

# **Exclusive: Is a senior Air Force general using his power to spread far-right Christian nationalism?**

**Brig. Gen. John Teichert faces charges he has used his rank and authority to spread extremist, anti-American views**

**[Paul Rosenberg](#) , August 19, 2018 4:10pm (UTC)**

**<https://www.salon.com/2018/08/19/exclusive-is-a-senior-air-force-general-using-his-power-to-spread-far-right-christian-nationalism/>**

On July 18, Air Force Brig. Gen. John Teichert [assumed command](#) of the 412th Test Wing at Edwards Air Force Base. Less than one month later, on Aug. 12, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation filed a [22-page complaint](#) against him for violating military rules and regulations about religious proselytizing, based on the online record at Teichert's Christian ministry website, "[PLUS](#)" ("Prayer at Lunchtime for the United States"), which has been in operation for five years, well before his latest promotion. Within the week, the MRFF, a watchdog group founded in 2005, received word that the Department of Defense was beginning a formal investigation.

According to a press statement from MRFF founder and president Michael L. Weinstein, a former Air Force officer, on Teichert's website he has "denigrated LGBT individuals, slammed American society at large, and, of course, delivered election voting mandate directives" urging that only certain categories of Christians should be elected to public office.

Military officers enjoy the same freedom of religion as everyone else in America, so Teichert's religious faith is not an issue in itself. But military service entails special restrictions on how religion is expressed, particularly if that expression is deemed to undermine military effectiveness, a point that lies at the heart of the MRFF's complaint.

For example, Air Force Instruction 1-1, Paragraph 2.15.4. states the following:

Airmen who provide commentary and opinions on internet blogs that they host or on others' internet blogs, may not place comments on those blog sites, which reasonably can be anticipated, or are intended, to degrade morale, good order, and discipline of any members or units in the U.S. Armed Forces, are Service-discrediting, or would degrade the trust and confidence of the public in the United States Air Force.

The complaint was filed on behalf of 41 clients at Teichert's new command (32 of whom identify as Christian), "many of whom are in mortal fear of retaliation should they be personally identified in this matter, something that MRFF suggests is an equally troublesome issue," as its text explains. Elsewhere the MRFF complaint argues that Teichert's specific form of zealotry does not "promote diversity, unit cohesion, good order and discipline, religious tolerance and *esprit de corps*," all considered core values of the 21st-century military.

"Our clients feel as though they been spiritually raped by this general, and he was their commander," Weinstein told Salon, comparing these circumstances to the [Tailhook Scandal](#), which made sexual harassment in the military a major national issue. This one, he argues, is far more hidden. Complainants didn't feel they could confront Teichert or even speak to him openly, Weinstein said, "because, again, the moment you do that you're done."

Weinstein summarized the issue this way: "When you tell somebody — and you're a general in the Air Force [speaking] to a subordinate — that you lack integrity, character, honor, honorability, intelligence, courage, etc., because of your chosen religious faith or lack thereof, there is no difference between that and telling that someone they're stupid because of the color of their skin or because they were born without a penis."

Teichert fervently believes that America was founded as a Christian nation, and has fallen away from its original exalted state. The cultural resonance of these views — [although they represent fake](#)

[history](#) — helps give cover to activity to would otherwise cause outrage.

“Can you imagine what would happen if, instead of Brig. Gen. Ernest John Teichert, we had Brig. Gen. Mohammed Assan, and it turned out that he had Prayers at Lunchtime for the United States and it was completely Islamic?” Weinstein asked. “There would be blood in the streets.”

Prior to his current assignment, Teichert was wing commander at Andrews Air Force Base, home to Air Force One, the president’s plane. So Teichert alone is not the problem. “We want to know who else knows,” Weinstein said. Senior figures in the Defense Department and Air Force “knew what this guy was doing it, and are complicit, but did nothing.”

Weinstein's clients face a situation that is difficult for those outside the military to grasp, he explained. Weinstein himself is an Air Force Academy graduate — one of six in his family — who served for seven years as a military lawyer with the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps. His family has served in every major U.S. combat engagement from World War I to the current “war on terror.” MRFF, which Weinstein founded, represents more than 57,000 active duty military, reserve members, DOD civilian employees and veterans, 96 percent of whom identify as Christian. So he knows what he’s talking about.

“The military is unbelievably tribal, adversarial, communal and ritualistic,” Weinstein said. “Anyone who outranks you has unbelievable control over you. You can lose liberty, if you even slightly disrespect them. We’ve had, I think, 12 of our clients killed in action. It's been very difficult. We’ve had another dozen who’ve committed suicide.”

Teichert’s defenders (cited in [this story](#) from Air Force Times, for example), have tried to claim that he has simply engaged in private religious practice, which everyone agrees is a protected constitutional right. But the fact that 41 complainants have come forward strongly suggests otherwise.

The complaint calls for an investigation into whether Teichert's conduct interferes with or violates the civil liberties or equal opportunities of service-members and civilians under his command, as well as whether it violates several key provisions of Air Force Instruction 1-1, including the following (in addition to Paragraph 2.15.4. cited above):

Paragraph 2.11: "Every Airman is free to practice the religion of their choice or **subscribe to no religious belief at all**. You should confidently practice your own beliefs while respecting others whose viewpoints differ from your own." ...

Paragraph 2.12: Leaders at all levels must balance constitutional protections for their own free exercise of religion, including individual expressions of religious beliefs, and the constitutional prohibition against governmental establishment of religion. They must ensure **their words and actions cannot reasonably be construed to be officially endorsing or disproving of, or extending preferential treatment for any faith, belief, or absence of belief**. ...

Paragraph 2.15.5, Use of Social Media [Excerpt]: When you are expressing personal opinions on social media sites **and can be identified as an Airman**, you should make it clear that you are speaking for yourself and not on behalf of the Air Force. While service members may generally use their rank and service even when acting in their personal capacity, **they should not do so in situations where the context may imply official sanction or endorsement of their personal opinions**. [Emphasis added.]

In Weinstein's press statement, he argues that "Teichert has inextricably intertwined his USAF position of senior command" with his ministry and proselytizing on the PLUS website. Paragraph 2.12. is violated persistently, as there is no disclaimer making clear that these are Teichert's personal views, as opposed to official ones. To the contrary, Teichert parades his rank frequently and repeatedly misrepresents American history to echo his views and provide them with ersatz legitimacy and a semblance of official sanction. As Weinstein observes, Teichert has also attacked America in a way

that would be inconceivable from a hypothetical general who was Muslim.

In an [early post](#), from April 2013, "Unrecognizable from the Original — Hebrews 13:8," Teichert fumes over the ways America has changed since its founding, which he assumes was well-nigh perfect, slavery and all, because it was supposedly so thoroughly Christian.

"It is clear that American Christians have steadily drifted away from the Lord, following in the footsteps of an aggressively liberalizing society," Teichert writes. "How did we, both as a people and as a nation, arrive at such a position that is largely unrecognizable from where we began? The answer is a series of small compromises." What compromises is he talking about? The abolition of slavery? Voting rights for women? He doesn't say.

That's just one of many such posts. In July of that year, Teichert expounded on the theme of "[Omission](#)," writing: "Evil is triumphing in our nation because the good are doing nothing." He cited a series of 12 earlier posts on how the "sins of omission are evident among us," and criticized He America with a doggedness that would get anyone to the left of Genghis Khan accused of treason.

This is all justified, it would seem, by the mythology of America's supposedly pure Christian origins, which supports a multitude of false or distorted historical narratives. This is a subject long studied by Frederick Clarkson, senior research analyst at [Political Research Associates](#), a progressive think tank in Massachusetts.

"Teichert's blog posts epitomizes a kind of historical revisionism that historian Frank Lambert calls creating a 'usable past,'" Clarkson told Salon. "This is done by selecting tidbits from history and suggesting that they support contemporary conservative Christian political views and candidates, or more importantly an interpretation of the Constitution. This is how Christian nationalists create a history that they use to justify not only their favored politicians and issues du jour, but often the more profound vision of political dominion we call 'Dominionism.'"

In its starkest forms, the ideology known as Dominionism is clearly anti-democratic and un-American. Laws passed by overwhelming majorities are invalid if they conflict with “God’s law” — separating the races, for example, which was long perceived as a biblical mandate in the pre-civil rights South. So for obvious reasons most American Dominionists of the 21st century shield or shade their beliefs, sometimes even from themselves. But their underlying logic is broadly influential, Clarkson argues:

Once one has arrived at the notion that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, and that this means based on Christian or biblical principles (they are often used interchangeably), one holds a self-issued license to serve as spokesperson for God and the founding fathers. Political opinions take the character of revealed truths.

Teichert has a method in his blogging, in which he quotes a biblical passage, and sometimes a quote from a founding father or other notable person which leads him to say that "Christian citizens" must elect Christian candidates (of the right sort, of course) who are then to craft policies based on Christian principles because that is what God requires of his Christian nation.

Although this is profoundly misleading — and eerily reminiscent of the reasoning behind the al-Qaida or ISIS interpretation of Islamic doctrine — nothing would prevent Teichert from expressing these views as a private citizen. He is not. He is a senior military officer in command of thousands, with a duty to promote unity rather than division. The danger Teichert may pose in that command is rooted in a fundamental historical falsehood captured in an [April 2016 blog post](#) in which he claimed that "at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, between 98.4% and 99.8% of Americans were professing Christians," citing a book promoted by Glenn Beck, who has long been obsessed with "proving" that George Washington was an orthodox Christian. (Which would prove nothing if true, and has been [meticulously refuted](#).)

Teichert's alleged statistic is both untrue on its own terms and profoundly deceptive, Clarkson argued by email:

That percentage is silly and not borne out by [contemporary scholarship](#), which shows that only about 17% of the population in the colonies were church members at the time of the Revolution. But whatever the number or percentage, there were also a wide variety of Christians in the colonies, including Congregationalists, Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Dutch Reformed, Quakers, Mennonites and Presbyterians. So when one says Christian, it meant different things to different people. The same is true today.

To claim that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation, one has to ignore such facts as that the founding of the United States set in motion the dismantling of 150 years of mini-colonial theocracies; that there was no mention of God or Christianity in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights; [and] that this was because the framers recognized that the glue that would hold a religiously diverse nation together would be religious equality in the eyes of the law.

In short, America's strength as a nation — indeed, its very existence — depends on avoiding the kind of exclusionary religious conflict that Teichert is preoccupied with. Our nation's original motto says it all: *E pluribus unum*. In this same spirit, after quoting from George Washington's own correspondence on the subject of military chaplains serving religiously diverse troops, the MRFF complain observes that the father of our nation was "worried about even the 'smallest uneasiness' over religion and objected to anything that would "compel men to a mode of worship that they didn't profess."

Many of the most troubling posts identified by MRFF's clients identified had to do with Teichert's divisive religious-warrior mindset. The general frequently writes as if he were at war with America itself, and certainly with anyone who does not share his own form of fundamentalist belief. Here are a few examples:

- In June 2014, [he wrote](#), "We are engaged in a war between fundamentally opposed ideologies."
- In December, 2014, [he wrote](#) about "the enemies of Christ."
- In October 2015, [he wrote](#), "God has entrusted us to subdue our own kingdom – 21st century America."

- Also in October 2015, [he wrote](#), “In 21st century America we may feel like we have landed in enemy controlled territory behind enemy lines.”
- In April 2016, [he wrote that](#) "the adversary has taken the first shots of the current battle."
- On July 28th of this year, [he wrote](#), “Far too often, Christians move against other Christians who aren’t much different than themselves, sometimes with great violence and strife. ... Each time this happens, it is a dark day for the cause of Christ when there are plenty of real enemies that should be the focus of our forces.” He closed by saying, "PLEASE PRAY FOR UNITY AMONG BIBLE-BELIEVING CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA IN ORDER TO PROPERLY OPPOSE OUR REAL ADVERSARY." [All-caps in the original.]

There’s an important if nearly invisible layer of cultural influence at work here which is likely to influence how this case is perceived, and even how it plays out in the military bureaucracy. This is known as “secularized evangelical discourse” [SED], meaning an ideological orientation derived from evangelical Christian roots but is then expressed in public “in religiously nonparticularistic terms,” as described in a recent paper for the journal Social Forces, ["Christian America? Secularized Evangelical Discourse and the Boundaries of National Belonging,"](#) by Jack Delehanty, Penny Edgell and Evan Stewart.

Even as evangelicals decline as a percentage of the electorate, the persistence of SED preserves a powerful influence over the culture, these scholars argue. In practice, this means that Teichert’s deeply divisive Christian proselytizing is instinctively defended by many people who do not share his most extreme beliefs and would no doubt be horrified by a website expressing similar views from an Islamic (or Hindu, or Jewish) viewpoint.

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My initial thought was that one could view the set of influences at work in terms of concentric rings of influence: hardcore Dominionist beliefs at the bullseye of a target, surrounded first by



Christian nationalism and then by secular evangelical discourse. That metaphor "seems a bit too straightforward to me," study co-author Delehanty told Salon.

"I think that dominionism can also exist separately from Christian nationalism, because it's a theological position more than a political one," he said. Delehanty pointed to the notorious example of the fanatical extremists at Westboro Baptist Church, who would qualify as Dominionists in most respects, but "believe that the nation and all people in it are 'totally depraved' – so detested and loathed by God that there is literally no point in trying to organize a nation around gaining his favor."

Edgell, another co-author, agrees. "While the bullseye metaphor is very evocative, what is happening out there is more about overlap," she said. "When do the nationalist and Dominionist strains line up in a way that one reinforces the other?"

Their paper focuses on four particularly important claims drawn from SED, and widely shared among Christians who may not otherwise hold extreme positions or even be especially devout:

1. that religious identity is important for good citizenship,
2. that religious belief is a criterion for strong political leadership,
3. that society's rules should be based on divine will,
4. that public institutions should broadly accommodate religious belief and practice.

The paper found that SED enjoys majority support, extending well beyond the evangelical demographic, but with qualified power. Views generally break down into four groups — ardent opposition, moderate opposition, moderate support and ardent support. There is no "sensible center" equally opposed to "both extremes" in this regard, said co-author Stewart. "Even among the moderates, consensus about religion's symbolic role is limited. People generally agree about how governments should accommodate religious belief and commitment, but the role of evangelical ideas in symbolic boundary-making remains a source of contention."

One further surprise is that “even strong supporters of SED hesitate to support explicitly Christian prayers in schools and government funding of religious charities,” Stewart said. This suggests that “even the most culturally conservative Americans use religious ideas as a source of symbolic boundaries more than as a basis for law and policy.”

Edgell made a related point: “The talk about symbolic boundaries can drown out debate on a substantive agenda, and substantive agenda items are hard to talk about on their own terms.” One example would be the way that the MRFF, Weinstein's foundation, has frequently been attacked as “atheistic” or “anti-Christian,” although it's clients and members overwhelmingly identify as Christian.

This opens up a whole new range of questions about how religious culture war issues will be framed and reframed in the years ahead. But as far as those under Teichert’s command are concerned, it comes down to this: Their lives are not symbolic playthings for one general's illegitimate exercise of power comes from treating them as such. While many of those who have raised complaints about the general's conduct are just as Christian he is (or arguably more so), that is essentially irrelevant. Those who profess other faiths or none at all wear the same uniform, serve the same flag and swear the same oath of allegiance to a nation whose constitution is utterly silent about God.

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### **Comments:**

Cwnidog:

I understand that BG Teichert is not alone in his actions and beliefs. Harassment amounting to persecution of non-Christians was common at the Academy a few years ago. And airmen have been denied re-enlistment if they didn't include “so help me God” in their oaths. I believe that these have been corrected, but Teichert is just more of the same. I was in the Air Force from 1978 - 1982 and reached the exalted rank of Staff Sergeant. I don't know that I'd know the place anymore.

Don Chapin: Likewise, USAF from Sep’56 to Apr’77, mustang and retired as Capt.... This is not acceptable!