

The Threat of Christian Bias In The Military

My Experience Over the Last 47 Years With Christian Nationalism and Sexism, Among Other Biases



MARTY FRANCE
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From December 2024

"When you hit 50, and you haven't had children, you're going to regret it. You have mis-aligned priorities. I know that's hard to hear. A career, especially for a woman, is not as important as a family."

The above quote isn't from 1955 or 1975 or not even 1995, but December of 2024. And, it was a public post by a (now former) friend, retired officer, male of course, to an active-duty officer on HER social media feed. It stood out among all of the other posts that were expressing admiration and envy for the female officer because of some of her recent travels to magical and inspirational places, peripherally related to her most recent assignment. What's even more shocking is that the responding misogynist does not (militarily) outrank his target and that the original poster is easily one of the most talented, professional, and high-achieving military officers I've known in my 47 years of involvement with the US military—male or female.

He then takes the conversation off-line to DMs where he doubles down on his condescending, patriarchal stance with the following:

"You have a serious issue. I know you well enough and you have screwed up, DARLIN' [emphasis added]. You have a very limited time to fix your priorities. Good vibes are not in order at this point. Figure it out, XXXXXXX (rank redacted, but it's superior to his retired grade). You need to actively create the future, and you're not doing that. If you can't create, adopt. Do something. You, as a woman, do have a different role than I do, believe it or not."

She forwarded this exchange to me shocked that a former friend and colleague would feel empowered to not only publicly denigrate her for her professional and personal choices and then for exacerbating the situation with his series of DM lectures. She wanted not only my advice, but primarily to demonstrate to me that "they" are still out there—the sexists and Christian Nationalists that do not believe in equality of opportunity and are still actively seeking to impose archaic gender roles on members of the active-duty service.

We discussed the damage that a leader or commander with this perspective could have on the many officers and enlisted personnel with whom he interacts, commands, evaluates, and mentors over a 20-plus year career. The effects can be devastating. Of course, I instantly thought of comments by more famous Christian Nationalists like VP-elect [JD Vance](#) and Secretary of Defense nominee, [Pete Hegseth](#), that are fully in line with the above retiree's positions.

With all combat roles in our military open to women for nearly a decade, one would've thought that this was "settled law." Unfortunately, we thought the same of [Roe v. Wade](#) prior to 2022, or at least we were told it was settled law by those seeking Senate confirmation—until it wasn't. Now, I'm afraid that women's rights—and those of other minority groups—in the military may indeed be in danger, regardless of the "nominee promises" of Hegseth and others.

My experience with this type of sexism, which really has religious bias at its root, goes back decades. The story above and the challenges we face currently with the incoming MAGA, avowedly Christian Nationalist administration as outlined in their [Project 2025 plans for the military](#), are serious enough, but with me, they resonate deeply. If you're so inclined, please read on for my deeper experience with these issues. If not, then please take the aforementioned personal anecdote as evidence that the threat remains and will only grow if they fail to confront it now.

Let's Take the Wayback Machine to 1977



"Ten, e-LEV-en, tweh... ugh!" That was me 47 years ago, counting out pull-ups before breakfast, in line with my basic cadet classmates at the US Air Force Academy (USAFA). We were in field training, called "Jack's Valley" for its location just north of the cadet area. There were two lines of us doing our pull-ups while everyone watched, straining in our green cotton fatigues and black, polished, Vietnam-era combat boots to get our chins over the cold steel bar just one more time while everyone cheered (or groaned).

Adjacent to me, as I did all I could to get to number 12, I heard, calmly and clearly, a slightly higher pitched, "Twelve! Thirteen! Fourteen!" I looked right and was not surprised to see Basic Cadet Michelle D. Johnson, Class of 1981, crushing me. It wasn't the first time that I'd be bested by a female classmate at the Academy and it wouldn't be the last. But that morning left an indelible mark on me. I'd seen first-hand that I was nothing special; that I was surrounded by a lot of special people with great skills and talent, and that even though they made up only 10% of our class and were only the second class of women admitted to USAFA, the women in my class were every bit as talented, committed, and ready to serve as any of the men. [Note: Michelle would go on to graduate #2 overall in our class of 876, be an All-America NCAA Div II basketball player, the first female cadet wing commander, a Rhodes Scholar, and ultimately a lieutenant general (three-star) and first female superintendent of the US Air Force Academy.]

Having been raised by a very strong, independent woman and also having many strong female friends in high school that I respected greatly, this wasn't a huge adjustment for me—more of a reinforcement of what I already thought was true.

Women were not yet fully integrated into the military—they couldn't yet serve in anything very close to combat roles as they are today—but most of us could see that coming before too long and we knew that many of our classmates would be in the vanguard of that natural evolution.

We also saw a lot of resistance to that integration. The final class of all-male cadets at USAFA, 1979, had a reputation of misogyny that lives on to this day, adopting a class motto of "Last Class With Balls," or LCWB. It was absolutely common for male cadets of all classes to overtly say that they didn't think women belonged at the service academies and we even heard similar mutterings from faculty and staff. Many of these complaints were couched in religious terms, in part because of the high percentage of cadets, faculty, and staff that were openly religious, usually leaning towards evangelical Christianity in their fervor and literal interpretation, even if the rapid growth of Bible-banging evangelism was just beginning in the late-70s, coming out in full-force with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency—an event that enjoyed near unanimous support among USAFA cadets, it seemed.

Into the '80s and the Growth of Christian Nationalism in the Military

The growth of non-denominational evangelical Christianity from the Reagan Era through the following decades is well-documented in many sources and I won't belabor it here. But what I saw was a growing likelihood that officers in the military would overtly state their beliefs in a variety of ways. There were lunch-time Bible studies in conference rooms, spouses (actually, civilian wives only) of Christian officers met for tea, lunch, or "Mothers of Pre-Schoolers (MOPS)" that ended up being bald-faced church recruitment and Bible study meetings in their own right. Entire units became known for their religious perspective, usually defined by the commander.

I knew organizations that were known as "Mormon," and others that were "Southern Baptist" or associated with one local evangelical church or another. If you went to the boss's church and participated in his (or his wife's) religious meetings, you were "in," and could count on good evaluations and increased chances of promotions and good follow-on job recommendations. Female officers were largely shunned or ignored and, if they were married, their husbands were excluded from spousal social events—or just not interested—whether they were civilian or active-duty. Most active-duty spouses had their own social and professional commitments, so they didn't participate with other spouses in unit social activities. Often, this was interpreted as either they were not "team players," or there was the sense that this was non-traditional and a "price" that was paid within the "new military." They threatened traditions like the old Officer's Wife's Club that were led by the wives of senior commanders and involved a laundry list of events and causes that the spouses of upwardly mobile male officers were expected to support. The bias was inherent.

Christian Nationalism in the 21st Century

During the early 2000s, some of these began to fade for a variety of reasons. Climate surveys in some large units and institutions like USAFA showed unexpected (to the pollsters and leaders) strong data suggesting not only the presence of deeply rooted sexism, but also religious bias as I've described above. At USAFA, cadets and staff complained of strong Christian bias in the selection of cadets for leadership positions

and then sense that one needed to believe in a rather narrow evangelical path to enjoy all of the opportunities available.

At this time, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation ([MRFF](#)) was formed by Mikey Weinstein (USFA Class of 1977). He did this in part due to some rather ugly acts committed by cadets and staff directed at cadets, as well as bias demonstrated in an expansive climate poll held at USAFA in 2004. My son (a cadet at the time) experienced similar bias and, as a result, we met, bonded, and I became one of the first members of the MRFF's advisory panel.

In 2005, I was appointed to a senior academic position at USAFA and, as part of that appointment, went through a military ceremony presided over by the Superintendent (a lieutenant general or "three-star") during which the oath of office for commissioned officer was administered to me. Being an Atheist, I told the brigadier general (one-star) administering the oath that I did not want to say the final, optional last three words of the oath, "So help me god." She repeatedly asked me why and tried to convince me to say them, but I would not relent. She asked me one last time, minutes before administering the oath. In giving me the oath, she did not say those words and I did not insert them. No one seemed to notice, or so I thought.

A few days after the ceremony, my boss, the Dean of Faculty, called me into her office and presented a letter sent to her boss, the three-star, from a retired USAF colonel demanding that I be removed from my job because I did not take the full oath, omitting the last three words. This letter was even more poignant because the author had been volunteering his time in a laboratory in the department I now led, acting as a technical mentor and advisor to "my" students. What struck me was that she and her boss didn't respond to the letter—they ordered ME to respond to the letter and provide them with a copy of my response.

I did as they ordered. I did not technically respond to his letter, though. Instead, I sent him a note thanking him for his prior service to my department and politely told him that his services were no longer needed. I then asked him to return his access badge and told my department to alert security police if he ever set foot in our department again. I provided that letter to my boss and didn't hear anything more on the subject.

A few years later, though, now in the late 00's, this colonel and his perspective returned to my sightline. One of our top cadets told me that a cadet friend of his had invited him to a Bible study during the evening at this colonel's home. He attended and was disturbed by what he saw and heard. He told me that there were several senior cadets (in terms of rank and position within the cadet "wing" or student body. He was told that he was identified as a high-performing cadet who was headed to important things and they wanted him to be part of their religious study group. They assured him that if he did join that this group would make sure he advanced to similarly lofty positions since they all "worked together" to promote within their own Bible study—it was a sort of shadow government within the cadet wing.

This cadet told me the whole story and then asked what I thought he should do. He told me that the whole thing made him squeamish and just didn't seem right. I told him to run, decline the offer, and not have anything to do with this group. He agreed and, by the way, did just fine without their help. I told my boss about the entire series of events and she feigned interest, but did nothing. Over the next 10 years, several more cadets came to me with comparable stories. The shadow cadet government continued without any intervention from USAFA leadership.

Cadets for Christ

At about the same time, another religious organization was influencing cadets through quasi-official channels. [Cadets for Christ](#) was a "SPIRE Group," meaning a civilian-led one-per-week religiously focused group that met on Wednesday or Thursday evenings on-site in the cadet dormitory, academic, and student union areas at USAFA. "This ministry is part of the 'shepherding' movement, using cult-like tactics by which the cadets recruited by ministry leaders Don and Anna Warrick are separated from their families and anything else that might interfere with their brainwashing. In the shepherding movement, the female is the 'sheep' and the male is the 'shepherd,' and a woman's sole purpose in life is to be a good wife and mother, subordinating herself to her male shepherd."

Organizations and civilians, outside of the military chaplaincy program still operate at USAFA on a weekly basis and with virtually no oversight. The Christian Nationalist influence at USAFA remains strong, to the point that, recently, services from a large mega-church that advocates for the Christian Nationalist view were [piped into the cadet dining hall](#) (that seats all 4,000 cadets) on Sunday morning, projected onto a big screen for all to hear and see—at a volume and size that none could ignore. This was stopped only because of cadet complaints channeled through the MRFF to USAFA senior leadership. Scanning the [MRFF website](#) will give you a snapshot of the literally hundreds of cases where the MRFF has had to intervene at USAFA (as well as many, many other military and government institutions and organizations) to stop blatant violations of the Constitution in the name (almost always) of Christian Nationalist overreach and bias.

The System – How Christian Nationalism Can Threaten Our Military

Many civilians may not understand the damage that can be quite easily and almost untraceably caused by bias within our military—be it sexism, racism, religious bigotry, or anti-LGBTQ+ bias. The military is made up of humans and it's a very subjectively evaluated "business," not unlike the corporate world, even if some of its methods of promotion and selection for jobs attempts to be objective, relatively transparent, and

regimented.

Officers and enlisted members receive annual fitness or performance reports written and endorsed by their commanders and these and other evaluations are used at various times in their careers as bases for assignment and advanced education and training selection (that have a great influence on future opportunities), as well as promotions.

There have been various attempts to make these evaluations more objective with number and peer ratings, but these almost always fail as "grade inflation" sets in and everyone ultimately gets "fire-walled" to the top scores. The result, at least within the Air Force, and I suspect, all of the services is that words make up the evaluations and those words are the basis for promotion and other selections.

The result is that it's no exaggeration to say that a skilled commander can write an evaluation on one of their airmen (or guardian, or sailor, soldier, Marine) that would make that member's mother tear up with pride, convince a lawyer that this is a top-flight rating, but yet a promotion board would read it and take a hard pass on promoting the ratee. The code words and methods used to evaluate and praise the ratee are that subtle.

Likewise, once one's record goes before a promotion board (or selection board of any kind), funny things can happen. These boards are usually constituted of senior officers, one, two or more ranks above those being evaluated, and the board members score the records of each member on some numerical scale. In my day, on the boards I supported, we rated everyone from 6.0 to 10.0 with half-point increments. Usually five (or as few as three) officers would score each record. If there was a difference of 2.0 or more between any two raters on an individual, then that record would be pulled out and the panel of three or five would review the record as a group with the result being one or more of the evaluators would "budge" on their rating and the gap would be closed.

In the end, all of the officers' records would receive an average board score and then the group—sometimes over 1,000 records—would be rank-ordered based on the score and promotions or special assignments would be doled out to the overall quota allowed for that board. Scores were resolved down to the thousandth of a point or smaller to break ties and sometimes, the "cut line" would be in the high 8's or even low 9's because of the high quality of the candidates and the difficulty in finding any meaningful difference between candidates.

The individual service record of each individual also plays a role here. Besides the annual performance reports, board members can see things like the ratee's assignment record, commissioning source (service academy, ROTC, or officer training school), and maybe a list of their academic and military education, training, and degrees earned. Some of the data changes from year to year.

For example, in the distant past, promotion boards included a waist up or even full-length photo of the candidate. That was discontinued a few decades ago when the obvious risk of bias was cited. However, there are still aspects of an officer's life that have been included in records that can cause conscious and unconscious bias among selectors: marital status; number of dependents; specific name of their undergraduate institution; race/ethnicity; gender; and stated religious preference just to name a few. Even someone's NAME can be a potential source of bias.

During one evaluation board, I expressed displeasure that each candidate's religious preference was on the top page of the selection package. It took several YEARS of fighting that battle annually before, at least for the selections I was reviewing, the information was removed. Another officer friend of mine admitted that he didn't want to know each candidate's marital status—he felt that he could NOT be unbiased about the candidates if he saw this information.

My point here is to highlight how sensitive promotions and assignment selections that define a military member's career can be to individual biases. It doesn't take much imagination to realize that, if you were biased against women or some religion or race/ethnicity that you could quite easily drop scores on some by 0.5-1.0 point and only rarely have your score highlighted in some conflict resolution board—if ever. You could do the same on the other side, maybe promoting those that went to religious universities or had names that seemed "white" or male. You could boost those that were married with children and punish divorcees, too—all because that information is available.

There's yet another way that leadership can put their fingers on the scale. At each promotion board, the chief of each service or the secretary of that service can send "instructions to the board." These "instructions" serve as guidance for what the chiefs or secretaries think the board should pay particular attention. Examples in the past have included things like combat experience and deployments, higher education, training, and education assignments. The instructions can yield an almost imposed "bump" for those that meet the desired criteria.

Given the terrain of promotions and assignment selections, then, what do we have to fear? First, in realizing that we are using messy, subjective humans to evaluate messy, subjectively evaluated humans from across a broad spectrum of lived experiences, we should realize that we're not always going to get it right. Some will be "passed over" for promotion that are deserving, while others will follow the [Peter Principle](#) to higher rank.

But the potential for bias, and identifying ways to eliminate it should be our focus, especially when we face an incoming administration that is openly hostile to fair,

unbiased evaluation and promotion of military officers. What if a service secretary or chief says to a promotion board that they would like to highlight those that are married and (seem to be) in stable families with children? What if officers chairing the promotion board have themselves already been subjected to [Warrior Boards](#) to sort out their political fitness under the Trump Administration? Wouldn't they be more likely to go over an officer's record for signs (real or imagined) that they fit the mold for future MAGA-ready senior officership?

The potential for religious bias in these boards and tracing all of the way back to annual evaluations is what frightens me the most and, I know, terrifies those currently serving who are not from the evangelical Christian mainstream MAGA world. It worries those whose ethnicity or marital status may not seem desirable to the MAGA-centric and, as you've seen at the far top of this article, should be of great concern to those that haven't met JD Vance's criteria for full female citizenship: reproduction.

The new MAGA military, especially if led by the likes of Pete Hegseth and his ilk, are a threat to our readiness, our equality, and our Constitutional form of government. Their path to "purifying" our military to the benefit of straight, white, Christian Nationalist officers who are avowedly anti-DEI and politically supportive of the man who promises to be a "dictator on day one," is not only possible, but predictable. It was de facto true in our past, and as many define that past as when America was at its greatest (they do, but it wasn't), we'd be naïve to not believe them the first time or think they don't fully intend to impose such changes starting on 20 January 2025.

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Danielle Tabb

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I didn't notice how overwhelmingly Christian the military is until after I left. Reading your perspective on this topic leaves me scared... I knew it was bad but not this bad. Thank you for sharing.

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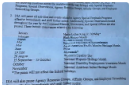
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