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1 July 2026

Chaplain (COL) David Wake
Executive Director, Armed Forces Chaplains Board
Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness)
4000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-4000

Subject: Issue Paper – *The Military Chaplain and the Insignia of Rank*

Dear Chaplain Wake:

I respectfully submit the attached issue paper, *The Military Chaplain and the Insignia of Rank: An Institutional Analysis of the 2026 DoD Chaplain Uniform Reform Policy*, for your consideration and, if appropriate, for the consideration of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board.

The paper does not argue that the Department's 2026 uniform reform policy is unlawful, nor does it attempt to evaluate whether the policy will achieve its stated objective of increasing the accessibility of military chaplains. Instead, it examines a narrower institutional question: whether the policy carries implications extending beyond uniform appearance by altering the visible expression of commissioned status for one category of commissioned officer.

The analysis approaches that question through four related perspectives: the historical development of military chaplains within the commissioned officer corps, the statutory framework established by Congress in Title 10, the institutional implications of the policy as publicly implemented by the military departments, and several questions that may warrant further institutional consideration. Throughout the paper, I distinguish questions of statutory structure and personnel policy from broader theological or pastoral considerations.

Although the paper references the implementing guidance issued by the military departments, I have been unable to locate the Department of Defense memorandum identified as the originating policy document. It is entirely possible that memorandum addresses some or all of the questions raised in the paper. If so, I would welcome the opportunity to better understand the Department's reasoning. In the absence of that

document, however, I believe the publicly available record leaves several institutional questions unresolved.

I offer these observations from the perspective of a retired Army chaplain and former personnel policy officer in the Office of the Chief of Chaplains. During twenty-three years of active military service, I served in assignments involving chaplain personnel policy, accessions, assignments, and senior leader management. Following retirement, I have continued to study and write on matters affecting the institutional character of military chaplaincy and ecclesiastical endorsement.

My purpose in submitting this paper is not to advocate a predetermined policy outcome. Rather, it is to encourage careful institutional consideration of questions that appear to affect the long-term relationship between military chaplaincy, congressional statute, and commissioned military service. Because the Armed Forces Chaplains Board serves as the Department's principal forum for interservice consideration of matters affecting military chaplaincy, it appears to me to be the appropriate body to consider these questions.

If the Board determines that the analysis would benefit from correction, clarification, or additional information, I would welcome that guidance. Likewise, if the Department's unpublished memorandum resolves the issues identified in the paper, I would appreciate the opportunity to review that rationale as it becomes available.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission and for your continued service to the military chaplaincy.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Michael T. Bradfield". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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Attachment: Issue Paper – *The Military Chaplain and the Insignia of Rank*

Cc:

Members, Armed Forces Chaplains Board:

Chief of Chaplains, U. S. Army
Chief of Chaplains, U. S. Air Force
Chief of Chaplains, U.S. Navy

The Military Chaplain and the Insignia of Rank

An Institutional Analysis of the 2026 DoD Chaplain Uniform Reform Policy

References:

1. Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness memorandum, *Implementation Guidance for Chaplain Uniform Reform*, dated 4 May 2026.
2. Secretary of the Army memorandum, SUBJECT: Army Directive 2026-16 (Chaplain Rank and Insignia), dated 23 June 2026.
3. Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs memorandum, SUBJECT: Chaplain Uniform Reform and Maternity Wrap Dress Guidance, dated June 15, 2026.
4. Chief of Naval Operations message, SUBJ/CHAPLAIN UNIFORM RANK INSIGNIA OCCASION FOR WEAR, dated 11 June 2026.

Purpose:

This paper examines the uniform reform policy mandated by the Secretary of Defense and implemented by the Secretaries of the military services to assess its long-term institutional implications for the incorporation of military chaplains in the regular commissioned officer corps and whether these institutional implications warrant further consideration.

Discussion:

The Department of Defense's 2026 policy replacing commissioned officer rank insignia with faith group insignia for military chaplains represents more than a change in uniform appearance. It alters the outward expression of status for one category of commissioned officers and, in doing so, raises questions concerning the historical development, statutory foundation, and institutional understanding of the military chaplaincy.

The policy does not change the legal status of chaplains. They remain commissioned officers under Title 10 of the United States Code and continue to serve within the military chain of command as non-commanding officers. The question presented by this paper is therefore not whether chaplains continue to hold commissions, but whether changing the visible expression of that commission has broader implications for how the chaplain's role is understood within the Armed Forces.

This analysis proceeds from three observations:

1. Congressional intent as expressed in more than a century of legislative effort incorporating chaplains into the ordinary commissioned officer corps.

2. The statutory structure of Title 10 concerning military chaplains as commissioned officers.
3. The introduction of a different institutional presentation of that relationship by distinguishing chaplains visually from every other commissioned officer through the 2026 uniform reform policy.

This analysis would ordinarily rely on the Department of Defense memorandum listed as Reference 1 as its primary source for analysis. That resource, however, has not been publicly discoverable despite repeated searches of publicly accessible Department of Defense resources. The analysis that follows is therefore based upon the policy as implemented by the military departments, official public statements, applicable provisions of Title 10 of the United States Code, and relevant historical sources concerning the commissioned status of military chaplains.

Should the underlying memorandum become publicly available, some questions addressed in this paper may warrant reconsideration in light of that document's stated legal, historical, or policy rationale.

I. Historical Incorporation into the Commissioned Officer Corps

The status of military chaplains as commissioned officers developed through successive acts of Congress over more than a century. Rather than distinguishing chaplains from the commissioned officer corps, Congress progressively incorporated them more fully into the ordinary officer personnel system while preserving the distinctive religious function of the chaplain's office.¹

From the establishment of the Continental Army, chaplains occupied a distinctive position as clergy serving within the military establishment. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Congress repeatedly addressed questions of appointment, commissioned status, grade, promotion, retirement, and professional standing through successive legislation. Those enactments did not diminish the chaplain's religious identity. They increasingly situated the chaplain within the legal and professional framework applicable to commissioned officers.²

By the middle of the twentieth century, that progression had become explicit. Chaplains were appointed and commissioned as officers of the Army, while federal law recognized

¹ National Defense Act of 1916, Pub. L. 64-85, 39 Stat. 166; Officer Personnel Act of 1947, Pub. L. 80-381, 61 Stat. 795; Act of Aug. 10, 1956, Pub. L. 84-1028, 70A Stat. 1 (positive-law codification of Title 10).

² Resolution of the Continental Congress, July 29, 1775 (establishing pay for chaplains serving with the Continental Army); Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, vol. 2, at 220 (Worthington C. Ford ed., 1906); National Defense Act of 1916, Pub. L. 64-85, 39 Stat. 166; Officer Personnel Act of 1947, Pub. L. 80-381, 61 Stat. 795.

their distinctive non-command function without separating them from the commissioned officer corps for purposes of appointment, tenure, promotion, retirement, and related statutory rights.³

The positive-law codification of Title 10 in 1956 carried that understanding into the modern statutory framework. Military chaplains continued to be recognized as commissioned officers serving within the Army's special branches rather than outside the commissioned officer structure. Congress preserved the chaplain's distinctive functional role while retaining commissioned military service as the institutional setting in which that role was exercised. The accompanying Reviser's Note is especially significant. In deleting earlier statutory language placing chaplains "on the same footing" as other officers with respect to tenure, retirement, and pensions, the revisers explained that the provision had become "obsolete, since there is no distinction between the status of a chaplain as an officer and the status of other officers of the Army."⁴

This historical development provides the context within which the 2026 uniform reform policy should be evaluated. The question is not whether chaplains have always occupied a distinctive office. They have. The question is how Congress chose to express that distinction. Historically, Congress preserved the uniqueness of the chaplain's office while progressively incorporating chaplains into the ordinary commissioned officer corps. That historical trajectory forms the backdrop against which any policy altering the visible expression of commissioned status should be considered.

II. The Statutory Structure Established by Congress

The commissioned status of military chaplains is established by Congress through the statutory framework of Title 10 of the United States Code rather than by military custom or departmental policy. Although the organization of the chaplaincies differs among the military departments, Congress has consistently established military chaplains in each armed service as commissioned officers while recognizing the distinctive functional character of the chaplain's office. The Army provisions discussed below are used as representative of that broader statutory framework because they most clearly illustrate the congressional treatment of commissioned status, organizational placement, and functional distinction.

³ Officer Personnel Act of 1947, Pub. L. 80-381; applicable pre-1956 Army chaplain provisions recognizing commissioned status and non-command responsibilities.

⁴ Act of Aug. 10, 1956, Pub. L. 84-1028, 70A Stat. 1 (positive-law codification of Title 10, U.S. Code). Reviser's Note to former 10 U.S.C. § 3581 ("Command: chaplains"), explaining that the prior statutory language placing chaplains "on the same footing" as other officers was omitted as obsolete because "there is no distinction between the status of a chaplain as an officer and the status of other officers of the Army."

Within the Army, Congress has established the Chaplain Corps as one of the Army's special branches and has provided that the Chaplains include commissioned officers appointed as chaplains. Their commissions, grades, appointments, promotions, retirements, and service are governed within the same statutory officer framework applicable to commissioned officers generally except where Congress has expressly provided otherwise.⁵

Congress has likewise preserved the distinctive functional character of the chaplain's office. Federal law provides that "a chaplain has rank without command," distinguishing the chaplain's professional function from command authority while preserving commissioned status. Other provisions of Title 10 likewise recognize the continuing professional qualifications required for military chaplains. These distinctions define the chaplain's function rather than create a separate class of commissioned officer.⁶

Congress has delegated broad authority to the military departments to prescribe uniforms and insignia. Nothing in this paper questions that authority. Military uniforms have evolved continuously throughout American history, and decisions concerning their appearance properly belong to the executive branch acting within statutory authority.

The present question is therefore narrower. If Congress has established military chaplains throughout the Armed Forces as commissioned officers within the statutory officer corps, what institutional significance should be attached to removing the ordinary insignia by which commissioned grade has historically been communicated? The question does not challenge the Department of Defense's authority to regulate uniforms. It asks whether a policy governing uniforms may also influence the institutional understanding of a statutory office created and defined by Congress.

The distinction is important. The issue is not whether military chaplains continue to hold commissions. They plainly do. Nor is the issue whether the Department of Defense may revise military uniforms. It plainly may. The issue is whether the visible insignia of commissioned grade has historically constituted one of the principal institutional expressions of Congress's decision to incorporate military chaplains into the commissioned officer corps and, if so, whether altering that expression carries institutional consequences extending beyond the uniform itself.

⁵ 10 U.S.C. § 7064 (Army special branches), identifying the Chaplains as one of the Army's special branches. 10 U.S.C. § 7073 (Army Chaplains), providing that the Chaplains include commissioned officers appointed as chaplains.

⁶ 10 U.S.C. § 7231 (Command: chaplains), providing that "A chaplain has rank without command." 10 U.S.C. § 643 (or current successor provision), recognizing the continuing professional qualifications required for military chaplains, including ecclesiastical qualifications.

III. Policy Implications

The 2026 uniform reform policy establishes a unique institutional treatment for one category of commissioned officer. The publicly stated rationale is accessibility. Secretary of Defense Hegseth has stated that removing visible commissioned grade permits chaplains to be seen "first and foremost" as chaplains rather than as officers, thereby making them more approachable to junior service members. Whether that objective is achieved is beyond the scope of this paper. The policy, however, raises two institutional questions.

First, the rationale raises a question of internal consistency. The policy removes commissioned grade from the operational uniform while retaining it on service and dress uniforms. If visible commissioned grade is itself understood to inhibit accessibility, the institutional basis for limiting the policy to one category of uniform is not apparent from the publicly available policy documents. The relationship between a service member and a chaplain does not change when the uniform changes. The chaplain remains the same commissioned officer, holding the same grade and exercising the same office under the same ecclesiastical endorsement. Only the visible expression of commissioned status changes.

Second, the rationale raises a question of institutional consistency. Military chaplains are not the only commissioned officers whose professional authority derives from qualifications external to the Armed Forces. Physicians derive professional authority from medical education, licensure, credentialing, and clinical privileges. Judge advocates derive professional authority from admission to the bar. Other special branch officers likewise depend upon professional qualifications acquired outside military service. In each case, the military commission incorporates an already-qualified professional into the Armed Forces; it does not create the profession. The distinguishing characteristic is therefore not professional specialization but religious office. The publicly available policy documents do not explain why that distinction alone warrants a different institutional treatment.

Historically, commissioned grade has remained visible for every other professionally credentialed commissioned officer. Professional identity and commissioned status have been treated as complementary rather than competing. Physicians remain visibly both physicians and officers. Judge advocates remain visibly both lawyers and officers. The military has not generally concluded that visible commissioned grade diminishes professional accessibility or professional trust.

The 2026 uniform reform policy adopts a different institutional approach for military chaplains. Public explanations of the policy characterize the chaplain's religious office as primary and commissioned status as secondary. Historically, however, the military

chaplain has not been understood as alternating between separate identities. The office exists because ecclesiastical endorsement and commissioned military service operate together. The commission does not confer religious authority, nor does ecclesiastical endorsement confer military office. Military chaplaincy depends upon both.

This distinction bears directly upon the historical pattern described in the preceding sections. Congress progressively incorporated military chaplains into the commissioned officer corps while preserving the distinctive functional role of the chaplain's office. The present policy preserves legal commissioned status while altering one of its principal visible institutional expressions. It thereby establishes a form of institutional differentiation not applied to other professionally credentialed commissioned specialties.

Military insignia constitute an institutional communication system through which status, responsibility, and authority are conveyed immediately and without explanation. Branch or specialty insignia identifies an officer's profession. Rank insignia identifies that officer's place within that profession. Together they communicate the officer's institutional position within the commissioned officer corps.

The enlisted personnel system illustrates this principle. Even the absence of insignia communicates a recognized status: recruit—newly entered into military service and still undergoing initial military formation. The commissioned officer corps has historically contained no comparable category. Removing visible commissioned grade from one category of commissioned officers therefore represents more than a change in appearance. It introduces a condition not historically characteristic of the ordinary officer personnel system.

The implementing guidance reflects the practical implications of that change. Rather than relying primarily upon visible insignia, the guidance increasingly relies upon organizational familiarity, prior knowledge, or verbal clarification to accomplish functions historically performed by the uniform. The policy transfers part of the responsibility for recognizing commissioned status from the uniform itself to the knowledge and judgment of individual members of the force. That change may present little difficulty within small organizations. It becomes more significant within large headquarters, joint commands, medical centers, training installations, and operational environments where professional interaction routinely occurs among individuals who have never previously met.

The institutional significance of the policy is heightened by its application to the operational uniform rather than to ceremonial dress. Military organizations have historically relied most heavily upon rapid visual recognition in precisely those environments characterized by uncertainty, stress, and time constraints. The policy introduces ambiguity

into the setting in which the military has traditionally placed the greatest emphasis upon immediate institutional clarity.

The policy therefore presents more than a question of uniform design. It establishes a distinctive institutional treatment for one category of commissioned officers and warrants careful consideration of how military chaplains are visibly incorporated within the commissioned officer corps established by Congress.

IV. Questions for Further Consideration

This paper has not attempted to determine whether the 2026 uniform reform policy is lawful or whether its stated objective of increasing accessibility will ultimately be achieved. It has examined a narrower question: whether the policy represents more than a modification of military uniforms. The preceding discussion concludes that the policy raises institutional questions extending beyond matters of dress and appearance.

Those questions include the following:

1. **Historical Consistency.** Does distinguishing military chaplains from every other commissioned officer in the visible expression of commissioned grade reflect the historical direction established by Congress through more than a century of progressively incorporating chaplains into the commissioned officer corps?
2. **Internal Consistency.** If visible commissioned grade is understood to inhibit accessibility, why does the 2026 uniform reform policy apply only to the operational uniform while retaining visible commissioned grade on service and dress uniforms?
3. **Institutional Consistency.** If accessibility justifies removing visible commissioned grade, why has that rationale been applied only to military chaplains and not to other professionally credentialed commissioned officers whose professional authority likewise derives from external education, licensure, certification, or endorsement?
4. **Institutional Communication.** What effect, if any, does removing the ordinary visible expression of commissioned grade have upon the military's longstanding system for communicating officer status, responsibility, and professional relationships throughout the force?

These questions arise from the publicly available policy documents and implementing guidance. The Department of Defense memorandum identified as Reference 1 may address some or all of these matters. Because that memorandum has not been publicly available despite repeated searches of publicly accessible Department of Defense resources, its legal, historical, and policy rationale cannot presently be evaluated. This

analysis is therefore necessarily limited to the policy as publicly explained and implemented.

The questions identified in this paper do not presume a particular policy outcome. They do suggest that the institutional implications of the 2026 uniform reform policy warrant careful examination by the Department of Defense, the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, ecclesiastical endorsing agencies, and Congress. Military chaplaincy exists at the intersection of congressional statute, military necessity, and ecclesiastical endorsement. Changes affecting its institutional character therefore merit careful examination before becoming an enduring feature of military practice. If Congress's settled understanding has long been that "there is no distinction between the status of a chaplain as an officer and the status of other officers of the Army," what institutional significance should be attached to a policy that creates a unique visible distinction applicable only to military chaplains?

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Author's Note

The Senate Armed Services Committee reported S. 4784, the proposed *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2027* (Calendar No. 436; Report No. 119-127), on June 15, 2026. Section 1093 of the reported bill would prohibit implementation of the Department of Defense chaplain uniform reform policy absent express authorization by Congress and would require chaplains to display visible officer rank insignia in accordance with the requirements applicable to commissioned officers generally.

This legislation did not come to the author's attention until after completion of this paper. Accordingly, it has not been incorporated into the analysis presented herein. The inclusion of this provision in the reported bill does, however, indicate that the institutional questions discussed in this paper are now receiving congressional attention. That development suggests similar consideration may also be appropriate within the Department of Defense, the military departments, the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, and the ecclesiastical endorsing community.

Author

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