

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Freedom on Fire: Commanders and Chaplains of the American Revolution*

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<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.142811>

Military Chaplaincy Review

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2025

Military historians are the stewards of the sacred stories of the profession of arms. Chaplain (Colonel, Ret) John W. Brinsfield is exemplary. He served with distinction as the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps Historian from 2002-2011. He was a frequent author on the often-pivotal role of military chaplaincy during national crises. His dedication to his profession as both a historian and a chaplain is evident in his writings. He is careful and intentional about lifting the voices of military chaplains and letting those voices speak to posterity. He artfully curates the expertise of his craft as he carries the historical discourse forward into the present. These hallmarks are present in his latest book on chaplaincy during the American Revolution.

Freedom on Fire is stylistically an old-soul, like a general textbook on history from the 1980s emphasizing clear, straightforward accounts of people and events. Brinsfield writes these threaded historical vignettes with an emphasis on capturing important historical moments free of contemporary judgments on the past. This is not a revisionist history, which some might find confounding and others refreshing. There are no additional commentaries on slavery or Indigenous populations during the war. The book's focus is limited and specific to the presence of chaplains during this conflict. Additionally, this book is not a narrative history. He seems less concerned with focusing his historical search on a driving narrative. This may be difficult for modern readers of history. Fans of Erik Larson, Ron Chernow or Candice Millard will likely struggle initially with *Freedom on Fire's* approach to telling the story. At times, discerning the time and place within the overarching history of the revolution and its leaders was challenging. In that sense, it read more like David Eisenhower's 1986 work, *Eisenhower at War*, with its exhaustive notes and demanding timelines. Readers may find they need to keep additional research tools close by to connect the narrative between battles and important figures. For those that make the effort, it is rewarding and will give them an appreciation of the immense amount of research that went into the book.

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Brinsfield's *Freedom on Fire* focuses on the burgeoning story of military chaplaincy during the American Revolution. In this slim volume, he seeks to concisely set the voices and actions of military chaplains within the context of critical moments within the war. We get to peer into the writings of chaplains and commanders during famous battles like Bunker Hill and lesser-known military excursions like the Canadian Expedition. Brinsfield focuses on the interdependent relationship between military commanders and their chaplains. His goal is to show the vitality and necessity of this role to military leaders and the cause of freedom during moments when the outcome of the war was uncertain.

Freedom on Fire skillfully describes how the chaplain's role helped create bridges between the regional factions of the Continental Army. Brinsfield shows how the now celebrated unity between the States was not a shared assumption during the conflict. Clergymen who became military chaplains preached from Hebrew Bible texts about the war's moral necessity. These theological underpinnings of the war's narrative helped create common denominators between the colonies. This fostered a common experience striving against a common cause. This spirit of ecumenism was unique as if it arose to meet a historical need.

The book is filled with original research and illuminating anecdotes. Brinsfield's ambitious goal of capturing this command relationship is particularly relevant for currently serving military chaplains who prioritize the unique relationship of serving on the commander's personal staff. The challenge for *Freedom on Fire* is centered on the tension of defining a somewhat ambiguous concept, interdependence. Brinsfield seems to suggest that this relationship was self-evident, key to the command climate and decision-making process even as the relationship between chaplain and commander was not yet formally codified.

This exploration of the relationship between chaplain and commander is one of the few misses in this book. Brinsfield does not clearly define the interdependence he sought to explore. What does it mean for a superior and a subordinate to have an interdependent relationship? Modern regulations and doctrines define it now, but how was it understood then? Brinsfield appears to use 'interdependence' to describe a mutually beneficial relationship between these individuals. It intimates that the relationship itself was necessary to the success and well-being of each participant. One does not walk away with a clear sense of why Brinsfield stressed the use of this term to characterize this relationship between the chaplain and the commander.

The book shines in several noticeable ways. Brinsfield effectively captures the early evolutions of military chaplaincy. He articulates the move from volunteer militia chaplaincy to the role of commissioned officers within the Regular Continental Army. *Freedom on Fire* captures the moment where General George Washington, wanting to promote good order and discipline,

leans on chaplains to forge a moral environment within the ranks. Brinsfield shows how Washington thought that chaplains should instill a moral vision and code. Washington's moral vision harkens back to the prophets of Israel beseeching their warriors to not fall afoul of their covenants with God to ensure divine protection in their military pursuits. Brinsfield makes a strong case for how the presence and functions of chaplains were considered essential by Washington. Other commanders followed suit and relied on the presence and narrative of these religious leaders.

In this way, one may question whether Brinsfield unintentionally started a discussion with fascinating modern consequences on the sociopolitical role of chaplains during this time. For example, Brinsfield discussed the enormous role colonial ministers held as public theologians. It was genuinely one of the strongest pieces within the book. These ministers were the social influencers of their time, shaping local opinion with their sermons and newspaper editorials. They helped craft and deliver the justifying narrative for the war. Frequently, they were some of the most effective recruiters for the cause. The question that immediately came to mind was, "why?" Why did they do this? What did they gain from it? How did they justify this ideological position? Many of these ministers came from theological traditions that prioritized religious liberty and the separation of Church and State. Considering the American Revolution occurred on the heels of the First Great Awakening, one wonders what influence that event had in lighting a revolutionary fervor within the houses of worship.

Brinsfield's research is another shining quality. The source material he uses is clear and timely whether he is discussing figures like General Washington or prominent religious leaders. Frequently, he uses the voices of the chaplains to capture the essence of the moment through letters, sermons, and journal entries. His treatment of Chaplain Samuel Spring, Benedict Arnold's chaplain, was the best example of this. He carefully revealed how intrinsically integrated chaplains were in the very cause of the revolution. They were not disinterested professionals. They understood it was the lives of their families, their homes, and their livelihoods at risk as they confronted the British. Brinsfield showed how these chaplains used these existential threats to garner the support of the local community by fashioning a theological narrative from the pulpits of local congregations and the halls of academia.

In these discussions, Brinsfield leaves the readers wondering about the conclusions of these prominent chaplains. To point, there was no dialogue or writings from the chaplain's perspective after Arnold's betrayal of the Revolution. It is possible that original source material no longer exists. This might be the reason there was no discourse concerning chaplains and these other notable leaders. There were curious omissions of historical relevance. Fans of the musical *Hamilton* fans will be sorely disappointed. It was peculiar to read a history book predicated on exploring the relationships of important

military leaders within the American Revolution and not see any discourse on decisive individuals like Horatio Gates, Marquis De Lafayette, or even Alexander Hamilton. Brinsfield's discussion on General Benedict Arnold was fascinating, but it stopped short.

We are indebted to Brinsfield's stewardship of the profession. For years, he did his duty. He was faithful and intentional with preserving the voices and stories of the chaplains that served before us. *Freedom on Fire* is another testament to this pursuit. It is necessary to start a necessary conversation on the relationship between commanders and their chaplains in times of uncertain war. But to be clear, it is only a start—not the end—of a conversation. As contemporary chaplains continue to discern this relationship by mining this past, books like this one matter. Brinsfield's insights and questions are important for this. Ultimately, however, the challenge of carrying this conversation forward, delving deeper into the source materials, fully defining and answering the questions of this interdependent relationship falls on the next generation of military historians. They will need to take the shining moments and keen observations of this concise text and peer into the gaps and emerging questions that the book left unanalyzed and unanswered. It is our duty, our turn, to steward these sacred stories.

Published: September 08, 2025 EDT.



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