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GOD'S SQUAD

*Military At Risk As Sooner Delegation
Helps Tear Down Church-State Wall*

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

Mikey Weinstein lives a day's drive west of Oklahoma in the mountainous, desert Southwest, but he knows all about the Sooner state.

He knows it has 77 counties, and every one of them voted Republican in the last two presidential elections.

He knows it is a hub of U.S. military operations, including three Air Force bases and Fort Sill.

And he knows it is home to a statistically small, yet rabid – and politically influential – slice of Christian fundamentalism that abhors religious pluralism and pursues a theocracy that mirrors an apocalyptic worldview.

All of which makes Oklahoma a near-perfect locale for Weinstein – founder and president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation – to make his case first-hand that “fanatical religiosity” within America’s armed forces is threatening national security.

“Give me 300 seconds – one for each of the Spartans killed at the Battle of Thermopylae – and I don’t know how you can possibly be against what we’re talking about,”

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God's Squad

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says Weinstein, an Air Force Academy honors graduate.

"We're a very aggressive and militant organization, but our militancy and aggression is in support of the Constitution."

Weinstein will be the featured speaker at the Tulsa Interfaith Alliance's annual Russell Bennett Award presentation Sept. 21 at All Souls Unitarian Church, 2952 S. Peoria Ave. at 2:30 p.m. – an appearance sure to stir up a religious right that reviles him as "Satan's lawyer" and "Field General of the Godless Armies of Satan."

The timing of his Tulsa visit is significant, given that members of Oklahoma's congressional delegation – particularly Tulsa Rep. Jim Bridenstine – are busy cultivating the canard that a War on Christianity threatens America as we know it and severely restricts the religious freedoms of America's heroic warriors.

It's a fantasy, of course, conceived by an unholy alliance of rightwing conservatives in pursuit of political power and so-called religious Dominionists whose agenda features doing whatever is necessary to speed us toward Armageddon.

But the illusion doesn't keep wingnuts in Congress from introducing spurious legislation like Louisiana Rep. John Fleming's so-called Religious Liberty Amendment to the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act that supposedly would protect the First Amendment religious rights of those in uniform.

As the White House put it, Fleming's proposal actually would limit "the discretion of commanders to address potentially problematic speech and actions within their units" and "have a significant adverse effect on good order, disci-



– Mikey Weinstein

pline, morale, and mission accomplishment."

Of course, in zealot-land, the fact a Kenyan-born, Muslim, socialist president spoke against it is all the proof necessary that a War on Christianity exists.

As Weinstein notes, the opposite is true – particularly when it comes to the U.S. military. His group represents nearly 35,000 active-duty service members who have been targeted by religious zealots – oftentimes superior officers – demanding they embrace a specific strain of Christianity.

Ninety-six percent of the foundation's clients are Protestant or Roman Catholic, including 21 varieties of Baptist alone. Only four percent of service members lodging complaints through Weinstein's group are atheist, agnostic, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Shinto, Buddhist, Wiccan, Native American Spiritualist or other.

More than 800 are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Having served 10 years in the military, Weinstein, himself ag-

nostic, says he knows how much pressure can be applied in a military setting to conform to a certain religious point of view.

He founded the Military Religious Freedom Foundation about a decade ago after his children, while Air Force Academy cadets, were browbeaten to attend Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

Weinstein says his group is working to rebuild the wall separating church and state that all too often has been knocked down in the U.S. military, effectively depriving many armed forces members freedom of – and from – religion.

It's particularly worrisome, he says, that Dominionists are asserting their apocalyptic worldviews in settings where they can mix "a fanatical religiosity ... with actual weapons of mass destruction."

"It's a tortured, poisoned view of patriotism," says Weinstein. "It's a metastasizing threat to this country."

Not surprisingly, Weinstein's support of religious freedom does not set well with the likes of Rep. Bridenstine, who in a May 2013 blog entry promoted the fact he "questioned the Department of Defense's recent interactions with anti-Christian activist Mikey Weinstein."

"As a Navy reservist with combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan," Bridenstine said, "I know firsthand the importance of faith to many of our men and women in uniform."

"I am growing increasingly concerned that well-established protections of conscience and religious expression are being slowly eroded. Right now, the military is preparing guidance on religious issues. During this process, it remains critical that senior JAG leaders understand the concerns of religious service members."

What Bridenstine and his ilk clearly fail to appreciate is how they would like it if the shoe were on the other foot. They would be irate if other religious groups were given carte blanche to proselytize or – as seems likely in a military setting – the power to make one conform or face career-ending

consequences.

It's as if they can't come to grips with the uniquely American concept that it's OK not to believe – or to believe differently than Bridenstine and Co.

For them “to say we, Christians, are the persecuted, it is not only disingenuous, it is a goddamn lie – and they know,” Weinstein says.

“This is like the playground bully – after he's been pulled aside by every teacher or monitor on the playground for beating little Jimmy into the ground – showing his hand and saying, ‘Look what little Jimmy's head did to my knuckles – they're all bruised.’”

It speaks to the strange political times in which we live that Weinstein would be so despised by the religious right.

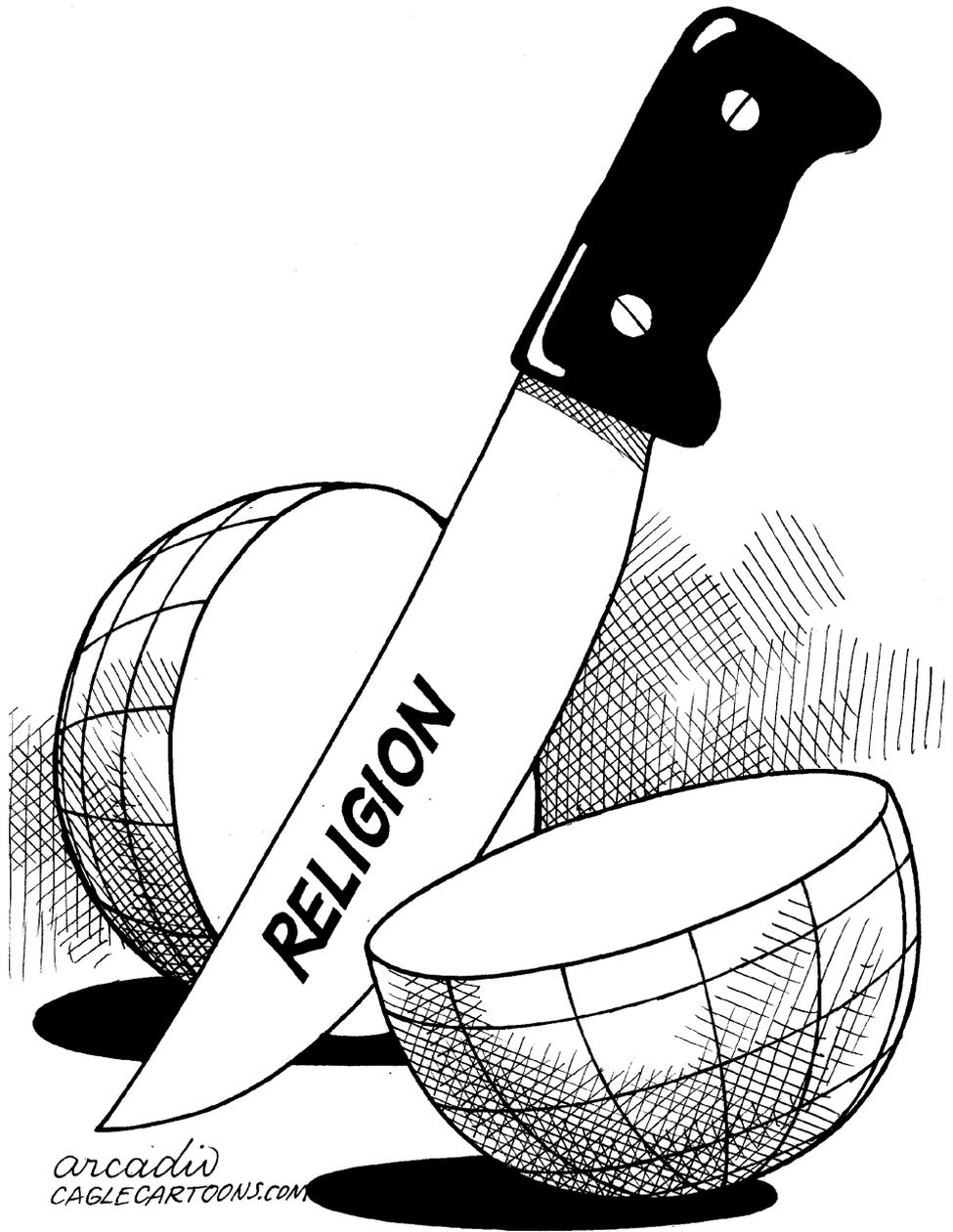
He's a lifelong Republican who served as a White House legal counsel under their favorite president, Ronald Reagan, and as committee management officer of the Iran-Contra investigation. He also served as first general counsel to Texas billionaire and two-time presidential candidate H. Ross Perot and Perot Systems.

Of course, Weinstein also was named one of the 50 most influential Jews in America by the Jewish weekly Forward. He was tabbed one of the 100 Most Influential People in U.S. Defense in 2012 by Gannett's Defense News. And his organization has been nominated five times for the Nobel Peace prize.

Weinstein clearly relishes his role as a provocateur, describing his foundation as the “demanders of the commanders” – more akin to the radical animal rights group PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) than the more staid and traditional Humane Society of the U.S.

“I'm very happy coming in and speaking truth to power,” he says, reminding it was 19th Century African-American leader Frederick Douglass who said “power concedes nothing without a demand.”

Weinstein says he is more than willing to be a “tarantula” on the fundamentalists' “wedding cake”



– but also hopes those attending the Tulsa event will actively join his group in working to restore the wall separating church and state in America's armed forces.

“We're not supposed to work 20 years, get our retirement and spend the rest of our time trying to lower our handicap on the golf course,” he says. “We're supposed

to be helping each other.

“It's not good enough to agree *with* something ... We're on this planet to *do* something ... If your thought, heart, brain, and passion supports what we're doing then also have your arms and legs do it.

“Make it clear” that what the Dominionists are doing to America's military “is not OK.”