

Perceptions Matter

Visibility, Trust, and the Meaning Carried in Plain Sight

*This essay is **Part 3 of a three-part series** prompted by recent Department of Defense policy reforms concerning chaplain uniforms and Religious Affiliation Codes. Each essay examines a different aspect of how those reforms shape institutional identity, function, and trust.*

Throughout my military career, in training courses and professional development sessions, one phrase surfaced again and again: *perception matters*.

It was not offered as public relations advice. It was a discipline—a kind of speed bump placed in front of action. Before doing anything, we were taught to pause and consider how it might be seen by someone who did not know the mission, the deliberations behind it, or the intended outcome.

The lesson was simple: what we *meant* was not the same as what others might see. And what they saw would shape trust.

I find myself returning to that lesson now—and wondering whether it is being applied.

That discipline mattered because the military operates in a space where trust is not optional. It must be earned, maintained, and—when necessary—repaired.

And trust is shaped, in no small part, by what people see. Uniforms, insignia, language, posture—these are not incidental. They are how the institution presents itself, both to those inside the formation and to those watching from the outside.

But institutions communicate in less visible ways as well. They define themselves through systems of classification, through the language they use to describe the people entrusted to their care, and through the distinctions they choose to preserve—or eliminate. Religious affiliation codes are one example. They are not merely administrative conveniences. They are part of the vocabulary by which the military understands the religious landscape of its own force.

Like rank insignia, those codes are signals. One makes an individual's place within the institution immediately recognizable. The other helps the institution recognize the character of the population it serves. Neither system is perfect. Both are attempts to make something important legible.

Which is why seemingly modest changes deserve careful attention. When distinctions become less visible—whether in what is worn or in how people are classified—the institution does not simply change how it communicates. It may also begin, gradually and unintentionally, to change how it understands itself.

Which is why even small changes can carry meaning beyond their immediate purpose.

Recent discussions and policy shifts involving military chaplains raise that question for me—not so much in what they intend, but in how they may be perceived by those who do not share the internal context in which they were made.

Take, for example, the question of visible insignia.

In the military, rank is not decoration. It is a language—one that communicates responsibility, authority, and integration into the structure of command. For chaplains, it has carried an additional weight: it signals that the chaplain is not an external advisor, but a commissioned officer, fully embedded within the life and risk of the force.

Adjustments to how that rank is displayed—or whether it is displayed at all—may be intended to clarify religious identity or reduce confusion. That may well be the case.

But perception does not wait for explanation.

To someone outside the system, the question may look different: is the chaplain first an officer, or first a representative of a particular religious identity?

That distinction matters—not only internally, but constitutionally.

The constitutional footing of the military chaplaincy has long rested on the recognition that the military imposes unique constraints on the free exercise of religion, and therefore must provide for it. That logic, affirmed in *Katcoff v. Marsh*, depends not simply on the presence of clergy, but on their *embeddedness* within the force.

Chaplains are not visitors. They are officers.

They share the conditions of service, the structure of accountability, and, when necessary, the risks borne by those they serve. That embedded presence is what distinguishes the chaplain from civilian clergy who may support a military community from the outside.

It is also what underwrites the constitutional argument for their existence.

Which raises a question—not of intent, but of perception.

If the visible and structural signals of that embeddedness begin to shift, even subtly, how might that be understood by those outside the system?

It is not difficult to imagine how such changes might be read in different ways.

Some might see a shift toward a more explicitly defined religious identity, raising questions about whether the chaplaincy is maintaining its role as a facilitator of free exercise for all, or moving toward representation of a particular tradition.

Others might wonder whether, if chaplains appear less integrated into the military structure, their role could be fulfilled—at least in some settings—by civilian clergy. That question is not new. It has surfaced before in legal and policy discussions, including in the background considerations surrounding *Katcoff v. Marsh*, particularly with respect to stateside installations.

Still others might look at the broader picture and ask whether changes in how chaplains are positioned—visibly and institutionally—could invite renewed constitutional scrutiny, not because the mission has changed, but because its *appearance* has.

None of these interpretations may reflect the intent behind any particular policy decision.

But intent does not control perception.

Recent implementation guidance provides an interesting example of this distinction. Although the official list of religious affiliation codes has been substantially reduced, service members may still request that a more specific religious preference appear on their identification tags. Individual religious identity, in other words, remains available as a matter of personal expression, even while the institution chooses to understand that same identity through broader administrative categories.

That difference is revealing. It suggests that the question is not whether individual religious identity continues to exist. It plainly does. The question is how precisely the institution chooses to recognize that identity within its own systems. The underlying reality remains unchanged. The institutional understanding of that reality becomes more generalized.

Seen alongside questions about the visibility of rank insignia, a common pattern begins to emerge. In one case, the officer's identity remains intact while becoming less immediately legible. In the other, the service member's religious identity remains intact while becoming less institutionally distinct. Each policy can be understood independently. Together, they raise a broader question about how the institution is defining itself and the people it serves.

History offers examples—very different in context, but instructive in structure—of what can happen when the lines between institutional role and ideological identity begin to blur. The political officer system in the former Soviet Union placed representatives of a governing ideology alongside military commanders, reshaping both authority and trust within the force.

In that system, it was not simply a matter of rank. The position itself carried a kind of influence that could, at times, overshadow traditional command relationships. Authority was understood not only through grade, but through the role one occupied.

That is not the system we have. Nor is it the system we are moving toward.

But perception does not require equivalence to draw comparison.

It is possible to imagine how some might look at emerging signals—especially those that appear to elevate religious identity more visibly than officer status—and begin to wonder whether a different kind of positional influence is taking shape. Not ideological in the political sense, but theological in character.

And here, the effect may not be what is intended.

Rather than increasing clarity, such a shift could complicate the chaplain's place within the command. If the chaplain is seen less as a fellow officer and more as a distinct or separate kind of representative, access to command may narrow, not expand. The very relationships that enable effective religious support—relationships built on shared status, trust, and integration—could become harder to sustain.

That perception, whether accurate or not, carries implications. It raises questions about whether chaplains are understood primarily as facilitators of free exercise across a plural force, or as representatives of a particular expression within it. And once that question is in play, trust—both inside the ranks and among the public—begins to take on a different character.

There is an additional layer to this question that deserves consideration.

Some reports suggest that any changes to the display of rank insignia may apply primarily to the combat or utility uniform—the uniform worn in the field, in operational settings, and under conditions where clarity matters most. Rank would remain visible on service and dress uniforms.

If that is the case, the question becomes more pointed.

Why would the clearest visual signal of authority and integration be reduced in the environment where it is most needed—and retained in those settings where its function is more ceremonial?

In the field, rank is not about formality. It is about immediate recognition. It tells others who is responsible, who is accountable, and how to engage within the structure of the unit. For chaplains, it has also served to signal that they stand within that structure—not outside of it.

To alter that signal in operational settings, while preserving it in formal ones, may create an unintended contrast: that the chaplain's officer identity is most visible when it is least required, and least visible when it is most consequential.

That, too, is a matter of perception.

There is a further implication worth considering.

Some have suggested that, if such policies are implemented, chaplains serving in institutional settings—such as the Office of the Chief of Chaplains within the Pentagon—may adjust accordingly. Where it has been common, particularly during periods of sustained operations, to wear the combat uniform for daily duties, there may be a return to service uniforms for routine office work, and to dress uniforms for senior-level engagements.

If so, that adjustment would be telling.

It would suggest that, in environments where interaction with senior leaders is constant, the visible display of rank is not optional. It is functional. It facilitates access, signals standing, and reinforces the chaplain's place within the structure of the institution.

In other words, where clarity is required, it will be restored.

Which raises a parallel question: if that clarity is preserved in institutional settings, why would it be diminished in operational ones?

The lesson we were taught still applies.

In a profession built on trust, perception is not a secondary concern. It is a form of accountability—one that exists wherever actions are taken in the name of the public.

What is seen shapes what is understood. What is understood shapes what is trusted. And in the military, where trust must extend across differences of belief, role, and responsibility, that trust depends on clarity: clarity of structure, clarity of identity, and clarity of purpose.

When those signals become unclear—even with good intent—the institution begins, almost imperceptibly, to understand itself differently. And when an institution's understanding of itself begins to shift, trust inevitably shifts with it.

That is not a matter of preference.

It is a matter of function.

Perception matters.

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