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God and General Boykin: A Controversy Worth Watching

General Omar Bradley, the "soldier's general" of World War II, once quipped: "I am convinced that the best service a retired general can perform is to turn in his tongue along with his suit, and to mothball his opinions." The very active tongue of a very active general is attracting worldwide attention this week, and the controversy shows no signs of retiring.

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Army Lt. General William "Jerry" Boykin is no desk officer. A founding member of the Army's famous Delta Force, Gen. Boykin's last assignment was as head of Special Forces. These are the soldiers who land in the most dangerous places to do the heaviest fighting. Gen. Boykin is no weekend warrior.

In his current assignment, Gen. Boykin serves as Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, directing the various intelligence agencies in the War against Terror in Iraq and around the world. He also supervises Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's "High Value Target Plan," which aims to locate and neutralize individuals such as Saddam Hussein, Mullah Omar, and Osama Bin Laden.

But it's Gen. Boykin who has been targeted by the media for neutralization. His offense? According to William Arkin of the Los Angeles Times, Boykin is "an intolerant extremist who has spoken openly about how his belief in Christianity has trumped Muslims and other non-Christians in battle." And that's not all, Arkin also reports that Boykin "has described himself as a warrior in the kingdom of God and invited others to join with him in fighting for the United States through repentance, prayer, and exercise of faith in God." And there's more: Gen. Boykin has even spoken in churches—get this—as a Christian. It must be time for a secularist-driven court martial.

The NBC Nightly News was hot on the story, and also depended upon reports by William Arkin. On the NBC broadcast, Arkin editorialized about his own story: "I think that it [Boykin's view of Islam] is not only at odds with what the president believes, but it is a dangerous, extreme, and pernicious view that really has no place." Arkin has Gen. Boykin in his sights, but he evidently sees Christianity as the enemy.

Is Gen. Boykin an "intolerant extremist?" The general is a frequent speaker in evangelical churches. Earlier this year he spoke at the First Baptist Church of Daytona Beach, FL, and said, "Anyone who puts on the armor of God becomes a target for Satan. Be ready. He will be coming. He will try to stop you from doing what God wants you to do. But you knew that already."

The year before, Boykin spoke in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks. "Bin Laden is not the enemy," he said, "No mortal is the enemy. It's the enemy you can't see. It's a war against the forces of darkness. The battle won't be won with guns. It will be won on our knees."

Frankly, you would think that most Americans would be reassured to know that such a high-ranking military officer sees a limit to what military action can accomplish. Gen. Boykin knows that we are in a spiritual struggle, and he knows the enemy. For the secularists, that's just the problem.

Boykin has claimed that America is hated by radical Islamists "because we're a Christian nation, because our

foundation and our roots are Judeo-Christian and the enemy is a guy named Satan.”

Most notoriously, he has been quoted as telling an audience that he had captured a major Somali warlord because “I knew my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and that his was an idol.”

The liberal media and their friends on the secularist fringe hit the panic button. The New York Times editorialized: “Not only did a high-ranking government official make remarks that espoused a single religious view and denigrated others, but he damaged the national security policy of the United States.”

The Council for American-Islamic Relations, a group known for cozy relationships with international terrorist groups, called for Gen. Boykin to be “reassigned to a position in which he will not be able to harm our nation’s image or interests.” How kind of them to be concerned about our image and interests.

Rev. C. Welton Gaddy of the ultra-liberal Interfaith Alliance wrote a letter to Rumsfeld and President Bush, asking and answering their own question: “Given his discordant views on Islam—as reported in detail—and other religions, can Gen. Boykin serve the U. S. while in the Middle East with the necessary respect and diplomacy? At this point, I would have to say no.” He continued by claiming that the general’s remarks, “fly in the face of the pleas of the president and violate the basic principles of tolerance and inclusion that are implicit in the culture of this nation.” Thankfully, America’s armed forces are not accustomed to looking for strategic advice from the Interfaith Alliance.

Christianity Today [see web site] has posted large segments of Gen. Boykin’s speeches on its WebLog, and a quick look reveals that the general’s statements have been twisted in order to sensationalize. Are you surprised? In the main, his comments are just what you would expect from a Christian military officer who is fighting against very real forces of evil. He does not mince words, but his statements cannot be fairly characterized as those of an “intolerant extremist.” Not unless all evangelical Christians are to be similarly charged.

After all, in the comments so lambasted by the press, Gen. Boykin was not speaking to the national or international press, but to Christian churches. He was speaking as a Christian believer and said nothing out of line in terms of Christian belief and theology. His testimony was that of a battle-hardened soldier who knows that the spiritual battle takes far more casualties than any military action.

If Boykin erred, it was in failing at times to make clear that he was speaking to Christian congregations as a Christian believer, a fellow disciple, and not on behalf of the U.S. military in an official capacity. But even in this, the general has apparently broken no military rules or regulations. Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said there is a “very wide gray area of what the rules permit” in regard to uniformed officers in non-military speaking engagements. That, of course, may now change.

President Bush distanced himself from Boykin’s statements as he traveled to Australia, telling reporters on Air Force One that Boykin’s statements “didn’t reflect my opinion” or “what the government thinks.” Prominent senators from both parties have called for the general’s ouster.

William Arkin and his allies in the national press have pilloried Gen. Boykin for days. A source described as “a senior Congressional Republican official” in an October 22 report in The New York Times said that “the political reality up here is that no one thinks Boykin will survive.” On the other hand, Pentagon spokesman Larry DiRita said that “nobody’s thinking about asking him to sep aside.” Nobody?

Gen. Boykin offered an apology on October 17, explaining, “I am not anti-Islam or any other religion. I support the free exercise of all religions. For those who have been offended by my statements, I offer a sincere apology.” He went on to say that he is “neither a zealot nor an extremist,” but “only a soldier who has an abiding faith.” The real question now is whether he will be able to soldier on in his assignment.

The secular press has decided to make an example out of Gen. William Boykin. Reporters have been digging up his church messages like Watergate reporters looking for White House tapes. They have found sufficient evidence to indict him as a Christian believer with politically incorrect views. To their way of thinking, only a fellow secularist can serve in a policy-making position of high rank. If not an out-and-out secularist, then they will settle for a liberal Christian who will deny core Christian beliefs. Gen. Boykin is just unthinkable.

Ponder the inevitable result of this line of thinking. America's military forces will be denied the religious liberty they are defending with their lives. Gen. Boykin's beliefs are based in classic Christianity—in the very words of the Bible. Some may question his way of turning a phrase and his decision to wear his uniform while speaking in churches, but his statements are essentially sound and profoundly important.

Gen. Boykin should be a bit more clear about the fact that it is the Church that is called to fight the good fight of faith—not the U.S. Army. But he is obviously correct in pointing to a spiritual battle underneath the military action in the war on terror. Only the most hare-brained secularist would find this kind of language offensive. But offended, they are. Their basic problem with Gen. Boykin is that he is an evangelical Christian who is bold to talk about his faith.

A great deal is riding on this controversy. If Gen. Boykin is removed or reassigned, this will send a clear and chilling signal throughout the U.S. military. "Keep your faith to yourself and tow the politically correct line," will be the sum and substance of that signal. Is Christianity too politically incorrect for the U.S. Army? Watch this case closely.

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