated with what she regarded as academy inertia, contacted Weinstein. With signature alacrity, he fired off e-mails to senior Air Force officers in Washington—including a former Air Force chief of staff—and the media, landing an exposé in Truthout, the online general news site. He publicly expressed outrage that academy officials would allow a private religious group to proselytize at a government institution, a charge he said was corroborated by statements from dozens of cadets. “We are now in a state of war with the academy,” he told the weekly Colorado Springs *Independent* in September.

He was back in the ring, canines bared.

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