

# War and Religion: Air Force Cites New Testament, Ex-Nazi, to Train Officers on Ethics of Launching Nuclear Weapons

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [Religion](#)

Werner Von Braun, a former member of the Nazi Party who used Jews imprisoned in concentration camps, captured French anti-Nazi partisans and civilians, and others to help build the V-2 rocket for Hitler's Third Reich, is cited in an Air Force PowerPoint presentation about the morals and ethics of launching nuclear weapons. The United States Air Force has been training young missile officers about the morals and ethics of launching nuclear weapons by citing passages from the New Testament and commentary from a former member of the Nazi Party, according to newly released documents.

The mandatory Nuclear Ethics and Nuclear Warfare session, which includes a discussion on St. Augustine's "Christian Just War Theory [3]," is led by Air Force chaplains and takes place during a missile officer's first week in training at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

The Christian Just War Theory has been touted [4] by Rep. Ron Paul, a 2012 presidential candidate, on the campaign stops. During his Nobel Prize acceptance speech two years ago, President Obama also invoked [5] the concept of a "just war," stating there will be times when the use of force will be "morally justified."

St. Augustine's "Qualifications for Just War," according to the way it is cited in a 43-page PowerPoint presentation [6], are: "to avenge or to avert evil; to protect the innocent and restore moral social order (just cause)" and "to restore moral order; not expand power, not for pride or revenge (just intent)."

The Air Force documents were released under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and provided to Truthout by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation [7] (MRFF), a civil rights organization. MRFF President Mikey Weinstein said more than 30 Air Force officers, a majority of whom describe themselves as practicing Protestants and Roman Catholics, have contacted his group over the past week in hopes of enlisting him to work with the Air Force to have the Christian-themed teachings removed from the nuclear weapons ethics training session. [Full disclosure: Weinstein is a member of Truthout's Board of Advisers.]

Included with the PowerPoint presentation are more than 500 pages of other documents [8] pertaining to a missile officer's first week of training. After missile officers complete their training they are sent to one of three Air Force bases to guard the country's Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) arsenal and, if called upon to do so by the president, launch their nuclear-armed Minuteman IIIs.

One of the slides used to explain to missile officers the moral justification for launching

nuclear weapons quotes Wernher Von Braun [9], a former member of the Nazi Party and SS officer who used Jews imprisoned in concentration camps, captured French anti-Nazi partisans and civilians, and others, to help build the V-2 rocket.

“We knew that we had created a new means of warfare and the question as to what nation, to what victorious nation we were willing to entrust this brainchild of ours was a moral decision [emphasis in document] more than anything else,” Von Braun said upon surrendering to American forces in May 1945. “We wanted to see the world spared another conflict such as Germany had just been through and we felt that only by surrendering such a weapon to people who are guided by the Bible could such an assurance to the world be best secured.” [emphasis in document]

Von Braun was part of a top-secret military program known as “Operation Paperclip [10],” which recruited Nazi scientists after World War II who “were secretly brought to the United States, without State Department review and approval; their service for [Adolf] Hitler’s Third Reich, [Nazi Party] and SS memberships as well as the classification of many as war criminals or security threats also disqualified them from officially obtaining visas,” according to the Operation Paperclip web site [11].

Von Braun and about 500 or so other Nazi scientists who were part of the classified program worked on guided missile and ballistic missile technology at military installations in New Mexico, Alabama and Texas.

## Ethical Questions

The Air Force has been mired in numerous religious scandals [12] over the past decade and has been sued for allowing widespread proselytization at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. It has been citing Christian teachings in its missile officer training materials for at least a decade.

One Air Force officer currently on active duty, who spoke to Truthout on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak with the media, said he was trained as a missile officer in 2001 and vividly recalls how the chaplain leading the training session on the ethics of launching nuclear weapons said, “the American Catholic Church and their leadership says it’s ok in their eyes to launch nukes.”

Last year, however, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Vatican representative to the United Nations, said [13] in speeches in Washington and New York City that “nuclear weapons are no longer just for deterrence but have become entrenched in the military doctrines of the major powers.”

“The conditions that prevailed during the Cold War, which gave a basis for the [Catholic] Church’s limited toleration of nuclear deterrence, no longer apply in a consistent and effective manner,” the Archbishop said.

The 381st Training Group and 392nd Training Squadron are responsible for training every Air Force Space and Missile Officer. Several emails and phone calls left for spokespeople at Vandenberg Air Force Base, where the squadron is based, were not returned. The PowerPoint identifies Chaplain Capt. Shin Soh as leading the nuclear ethics presentation.

One of the ethical questions contained in the PowerPoint presented to missile officers asks: "Can you imagine a set of circumstances that would warrant a nuclear launch from the US, knowing that it would kill thousands of non-combatants?"

Another question trainees are confronted with asks: "Can we train physically, emotionally and spiritually for a job we hope we never have to do?"

To help officers answer these ethical queries, the PowerPoint presentation cites numerous examples of characters from the New and Old Testament fighting "just" wars. For example, "Abraham organized an army to rescue Lot," God motivated "judges (Samson, Deborah, Barak) to fight and deliver Israel from foreign oppressors," and "David is a warrior who is also a 'man after God's own heart.'"

Also included in the PowerPoint presentation is a slide containing a passage from the Book of Revelation that attempts to explain how Jesus Christ, as the "mighty warrior," believed war to be "just."

It goes on to say that there are "many examples of believers [who] engaged in wars in Old Testament" in a "righteous way" and notes there is "no pacifistic sentiment in mainstream Jewish history."

The PowerPoint documents' blatant use of religious imagery and its numerous citations of the Bible would appear to be a violation of the First Amendment establishing a wall of separation between church and state and Clause 3, Article 6 of the Constitution, which specifically prohibits a "religious test."

Weinstein, a graduate of the Air Force Academy and a former Air Force Judge Advocate General (JAG), said a section of the PowerPoint presentation that has been cited by MRFF clients as being at the top of the list of "unconstitutional outrages" is the one "which wretchedly asserts that war is both ethical and part of 'the natural order' of man's existence on earth."

"Astonishingly, the training presentation grotesquely attempts to justify that unconscionable concept of 'war is good because Jesus says it is' by specifically textually referencing allegedly supportive bible passages from the New Testament Books of Luke, Acts, Hebrews, Timothy and, finally even Revelation," said Weinstein, a former White House counsel during the Reagan administration. "If this repugnant nuclear missile training is not Constitutionally violative of both the 'no religious test' mandate of the Constitution and the First Amendment's No Establishment Clause then those bedrock legal principles simply do not exist."

A senior Air Force Space and Missile officer who reviewed the materials, said the teachings are "an outrage of the highest order."

"No way in hell should this have been presented as a mandatory briefing to ALL in the basic missiles class," the officer, who requested anonymity, said in an email. "It presumes ALL missile officers are religious and specifically in need of CHRISTIAN justification for their service."

"If they wanted to help people with their spiritual/religious/secular justification for serving as missile officers, then they should've said something like 'for those of you with religious concerns about missile duty, we've arranged the following times to chat with chaplains from

your particular faith group.’ For those with secular concerns about the morality of missile duty, we’ll have a discussion moderated by a professor [and/or] counselor, a noted ethicist, too. If you’re already good with your role and duty as a missile officer, then you’re welcome to hit the golf course or gym.”

The senior Air Force officer added that the commander of the training squadron “that approved this, along with the Training Group Commander at Vandenberg, should be fired instantly for allowing it.”

“Jesus Loves Nukes”

Former Air Force Capt. Damon Bosetti, 27, who attended missile officer training in 2006 and was stationed at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana, said he and his colleagues used to call the religious section of the ethics training the “Jesus loves nukes speech.”

“What I went through in 2006 didn’t have that level of inappropriateness in it, but it was still strongly religious,” he said of the PowerPoint presentation the Air Force now uses for training missile officers.

Bosetti, who is represented by MRFF, said he believes the intent of quoting Bible passages was to make officers feel “comfortable” about launching nuclear weapons and signing a legal document stating they had “no moral qualms” about “turning the key” if ordered to do so.

The legal document from the Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, which was also released under the FOIA, states, in part, “I will perform duties involving the operation of nuclear-armed ICBMs and will launch them if lawfully ordered to do so by the President of the United States or his lawful successor.” [emphasis in document]

Bosetti, an officer who left active duty in the Air Force last year, said officers were immediately presented with the three-page document to sign after the end of the training session on nuclear ethics.

“I think the average American would be and should be very disturbed to know that people go through training where the Air Force quotes the Bible,” Bosetti said. “This type of teaching sets a dangerous precedent because no one above you is objecting. It shifts the group definition of acceptable behavior more and more off track.”

Weinstein said the combination of citing fundamentalist Christianity and a Nazi scientist as a way of explaining to missile officers why launching nuclear weapons is ethical is a new low for the Air Force.

“Leave it to the United States Air Force to find a way to dictate the ‘ethical’ value of nuclear war and it’s inevitable role in the ‘natural order’ of humanity’s existence, to it’s missile launch officer trainees by merging unadulterated, fundamentalist Christian end times Armageddon doctrines with the tortured ‘people who are guided by the bible’ endorsements of a former, leading Nazi SS official,” Weinstein said. [14]

Links:

[1] <http://www.truth-out.org/print/4535>

- [2] <http://www.truth-out.org/printmail/4535>
- [3] [http://catholicism.about.com/od/beliefsteachings/p/Just\\_War\\_Theory.htm](http://catholicism.about.com/od/beliefsteachings/p/Just_War_Theory.htm)
- [4] <http://www.dailypaul.com/170284/ron-paul-speaks-on-the-christian-just-war-theory>
- [5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/11/world/europe/11prexy.text.html?pagewanted=all>
- [6] [http://truthout.org/files/nuclear\\_ethics.pdf](http://truthout.org/files/nuclear_ethics.pdf)
- [7] <http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org>
- [8] <http://www.scribd.com/doc/61068592/ICBM-Training-Material>
- [9] <http://www.operationpaperclip.info/wernher-von-braun.php>
- [10] <http://www.operationpaperclip.info/> [11] <http://www.operationpaperclip.info>
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- [http://www.google.com/#sclient=psy&hl=en&source=hp&q=%22jason+leopold%22+and+%22air+force+academy%22&pbx=1&oq=%22jason+leopold%22+and+%22air+force+academy%22&aq=f&aql=1&gs\\_sm=e&gs\\_upl=17971401610142541671401910131239111292410.6.15.5.3.1.1.0.1.1133&bav=on.2.or.r\\_gc.r\\_pw.&fp=d5ef1517b4bad13f&biw=1280&bih=513](http://www.google.com/#sclient=psy&hl=en&source=hp&q=%22jason+leopold%22+and+%22air+force+academy%22&pbx=1&oq=%22jason+leopold%22+and+%22air+force+academy%22&aq=f&aql=1&gs_sm=e&gs_upl=17971401610142541671401910131239111292410.6.15.5.3.1.1.0.1.1133&bav=on.2.or.r_gc.r_pw.&fp=d5ef1517b4bad13f&biw=1280&bih=513)
- [ 1 3 ]
- [http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/georgetown/2010/05/vatican\\_questions\\_nuclear\\_deterrence.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/georgetown/2010/05/vatican_questions_nuclear_deterrence.html)
- [14] <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/>

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