

# JESUS KILLED MOHAMMED

The crusade for a Christian military  
By Jeff Sharlet

When Sergeant Jeffery Humphrey and his squad of nine men, part of the 1/26 Infantry of the 1st Infantry Division, were assigned to a Special Forces compound in Samarra, he thought they had drawn a dream duty. “Guarding Special Forces, it was like Christmas,” he says. In fact, it was spring, 2004; and although Humphrey was a combat veteran of Kosovo and Iraq, the men to whom he was detailed, the 10th Special Forces Group, were not interested in grunts like him. They would not say what they were doing, and they used code names. They called themselves “the Faith element.” But they did not talk religion, which was fine with Humphrey.

An evenhanded Indianan with a precise turn of mind, Humphrey considered himself a nonsense soldier. His first duty that Easter Sunday was to make sure the roof watch was in place: a machine gunner, a man in a mortar pit, a soldier with a SAW (an automatic rifle on a bipod), and another with a submachine gun on loan from Special Forces. Together with two Bradley Fight-



ing Vehicles on the ground and snipers on another roof, the watch covered the perimeter of the compound, a former elementary school overlooking the Tigris River.

Early that morning, a unit from the 109th National Guard Infantry dropped off their morning chow. With it came a holiday special—a video of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and a chaplain to sing the film’s praises, a gory cinematic sermon for an Easter at war. Humphrey ducked into the chow room to check it out. “It was the part where they’re killing Jesus, which is, I guess, pretty much the whole movie. Kind of turned my stomach.” He decided he’d rather burn trash.

He was returning from his first run to the garbage pit when the 109th came barreling back. Their five-ton—a supersized armored pickup—was rolling on rims, its tires flapping and spewing greasy black flames. “Came in on two wheels,” remembers one of Humphrey’s men, a machine gunner. On the ground behind it and in retreat before a furious crowd were more men from the

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109th, laying down fire with their M-4s. Humphrey raced toward the five-ton as his roof shooters opened up, their big guns thumping above him. Later, when he climbed into the vehicle, the stink was overwhelming: of iron and gunpowder, blood and bullet casings. He reached down to grab a rifle, and his hand came up wet with brain.

Humphrey had been in Samarra for a month, and until that day his stay had been a quiet respite in one of the world's oldest cities. Not long before, though, there had been a hint of trouble: a briefing in which his squad was warned that any soldier caught desecrating Islamic sites—Samarra is considered a holy city—would fall under “extreme penalty,” a category that can include a general court-martial and

prison time. “I heard some guys were vandalizing mosques,” Humphrey says. “Spray-painting ‘em with crosses.”

The rest of that Easter was spent under siege. Insurgents held off Bravo Com-

pany, which was called in to rescue the men in the compound. Ammunition ran low. A helicopter tried to drop more but missed. As dusk fell, the men prepared four Bradley Fighting Vehicles for a “run and gun” to draw fire away from the compound. Humphrey headed down from the roof to get a briefing. He found his lieutenant, John D. DeGiulio, with a couple of sergeants. They were snickering like schoolboys. They had commissioned the Special Forces interpreter, an Iraqi from Texas, to paint a legend across their Bradley's armor, in giant red Arabic script.

“What's it mean?” asked Humphrey.

“Jesus killed Mohammed,” one of the men told him. The soldiers guffawed. JESUS KILLED MOHAMMED was about to cruise into the Iraqi night.

The Bradley, a tracked “tank killer” armed with a cannon and missiles—to most eyes, indistinguishable from a tank itself—rolled out. The Iraqi interpreter took to the roof, bullhorn in hand. The sun was setting. Humphrey heard the keen of the call to prayer, then the crackle of the bullhorn with the interpreter answering—in Arabic, then in English for the troops, insulting the prophet. Humphrey's men loved it. “They were young guys, you know?” says Humphrey. “They were scared.” A Special Forces officer stood next to the interpreter—“a big, tall, blond, grinning type,” says Humphrey.

“Jesus kill Mohammed!” chanted the interpreter. “Jesus kill Mohammed!”

A head emerged from a window to answer, somebody fired on the roof, and the Special Forces man directed a response from an MK-19

grenade launcher. “Boom,” remembers Humphrey. The head and the window and the wall around it disappeared.

“Jesus kill Mohammed!” Another head, another shot. Boom. “Jesus kill Mohammed!” Boom. In the distance, Humphrey heard the static of AK fire and the thud of RPGs. He saw a rolling rattle of light that looked like a firefight on wheels. “Each time I go into combat I get closer to God,” DeGiulio would later say. He thought *The Passion* had been a sign that he would survive. The Bradley seemed to draw fire from every doorway. There couldn't be that many insurgents in Samarra, Humphrey thought. Was this a city of terrorists? Humphrey heard Lieutenant DeGiulio reporting in from the Bradley's cabin, opening up on all doorways that popped off a round, responding to rifle fire—each Iraqi household is allowed one gun—with 25mm shells powerful enough to smash straight through the front of a house and out the back wall.

Humphrey was stunned. He'd been blown off a tower in Kosovo and seen action in the drug war, but he'd never witnessed a maneuver so fundamentally stupid.

The men on the roof thought otherwise. They thought the lieutenant was a hero, a kamikaze on a suicide mission to bring Iraqis the American news:

عيسى قتل محمداً

JESUS KILLED MOHAMMED.

When Barack Obama moved into the Oval Office in January, he inherited a military not just drained by a two-front war overseas but fighting a third battle on the home front, a subtle civil war over its own soul. On one side are the majority of military personnel, professionals who regardless of their faith or lack thereof simply want to get their jobs done; on the other is a small but powerful movement of Christian soldiers concentrated in the officer corps. There's Major General Johnny A. Weida, who as commandant at the Air Force Academy made its National Day of Prayer services exclusively Christian, and also created a code for evangelical cadets: whenever Weida said, “Airpower,” they were to respond “Rock Sir!”—a reference to Matthew 7:25. (The general told them that when non-evangelical cadets asked about the mysterious call-and-response, they should share the gospel.) There's Major General Robert Caslen—commander of the 25th Infantry Division, a.k.a. “Tropic Lightning”—who in 2007 was found by a Pentagon inspector general's report to have violated military ethics by appearing in uniform, along with six other senior Pentagon officers, in a video for the Christian Embassy, a fundamentalist ministry to Washington elites. There's Lieutenant General Robert Van Antwerp, the Army chief of engineers, who has also lent his uniform

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to the Christian cause, both in a Trinity Broadcasting Network tribute to Christian soldiers called *Red, White, and Blue Spectacular* and at a 2003 Billy Graham rally—televised around the world on the Armed Forces Network—at which he declared the baptisms of 700 soldiers under his command evidence of the Lord’s plan to “raise up a godly army.”

What men such as these have fomented is a quiet coup within the armed forces: not of generals encroaching on civilian rule but of religious authority displacing the military’s once staunchly secular code. Not a conspiracy but a cultural transformation, achieved gradually through promotions and prayer meetings, with personal faith replacing protocol according to the best intentions of commanders who conflate God with country. They see themselves not as subversives but as spiritual warriors—“ambassadors for Christ in uniform,” according to Officers’ Christian Fellowship; “government paid missionaries,” according to Campus Crusade’s Military Ministry.

As a whole, the military is actually slightly less religious than the general population: 20 percent of the roughly 1.4 million active-duty personnel checked off a box for a 2008 Department of Defense survey that says “no religious preference,” compared with the 16.1 percent of Americans who describe themselves as “unaffiliated.” These ambivalent soldiers should not be confused with the actively irreligious, though. Only half of one percent of the military accepts the label “atheist” or “agnostic.” (Jews are even scarcer, accounting for only one servicemember in three hundred; Muslims are just one in four hundred.) Around 22 percent, meanwhile, identify themselves as affiliated with evangelical or Pentecostal denominations. But that number is misleading. It leaves out those attached to the traditional mainline denominations—about 7 percent of the military—who describe themselves as evangelical; George W. Bush, for instance, is a Methodist. Among the 19 percent of military members who are Roman Catholics, meanwhile, there is a small but vocal subset who tend politically to affiliate with conservative evangelicals. And then there is the 20 percent of the military who describe themselves simply as “Christian,” a category that encompasses both those who give God little thought and the many evangelicals who reject denominational affiliation as divisive of the Body of Christ. “I don’t like ‘religion,’” a fundamentalist evangelical major told me. “That’s what put my savior on the cross. The Pharisees.”

Within the fundamentalist front in the officer corps, the best organized group is Officers’ Christian Fellowship, with 15,000 members active at 80 percent of military bases and an annual growth rate, in recent years, of 3 percent. Founded during World War II, OCF was for most of its history concerned mainly with the spiritual lives of those

who sought it out, but since 9/11 it has moved in a more militant direction. According to the group’s current executive director, retired Air Force Lieutenant General Bruce L. Fister, the “global war on terror”—to which Obama has committed 17,000 new troops in Afghanistan—is “a spiritual battle of the highest magnitude.” As jihad has come to connote violence, so spiritual war has moved closer to actual conflict, “continually confronting an implacable, powerful foe



who hates us and eagerly seeks to destroy us,” declares “The Source of Combat Readiness,” an OCF Scripture study prepared on the eve of the Iraq War.

But another OCF Bible study, “Mission Accomplished,” warns that victory abroad does not mean the war is won at home. “If Satan cannot succeed with threats from the outside, he will



seek to destroy from within,” asserts the study, a reference to “fellow countrymen” both in biblical times and today who practice “spiritual adultery.” “Mission Accomplished” takes as its text Nehemiah 1–6, the story of the “wallbuilder” who rebuilt the fortifications around Jerusalem. An outsider might misinterpret the wall metaphor as a sign of respect for separation of church and state, but in contemporary fundamentalist thinking the story stands for just the opposite: a wall within which church and state are one. “With the wall completed the people could live an integrated life,” the study argues. “God was to be Lord of all or not Lord at all.” So it is today, “Mission Accomplished” continues, proposing that before military Christians can complete *their* wall, they must



bring this “Lord of all” to the entire armed forces. “We will need to press ahead obediently,” the study concludes, “not allowing the opposition, all of which is spearheaded by Satan, to keep us from the mission of reclaiming territory for Christ in the military.”

**E**very man and woman in the military swears an oath to defend the Constitution. To most of them, evangelicals included, that oath is as sacred as Scripture. For the fundamentalist front, though, the Constitution is itself a blueprint for a Christian nation. “The idea of separation of church and state?” an Air Force Academy senior named Bruce Hrabak says. “There’s this whole idea in America that it’s in the Constitution, but it’s not.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> That’s technically true; it’s in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.

If the fundamentalist front were to have a seminary, it would be the Air Force Academy, a campus of steel and white marble wedged into the right angle formed by the Great Plains and the Rockies. In 2005, the academy became the subject of scandal because of its culture of Christian proselytization. Today, the Air Force touts the institution as a model of reform. But after the school brought in as speakers for a mandatory assembly three Christian evangelists who proclaimed that the only solution to terrorism was to “kill Islam,” I decided to see what had changed. Not much, several Christian cadets told me. “Now,” Hrabak said, “we’re underground.” Then he winked.

“There’s a spiritual world, and oftentimes what happens in the physical world is representative of what’s happening in the spiritual,” an academy senior (a “firstie,” in the school parlance) named Jon Butcher told me one night at New Life, a nearby megachurch popular with cadets.<sup>2</sup> Butcher is wiry and laconic, a former ski bum from Ohio who went to the academy to be closer to the slopes. “For me, it was always like, a little bit of God, a little bit of drinking, a little bit of girls.” He prayed for admission to the academy, though, pledging to God that he’d change his ways if he got in. As far as he was concerned, God delivered; so Butcher did, too, quitting alcohol and committing himself to chastity.

But that commitment took him only so far. He was pure, but was he holy? He needed direction. He found it in Romans 13: “There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” It was like a blessing on the academy’s hierarchical system, and Butcher took it to heart, turning his body and spirit over to the guidance of older Christian cadets. A Christian, he explained in full earnestness, “is someone who chooses to be a slave, essentially.” He took time off to be a missionary, and when he returned he realized God had already given him a mission field. “God has told me to become an infantry officer,” Butcher said, explaining his decision to transfer from the Air Force to the Army upon graduation. A pilot has only his plane to talk to; an infantry officer, said Butcher, has men to mold, Iraqis to convert. “Everything is a form of ministry for me,” Butcher said. “There is no separation. I’m doing what God has called me to do, to know Him and to make Him known.”

At the academy, Butcher made his God known by leading what one member described

<sup>2</sup> See my story “Soldiers of Christ: Inside America’s Most Powerful Megachurch,” May 2005.

to me as an underground all-male prayer group. I was allowed to attend but not to take notes as around twenty-five cadets discussed lust and missionary work, the girlfriends whose touches they feared and the deceptions necessary for missionary work in China, where foreign evangelism is illegal. Butcher asked me not to disclose the group's name; those who do believe in separation of church and state might interfere with its goal of turning the world's most elite war college into its most holy one, a seminary with courses in carpet bombing. He couldn't imagine military training as anything other than a mission from God. "How," he asked, "in the midst of pulling a trigger and watching somebody die, in that instant are you going to be confident that that's something God told you to do?" His answer was stark. "In this world, there are forces of good and evil. There's angels and there's demons, you know? And Satan hates what's holy."

Following the 2005 religion scandal at the academy, its commander, Lieutenant General John Rosa, confessed to a meeting of the Anti-Defamation League that his "whole organization" had religion problems. It "keeps me awake at night," he said, predicting that restoring constitutional principles to the academy would take at least six years. Then he retired to become president of the Citadel. To address the problems, the Air Force brought in Lieutenant General John Regni, a tall, broad-shouldered man with a dome of hair streaked black and silver, the very picture of an officer, calm and in command. When I spoke to Regni, I began our phone conversation with what I thought was a softball, an opportunity for the general to wax constitutional about First Amendment freedoms. "How do you see the balance between the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause?" I asked.

There was a long pause. Civilians might reasonably plead ignorance, but not a general who has sworn on his life to defend these words: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

"I have to write those things down," Regni finally answered. "What did you say those constitutional things were again?"

Sometime early this summer, a general named Mike Gould will succeed Regni as head of the academy. A former football player there, Gould granted himself the nickname "Coach" after a brief stint in that capacity early in his career. Coach Gould enjoys public speaking, and he's famous for his "3-F" mantra: "Faith, Family, Fitness." At the Pentagon, a former senior officer who served under Gould told me, the general was so impressed by a presentation Pastor Rick

Warren gave to senior officers that he sent an email to his 104 subordinates in which he advised them to read and live by Warren's book *The Purpose-Driven Life*.<sup>3</sup> "People thought it was weird," recalls the former officer, a defense contractor who requested anonymity for fear of losing government business. "But no one wants to show their ass to the general."

Christian fundamentalism, like all fundamentalisms, is a narcissistic faith, concerned most of all with the wrongs suffered by the righteous and the purification of their ranks. "Under the rubric of free speech and the twisted idea of separation of church and state," reads a promotion for a book called *Under Orders: A Spiritual Handbook for Military Personnel*, by Air Force Lieutenant Colonel William McCoy, "there has evolved more and more an anti-Christian bias in this country." In *Under Orders*, McCoy seeks to counter that alleged bias by making the case for the necessity of religion—preferably Christian—for a properly functioning military unit. Lack of belief or the wrong beliefs, he writes, will "bring havoc to what needs cohesion and team confidence."

McCoy's manifesto comes with an impressive endorsement: "*Under Orders* should be in every rucksack for those moments when Soldiers need spiritual energy," reads a blurb from General David Petraeus, the senior U.S. commander in Iraq until last September, after which he moved to the top spot at U.S. Central Command, in which position he now runs U.S. operations from Egypt to Pakistan. When the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) demanded an investigation of Petraeus's endorsement—an apparent violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, not to mention the Bill of Rights—Petraeus claimed that his recommendation was

<sup>3</sup> Warren's bestseller sometimes displaces Scripture itself among military evangelicals. In March 2008, a chaplain at Lakenheath, a U.S. Air Force-operated base in England, used a mandatory suicide-prevention assembly under Lieutenant General Rod Bishop as an opportunity to promote the principles of *The Purpose-Driven Life* to roughly 1,000 airmen. In a PowerPoint diagram depicting two family trees, the chaplain contrasted the likely future of a non-religious family, characterized by "Hopelessness" and "Death," and that of a religious one. The secular family will, according to the diagram, spawn 300 convicts, 190 prostitutes, and 680 alcoholics. Purpose-driven breeding, meanwhile, will result in at least 430 ministers, seven congressmen, and one vice-president.

ONE BIBLE STUDY FROM  
OFFICERS' CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP  
URGES "RECLAIMING TERRITORY  
FOR CHRIST IN THE MILITARY"

supposed to be private, a communication from one Christian officer to another.

"He doesn't deny that he wrote it," says Michael "Mikey" Weinstein, president of MRFF. "It's just, 'Oops, I didn't mean for the public to find out.' And what about our enemies? He's promoting this unconstitutional Christian exceptionalism at precisely the same time we're fighting Islamic fundamentalists who are telling *their* soldiers that America is waging a modern-day crusade. That is a crusade."

Petraeus's most vigorous defense came last August from the recently retired three-star general William "Jerry" Boykin—a founding member of the Army's Delta Force and an ordained minister—during an event held at Fort Bragg to promote his own book, *Never Surrender: A Soldier's Journey to the Crossroads of Faith and Freedom*.

"Here comes a guy named Mikey Weinstein trashing Pe-

traeus," he told a crowd of 150 at the base's Airborne and Special Forces Museum, "because he endorsed a book that's just trying to help soldiers. And this makes clear what [Weinstein's] real agenda is, which is not to help this country win a war on terror."

"It's satanic," called out a member of the audience.

"Yes," agreed Boykin. "It's demonic."<sup>4</sup>

**M**ikey Weinstein, for his part, doesn't mind being called demonic by officers like Boykin. "I consider him to be a traitor to the oath that he swore, which was to the United States Constitution and not to his fantastical demon-and-angel dominionism. He's a charlatan. The fact that he refers to me as demon-possessed so he can sell more books makes me want to take a Louisville Slugger to his kneecaps, his big fat belly, and his head. He is a very, very bad man." Mikey—nobody, not

<sup>4</sup> After 9/11, Boykin went on the prayer-breakfast circuit to boast, in uniform, that his God was "bigger" than the Islamic divine of Somali warlord Osman Atto, whom Boykin had hunted. "I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol," he declared, displaying as evidence photographs of black clouds over Mogadishu: the "demonic spirit" his troops had been fighting. "The principality of darkness," he went on to declare, "a guy called Satan." Under fire from congressional Democrats, Boykin claimed he hadn't been speaking about Islam, but in a weird non sequitur he insisted, "My references to . . . our nation as a Christian nation are historically undeniable." These strategic insights earned Boykin promotion to deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, a position in which he advised on interrogation techniques until August 2007.

THE PICTURE WINDOW IN MIKEY'S  
LIVING ROOM HAS BEEN SHOT OUT  
TWICE, A SWASTIKA AND A CROSS  
SCRAWLED ON HIS DOOR

even his many enemies, calls him Weinstein—likes fighting, literally. In 1973, as a "doolie" (a freshman at the Air Force Academy) he punched an officer who accused him of fabricating anti-Semitic threats he'd received. In 2005, after the then-head of the National Association of Evangelicals, Ted Haggard, declared that people like Mikey made it hard for him to "defend Jewish causes," Mikey challenged the pastor to a public boxing match, with proceeds to go to charity. (Haggard didn't take him up on it.) He relishes a rumor that he's come to be known among some at the Pentagon as the Joker, after Heath Ledger's nihilistic embodiment of Batman's nemesis. But he draws a distinction: "Don't confuse my description of chaos with advocacy of chaos."

A 1977 graduate of the academy, Mikey served ten years' active duty as a JAG before becoming assistant general counsel in the Reagan White House (where he helped defend the administration during the Iran-Contra scandal) and then general counsel for Ross Perot. It is a surprising background for someone who has taken on the role of constitutional conscience of the military, a man determined to force accountability on its fundamentalist front through an assault of lawsuits and media appearances. Fifty-four years old, Mikey is built like a pit bull, with short legs, big shoulders, a large, shaved head, and a crinkled brow between dark, darting eyes. He likes to say he lives at "Mikey speed," an endless succession of eighteen-hour days, both on the road and at the foundation's headquarters—that is, his sprawling adobe ranch house, set on a hill outside Albuquerque and guarded by two oversized German shepherds and a five-foot-six former Marine bodyguard called Shorty. MRFF draws on a network of lawyers, publicists, and fundraisers, but its core is just Mikey, plus a determined researcher named Chris Rodda, author of an unfinished multivolume debunking of Christian-right historical claims entitled *Liar for Jesus*.

Mikey has won some victories, such as when he forced the Department of Defense to investigate the Christian Embassy video, and intimidated the Air Force Academy into adopting classes in religious diversity, and harassed any number of base commanders into reining in subordinates who view their authority as a license to proselytize. Every time he wins a battle or takes to the television to plead his cause, more troops learn about his foundation and seek its help. He keeps his cell phone on vibrate while he's exercising on his elliptical machine; he likes to boast that he'll interrupt sex to take a call from any one of the 11,400 active-duty mili-



tary members he describes as the foundation's "clients."<sup>5</sup> He hires lawyers for them, pulls strings, bullies their commanders, tells them they're heroes. He offered to let one G.I., facing threats of violence because of his atheism, move in with his family.

**B**ut as Mikey's client base grows, so too do the ranks of his enemies. The picture window in his living room has been shot out twice, and last summer he woke to find a swastika and a cross scrawled on his door. Since he launched MRFF four years ago, he has accumulated an impressive collection of hate mail. Some of it is earnest: "You are costing lives by dividing military personnel and undermining troops," reads one missive. "Their blood is on your hands." Much of it is juvenile: "you

The abuse has become a regular feature of Mikey's routine in public appearances. There's a sense in which Mikey likes it—not the threats, but the evidence. "We've had dead animals on the porch. Beer bottles, feces thrown at the house. I don't even think about it. I view it as if I was Barry Bonds about to go to bat in Dodger Stadium and people are booing. You want a piece of me? Get in line, buddy. Pack a lunch." Mikey sees things in terms of enemies, and he likes to know he's rattling his.

Central to Mikey's worldview are two beatings he suffered as an eighteen-year-old doolie at the academy, retaliations for notifying his superiors about a series of anti-Semitic notes he'd received. Both beatings left him unconscious. Mikey put them behind him, graduating with honors; but his



little bald-headed fag," reads an email Mikey received after an appearance on CNN, "what the fuck are you doing with an organization of this title when the purpose of your group is not to encourage religious freedom, but to DENY religious freedom?" Quite a bit of it is anti-Semitic: "Once again, the Oy Vey! crowd whines. This jew used to be an Air Force lawyer and got the email"—a solicitation by Air Force General Jack Catton for campaign donations to put "more Christian men" in Congress, which Mikey made public—"just one more example of why filthy, hook-nosed jews should be purged from our society."

<sup>5</sup> A spokeswoman for the Pentagon says the military has dealt with fewer than fifty reports of religion-related problems during the period since Mikey founded MRFF. But an abundance of evidence suggests that the Pentagon is ignoring the problem. I spoke to dozens of Mikey's clients: soldiers, sailors, and airmen who spoke of forced Christian prayer in Iraq and at home; combat deaths made occasions for evangelical sermons by senior officers; Christian apocalypse video games distributed to the troops; mandatory briefings on the correlation of the war to the Book of Revelation; exorcisms designed to drive out "unclean spirits" from military property; beatings of atheist troops that are winked at by the chain of command.

anger reignited in 2004, when his son Curtis, then a doolie himself, told Mikey he planned to beat the shit out of the next cadet—or officer—who called him a "fucking Jew." In 2005, when he created the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, he ornamented its board with a galaxy of retired generals, the stars on their shoulders meant to make clear that the foundation's enemy is not the military. His enemy, he says, is "weaponized Christianity," and his foundation is a weapon too: "We will lay down withering fire and open sucking chest wounds. This country is facing a pervasive and pernicious pattern and practice of unconstitutional rape of the religious rights of our armed forces members," he says. He calls this "soul rape."

It's a strong term that at first sounds like typical over-the-top Mikey, but his struggle goes to the very heart of America's First Amendment freedoms, dating back to the seventeenth century and Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island. Williams was a devout Christian, but based on his encounters with Native American leaders, whom he deemed honest men, and his dealings with the leaders of the Massachusetts colony, who sent him into exile, he concluded that outward religion—the piety of the Puritans—was

no guarantee of inner virtue. What mattered most, he thought, was the ability to seek the good. So if the state restricted that search (through mandatory prayer, for instance, or discrimination against minority faiths), it violated the most basic freedom, that of individual conscience. Without the freedom to choose one's own beliefs, Williams believed, no other freedom is really possible. Freedom of religion is thus bound to freedom from religion.

"In the military," Mikey told me one night in Albuquerque, "many constitutional rights that we as civilians enjoy are severely abridged in order to serve a higher goal: provide good order and discipline in order to protect the whole panoply of constitutional rights for the rest of us." One of those rights is free speech: a soldier in uniform can't endorse a political candidate, advertise a product, or proselytize. That rule is for the good of the public—no one wants men with guns telling them whom to vote for—and for the military itself. An officer can tell a soldier what to do, but not what to believe; conscience is its own order.

**T**he evangelical transformation of the military began during the Cold War, in a new American "Great Awakening" that has only accelerated across the decades, making the United States one of the most religious nations in the world. We are also among the most religiously diverse, but as the number of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and adherents of hundreds of other traditions has grown, American evangelicalism has entrenched, tightening its hold on the institutions that conservative evangelicals consider most American—that is, Christian.

"It was Vietnam which really turned the tide," writes Anne C. Loveland, author of the only book-length study of the evangelical wave within the armed forces, *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942–1993*. Until the Vietnam War, it was the traditionally moderate mainline Protestant denominations (Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians), together with the Catholic Church, that dominated the religious life of the military. But as leading clergymen in these denominations spoke out against the war, evangelicals who saw the struggle in Vietnam as God's work rushed in. In 1967, the Assemblies of God, the biggest Pentecostal denomination in the world, formally dropped its long-standing commitment to pacifism, embracing worldly war as a counterpart to spiritual struggle. Other fundamentalists took from Vietnam the lessons of guerrilla combat and applied them to the spiritual fight through a tactic they called *infiltration*, filling the ranks of secular institutions with undercover missionaries.

"Evangelicals looked at the military and said,

"This is a mission field,'" explains Captain McLinda Morton, a Lutheran pastor and former missile-launch commander who until 2005 was a staff chaplain at the Air Force Academy and has since studied and written about the chaplaincy. "They wanted to send their missionaries to the military, and for the military itself to become missionaries to the world."

The next turning point occurred in the waning days of the Reagan Administration, when regulatory revisions helped create the fundamentalist stronghold in today's military. A long-standing rule had apportioned chaplains according to the religious demographics of the military as a whole (i.e., if surveys showed that 10 percent of soldiers were Presbyterian, then 10 percent of the chaplains would be Presbyterian) but required that all chaplains be trained to minister to troops of any faith. Starting in 1987, however, Protestant denominations were lumped together simply as "Protestant"; moreover, the Pentagon began accrediting hundreds of evangelical and Pentecostal "endorsing agencies," allowing graduates of fundamentalist Bible colleges—which often train clergy to view those from other faiths as enemies of Christ—to fill up nearly the entire allotment for Protestant chaplains. Today, more than two thirds of the military's 2,900 active-duty chaplains are affiliated with evangelical or Pentecostal denominations. "In my experience," Morton says, "eighty percent of the Protestant chaplaincy self-identifies as conservative and/or evangelical."

The most zealous among the new generation of fundamentalist chaplains didn't join to serve the military; they came to save its soul. One of these zealots is Lieutenant Colonel Gary Hensley, division chaplain for the 101st Airborne and, until recently, the chief Army chaplain for all of Afghanistan. Last year, a filmmaker named Brian Hughes met Hensley when he traveled to Bagram Air Field to make a documentary about chaplains, a tribute of sorts to the chaplain who had counseled him—without regard for religion—when Hughes was a frightened young airman during the Gulf War. Military personnel forfeit their rights to legal and medical privacy; chaplains are the only people they can turn to with problems too sensitive to take up the chain of command, anything from corruption to a crisis of courage. When Hughes went to Bagram, he was looking for chaplains like the one who'd helped him get through his war. Instead, he found Hensley.

In the raw footage Hughes shot, Hensley strips down to a white T-shirt beneath his uniform to preach an afternoon service in Bagram's main chapel. On the T-shirt's breast is a logo for an evangelical military ministry called Chapel NeXt, the "t" in which is an oversized cross slashing down over a map of Afghanistan. "Got your seat belts



on?" Hensley hollers. He's a lean man with thinning, slicked-back gray hair who carries a small paunch like a package, the size and shape of a turtle's shell. "The Word will not fail!" he shouts. "Now is the time! In the fullness of time"—Hensley leans forward, two fingers on his glasses, his voice dipping to a growl—"God. Sent. His. Son. *Who!*" Then, as if addressing 33 million Muslim Afghans and their belief that Muhammad was a prophet as Jesus before him, he shouts, "There is no one else to come! There is no new revelation! There is no new religion! Jesus is it!" *Amen*, says the crowd. "If He ain't it, let's all go home!"

Hensley brings it back down. "I'm from the Jesus Movement," he says, presenting himself as a prophet born of American history: "Haight-Ashbury. Watergate. Woodstock. And out of that mess? Came Hensley, glory to God!" He goes on to quote (without attribution) the British theologian C. H. Dodd: "By virtue of the resurrection," he says, "Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father and is the messianic head of



the New Israel." Dodd was no fundamentalist; his ideas are still used by some liberal Christians to combat the apocalyptic fervor of fundamentalism. Not so with Hensley, who takes Dodd's uncredited words as a battle cry. "That's us!" he cries. "We are Israel. We are the New Israel!"

At this point, says Hughes, the Army media liaison sitting next to him put his head in his hands.

"There will come a day when there will be no more Holy Spirit!" Hensley shouts, hopping up and down on the stage, his speech no longer directed toward the pews but as if to some greater audience. "When the church shall be raptured up in the skyyy! And we shall be with Hiiim! And all of us shall be with Him!" He slows to an emphatic whisper like a warning: "Glory to God, *that's* our message!" A little bit louder now. "The

messianic Jesus is comin' back!" Louder still. "And I expect him to come back before we go to the mess hall, you know that?" And the soldiers say, *Amen*.

I found Lieutenant Colonel Bob Young after MRFF reported on an evangelical reality program, shown on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, that included tape of Colonel Young telling two wandering missionaries about his plan to pray for rain in Afghanistan. I reached him at home in Georgia late one evening. He said he was going to sit on his porch and look at the moon. In the background, I heard dogs barking. He talked for three hours, much of it about what he'd seen in the combat hospital under his command at Kandahar Air Base.

"Kids getting burned," he recalled. "Bad guys floating in on helicopters. You wouldn't know who they were." The base hospital treated 7,000 Afghans that year, and Young, commander of the Army's 325th Forward Support Battalion, lingered there, watching the bodies. "I want to tell you this. Triage area, guy strapped into gurney, Afghan guy. No shirt, skinny as a rail, sinewy muscle. Restraints on his ankles, his feet, dude is strapped into a wheelchair. He's got a plastic shield in front of his face because he's spitting." A doctor wants to sedate him. "I say, 'I'll tell you what's wrong with him. The guy has demons.'" Young decides to pray over him. "Couple minutes later the general's son-in-law—the Afghan general's son-in-law, our translator—comes in. I said, 'What's wrong with this guy?' He says, 'How do you say in English? He has spirits.' I say, 'Doc, there's your second opinion!'"

On the phone, Young laughed, a harsh "Ha!" Then his voice broke. "I'm telling you, it's real. Evil is real."

In the Christian reality show, Young extended that thought to the weather. "Interestingly," he says, "the drought has been in effect since the Taliban took over." Young has a high mouth and a low brow, his features concentrated between big ears. "People of America," he tells the camera, "pray that God sends the rain to Kandahar, and they'll know that our God answers prayers."

I asked Young if he wanted to contextualize these remarks, since they seemed, on the surface, to radically transcend his mission as a soldier. "Okay!" he said. "Are you ready?" I said I was.

He told me to Google *Kandahar, rain, January 2005*. The result he was looking for was an article in *Stars and Stripes* entitled "Rainfall May Signal Beginning of the End to Three-Year Drought in Afghanistan." Three and a quarter inches in just two days.

"That's some real rain," I admitted.

"That's what I'm saying, brother!"

I asked him about an allegation made to MRFF

by a captain who served under Young: that Young had made remarks that led him to be relieved of his command. It was true that he had been relieved of command, he admitted, but he had appealed and won. And the remarks? “All that was, I was speaking in reference to inner-city problems and whatnot. I said that the irony is that it would be better for a black to be a slave in America—I’m thinking now historically—and know Christ, than to be free now and not know Christ.”

With that cleared up, I then asked Young about another of the captain’s allegations: that he had given a presentation on Christianity to some Afghan warlords. Absolutely not, he said. It was a PowerPoint about America. He emailed it to me as we spoke, and then asked me to open it so he could share with me the same presentation he had given “Gulalli” and “Shirzai.” Since it had been President’s Day, Young had begun with a picture of George Washington, who, he explained, had been protected by God; his evidence was that, following a battle in the French and Indian War, when thirty-two bullet holes were found in Washington’s cloak, the general himself escaped unscathed. Young wanted to show the Afghans that nation-building was a long and difficult journey. “I did stress the fact that in America we believe our rights come from God, not from government. Truth is truth, and there’s no benefit in lying about it.”

There were slides about the Wright brothers, the moon landing, and NASCAR—Jeff Gordon, “a Christian, by the way,” had just won the Daytona 500. And then, the culmination of American history: the twin towers, blooming orange the morning of September 11, 2001. Embedded in the slide show was a video Young titled “Forgiveness,” a collage of stills, people running and bodies falling. Swelling behind the images was Celine Dion’s hit ballad from *Titanic*, “My Heart Will Go On.” Following the video was a slide of the Bush family, beneath the words: “I believe that God has inspired in every heart the desire for freedom.”

**A**t the heart of Young’s religion is suffering: his own. Before his battalion deployed for Afghanistan, he tried to armor them with prayer. To do so, he offered up his own testimony, the text that is in truth at the heart of his religion. He told them there were two kinds of phone calls a soldier in a combat zone was likely to encounter. One was from his wife, calling to say she was raising him up in prayer. The other was also from his wife, calling to say she was leaving him. Young had experienced both calls. In 1993, he was a Ranger, a member of the Army’s most elite special forces, away on deployment to Korea. He asked his best friend, the best man at his wedding, to watch over his wife

and his two toddlers. And when that worst of all calls came—his wife, telling him the car was packed, that she, his kids, and his friend were leaving—that was when Young found the Lord.

First, he tried to respond like an officer. “Military course of action development,” he lectured himself. “Course of action one: kill him. Two: kill them both. Three: kill myself.” Somebody, he decided, had to die. In the end, somebody did: Young, to the flesh. Raised nominally Catholic, he had never read Scripture. Now, every page seemed to speak to him. I can’t go on, he thought. He opened his Bible and found Matthew 6:34. *Do not worry about tomorrow. An eye for an eye, Young thought, then flipped the pages: Love your enemies. I have nothing to go home to, he thought, and then he came to Mark. Let us go over to the other side. They did, in a ship, and “a great windstorm arose,” Young read, the murder in his mind subsiding as the story overcame him. “And then Jesus said, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.”*

There is a modesty inherent in evangelicalism’s preference for personal stories, for every soul’s version of “I was lost, but now I’m found.” In a Protestant church without rank or reward, that story is democratic, radically so; my testimony is as important as yours, the poor man’s tale just as powerful as that of the rich man. But the marriage of evangelicalism to the military ethos turns public confession into projection, the creation of what the military calls a command climate. It is one thing for your neighbor in the pews to tell you that he was blind and now he sees; it is another for such vision to be described by your commanding officer.

Young has been a Christian soldier ever since that terrible phone call. The tension between war and faith does not disturb him. “We are to live with anticipation and expectation of His imminent return,” he told me. Look at the signs, said Young: nuclear Iran, economic collapse, President Obama’s decision to “unleash science” upon helpless embryos. He seemed to feel that the military was now the only safe place to be. “In the military, homosexuality is illegal. I don’t want to get into all the particulars of ‘Don’t ask,’ but you can’t act on homosexual feelings. And adultery is illegal. Really, arguably, the military is the last American institution that tries to uphold Christian values. It’s the easiest place in America to be a Christian.”

**I**n the weeks following Obama’s election, Mikey says, he almost went to Washington. He met with

“WE ARE ISRAEL. WE ARE THE NEW ISRAEL!” THE TOP ARMY CHAPLAIN IN AFGHANISTAN CRIED TO THE ASSEMBLED SOLDIERS

campaign staffers, submitted plans, gathered endorsements from powerful insiders. His dream was a post at the Pentagon from which he could prosecute the most egregious offenders. It didn't seem entirely out of the realm of possibility. He could have been pitched as another gesture of bipartisanship, since Mikey is a lifelong Republican who probably would have voted for John McCain if, back in 2004, his sons hadn't run afoul of the Air Force Academy's burgeoning spirit of evangelism—a culture that McCain, hardly a friend to fundamentalism, showed no interest in challenging this time around.

Another veteran serving in the Senate, who asked that he not be named so as not to compromise his close connections to today's top officers, offers a variation on Captain Morton's analysis of the military's turn toward religion. Although the military was integrated before much of the United States, he points out, it almost split along racial lines, particularly in the last days of Vietnam. If the military was to rebuild itself, the Southern white men at the heart of its warrior culture had to come to an understanding of themselves based on something other than skin color. Many, says the senator, turned toward religion, particularly fundamentalist evangelical Christianity—a tradition that, despite its particularly potent legacy of racism, reoriented itself during the post-civil rights era as a religion of "reconciliation" between the races, a faith that would come to define itself in the early 1990s with the image of white men hugging black men, tears all around, at Promise Keeper rallies. "They replaced race with religion," says the senator. "The principle remains the same—an identity built on being separate from a society viewed as weak and corrupt."

For decades, the military built a sense of solidarity out of a singular purpose, the Cold War struggle between free markets and state-planned economies—the shining city on a hill versus the evil empire. In that fight, pluralism, racial or religious, was ultimately on our side; and it meshed neatly with ideologies that might otherwise be challengers, easily subsuming both nationalism and fundamentalism, with Communism presented as the dark alternative should we fail to unite. Fundamentalism thrived not so much in opposition to the liberal state as in tandem with it, a neat, black-and-white theological correlate to a foreign policy—a vision of America's place in the world, our purpose, you might say—embraced more or less across the mainstream political spectrum.

The end of the Cold War deprived militant evangelicals of that clarity. Absent a clear purpose, a common foe, pluralism itself began to look to some like the enemy. The emergence of "radical Islam" as the object of a new Cold War only complicated the matter. Rather than re-

vealing a new enemy for us all to share, the idea of a monolithic radical Islam fractured pluralism from left to right. Many liberals abandoned even their rhetorical commitments to liberty of conscience, while the very conservatives who had favored arming militant Islamists since the Eisenhower Administration concluded that their universal embrace of religion in the abstract may have been naive. Perhaps pluralism—or at least the Cold War variety that sustained the rise of American empire in the second half of the twentieth century—was nothing but propaganda after all.

Today, fundamentalism, based as it is on a vigorous assertion of narrow and exclusive claims to truth, can no longer justify common cause with secularism. In its principal battle, the front lines are not in Iraq or Afghanistan but right here, where evangelical militants must wage spiritual war against their own countrymen. In a lecture for OCF titled "Fighting the War on Spiritual Terrorism," Army Lieutenant Colonel Greg E. Metzgar explained that Christian soldiers must always consider themselves behind enemy lines, even within the ranks, because every unsaved member of the military is a potential agent of "spiritual terrorism." Even secularists with the best intentions may be part of this fifth column, Air Force Brigadier General Donald C. Wurster told a 2007 assembly of chaplains, noting that "the unsaved have no realization of their unfortunate alliance with evil." What is the nature of this evil? Some conservative evangelicals call it "postmodernism." What they mean is the very idea of diversity, its egalitarianism—the conviction that my beliefs have as much right to speak in the public square as do yours; that truth, in a democracy, is a mediated affair.

Evangelicalism, the more zealous the better, is an ingenious solution, a mirror image of pluralism that comes with a built-in purpose. It is available to everybody. Its basic rules are easily learned. It merges militancy with love, celebrating the ferocity of spirit necessary for a warrior and the mild amiability required to stay sane within a rigid hierarchy. It's a populist religion—anyone can talk to the top man—on a vertical axis, an implicit rank system of "spiritual maturity" that runs from "Baby Christians" of all ages straight up to the ultimate commander in chief.

Mikey Weinstein did not get his Pentagon job. In fact, the generals whom Mikey thought would face a reckoning under a Democratic administration remain in place or in line for promotion. Not only did Obama keep on Robert Gates as defense secretary; he retained the secretary of the Army, Pete Geren—another star of the Christian Embassy video, who also, in commencement remarks at West Point last year, characterized America's wars in Iraq and



Afghanistan as struggles for religious freedom against the “darkness and oppression” of radical Islam—and also appointed as his national security adviser the retired Marine general James Jones, a regular on the prayer breakfast circuit. Nobody believes the new president shares Bush’s religious sentiments, but clearly he is willing to shave constitutional protections in exchange for evangelical peace. The new president appears to have adopted a hands-off approach not just to religion in the military but to the very relationship between church and state.

**T**he Air Force Academy chapel is the most popular man-made tourist attraction in Colorado, seventeen silver daggers rising above campus, veined with stained glass that suffuses the space inside with a violet and orange glow. But when one of the academy’s public-relations officers takes me on a tour, it’s empty. Very few cadets worship there anymore. Instead, they meet in classrooms and dorm rooms, at mountain retreats, and at the numerous megachurches that surround the academy.

One of the most popular services, called The Mill, takes place on Friday nights at New Life, in a giant, permanent tent that not long after academy dinnertime fills with fake fog and power chords and more than a thousand men and women ranging in age from their teens to their early twenties. I attended one Friday night in the company of Bruce Hrabak, the cadet who’d told me there was no separation of church and state in the Constitution. Broad-shouldered and broad-smiled, with color in his cheeks and excitable dusk-blue eyes, Hrabak says he’s at the academy both of his own free will and according to the strict Christian doctrine of “predestination,” that is, destiny chosen by God. It is this paradoxical mix, he explains, that allows him to serve both as an officer and as a missionary for the “Great Commission,” the evangelical belief that Christians must spread the Gospel to all nations. The academy, he explains, is a step on his spiritual journey.

The sermon at The Mill was painful—the pastor’s wife had recently delivered a stillborn baby, and he spoke in raw, awful terms about suffering and theodicy, the age-old question of why a loving God permits bad things to happen to good people. It is one of the central dilemmas of the Christian faith, and its persistence, its resistance to easy answers, is what has made Christianity the forge of so much of the world’s great art and philosophy. By the end of this hour-long service, though, everything turned out for the best; even the dead baby had been shoehorned into God’s inscrutable plan.

That cheered Hrabak up. Over dinner after-

ward, he told me he believed that all suffering, that which he endures and that which he inflicts, has a purpose. He felt this truth was of special solace for soldiers. I asked what he meant. “Well, you’re pulling a trigger, you know?” He thought about that a lot. Not the shot fired or the bomb dropped, but the bodies, the souls at the other end of his actions. In his classes, he watched videos of air strikes. At night, he pictured the dead. He was not as afraid of dying as he was of killing unjustly. He was afraid of sin. His double identity—as a spiritual warrior and as an officer of the deadliest force in the history of the world—was his redemption.

What would he do if he ever received an order that contradicted his faith?

Hrabak looked shocked. He giggled, then composed himself and took a big bite of pizza, speaking confidently through his food. “Impossible, dude. I mean, I guess it *could* happen. But I highly doubt it.”

What if he was ordered to bomb a building in which terrorists were hiding, even though there were civilians in the way?

He shook his head. “Who are you to question why God builds up nations just to destroy them, so that those who are in grace can see that they’re in grace?” A smile lit up half his face, an expression that might be taken for sarcastic if Hrabak wasn’t a man committed to being in earnest at all times. What he’d just said—a paraphrase from Romans—might be something like a Word of Knowledge, a gift of wisdom from God. It blew his mind so much he had to repeat it, his voice picking up a speed and enthusiasm that bordered on joy. “He”—the Lord—“builds up an entire nation”—Iraq or Vietnam, Afghanistan or Pakistan, who are you to question why?—“just to destroy them! To show somebody else”—America, a young man guided to college by God, distrustful of his own choices—“that they’re in grace.”

Grace, of course, means you’re favored by God, no questions asked, a blessing that you can neither earn nor deserve. To fundamentalists, it’s worth more than freedom, and they’re willing to sacrifice their freedom—and yours—for that glorious feeling. That’s a paradox, a box trap the fundamentalists have built for themselves. The first casualties of the military’s fundamentalist front are not the Iraqis and Afghans on the wrong side of an American F-16. They’re the spiritual warriors themselves, men and women persuaded that the only God worth believing in is one who demands that they break—in spirit and in fact—the oath to the Constitution they swear to uphold on their lives. “You’re laying down your life for others,” Hrabak says. “Well, there has to be some true truth to put yourself in harm’s way for.” True truth; truth that requires an amplifier. For the God soldiers, democracy is not enough. ■