

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 24, 2022

The Honorable Frank Kendall
Secretary of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Secretary Kendall,

We write to express our grave concerns regarding news reports of a recent event involving Jewish cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA). On October 5th the Academy scheduled one of its most important training days of the year, the “Commandant’s Challenge”, designed to foster teamwork, leadership, and character. This year, the Commandant’s Challenge coincided with the most solemn of Jewish holidays, Yom Kippur. As a result, all Jewish cadets were put in an impossible position of choosing between freely exercising their faith, or participating fully in military training specifically planned to build teamwork and camaraderie.

While we understand the rigorous and demanding schedule of the USAFA and that accommodations for religious services were made, the scheduling of such an important Academy event on Yom Kippur was unnecessary and suggests a fundamental disregard for Jewish cadets and their first amendment rights. This incident was made worse when one Jewish cadet seeking guidance from a senior cadet in her chain of command was allegedly told that the problem was her, “being Jewish”, and that she should “make an effort to try Christianity”, describing Christianity as “just enlightened Judaism”. Allegations were also made that the senior cadet encouraged the Jewish cadet to attend Bible studies. If true, such flagrant religious prejudice demonstrated by a senior cadet in conjunction with a general disregard for Jewish religious observances indicates institutional concerns that we strongly feel must be examined.

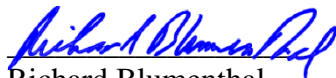
While we acknowledge the press statements made by the USAFA on October 6th, we respectfully request answers to the following questions by November 30, 2022 and stand ready to work with you to protect the religious liberties of all cadets, airmen, and guardians.

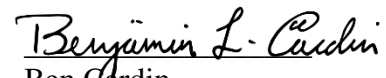
- Does Air Force leadership believe it was appropriate for the Academy to conduct the Commandant’s Challenge on Yom Kippur?
- If the Challenge was inadvertently scheduled on Yom Kippur, who was responsible for the decision to go ahead with the event once the issue was raised?
- Has there been an investigation into these allegations or any other instances of senior cadets denigrating the faith or religious practices of their juniors?
- Have any disciplinary actions already been taken against the senior cadet described in the incident?
- How many cadets have been disciplined in the last ten years for similar misconduct related to religious discrimination or proselytizing?


- Has there consistently been a Jewish chaplain on staff at the Air Force Academy accessible to cadets who provides weekly services?
- What role do chaplains play in the determination of the Academy's calendar to ensure that members of all faiths are able to observe religious services and holidays?
- If the Academy's Academic Year Calendar is developed and maintained through an institutional process that includes input on faith considerations of the cadets, why did the Academy go ahead with the scheduling of the Commandant's Challenge on October 5th, knowing that it conflicted with Yom Kippur?
- What steps are the Air Force and USAFA taking to ensure that cadets and service members have adequate accommodations for religious observances?
- What is the USAFA doing to ensure that junior cadets are not pressured or coerced by upper class cadets into religious activities in violation of their first amendment rights?

We know that you are committed to an Air Force built upon the diverse talents and experiences of Americans of all faiths, cultures, and creeds. We thank you for your service and ask that you keep us informed of efforts to ensure that all cadets, airmen, and guardians are afforded their fundamental first amendment rights.

Sincerely,


Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator


Ben Cardin
United States Senator


Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator