

# The Washington Post

C4 SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 1993

THE WASHINGTON POST

## From 'Poof' to 'Predator'

### *The Military Gay Ban Debate Cuts to the Heart of Our Fear of Homo-Sex*

By Frank Browning

SOME YEARS ago one of my colleagues at National Public Radio was thumbing through a magazine that had a short piece on homosexuality and homosexual desire during World War II. "Oh, this is disgusting!" she said to a colleague, who took the magazine, looked at it and agreed, adding, "I really don't care what they do, but why do they have to talk about it?"

Neither of these journalists, both prominent, liberal-minded Washington figures, would fit the standard profile of the hateful homophobe. Nor do they think of themselves as homophobes—any more than Gen. Colin Powell does. Nonetheless, the journalists and the generals are wrestling with the same problem: how to come to terms with a desire that millennia of Judeo-Christian teaching has condemned.

As an American citizen with profound commitment to Jeffersonian democratic ideals, I see no place for discrimination against any class of citizens when it comes to participating in the institutions of national service and governance, including the military. Yet as a man whose primary sexual desire is for other men, I am equally certain that our open presence in the ranks will be profoundly disturbing to "military culture" and to the nation at large. Most people hate to think about homo-sex.

Ten years ago, when AIDS became front-

*Frank Browning reports regularly for National Public Radio and is author of "The Culture of Desire: Paradox and Perversity in Gay Lives Today" (Crown).*

page news, readers, writers and editors wrestled with the same aversion. While doctors and public health officers were warning gay men against—take a deep breath—"anal intercourse" without condoms, information crucial to fighting the epidemic, years passed before editors let that phrase into their papers.

You might have thought that the nation had since moved beyond such titillation. But tomorrow, when the Senate begins the first hearings in American history on the intricacies of male lust, the specter of homo-sex will no doubt return. The ministers and the Marines are already out in force, declaiming anxiously about shower stalls and straight men's fear of picking up the soap.

This time, however, there is a major difference. A decade ago, when AIDS forced discussion of how homosexual men could have safe sex among themselves, the imagery of male intercourse was too hot for the media to handle. Now the guardians of tradition are rushing forth to warn the nation, elliptically, of everything those predatory perverts will do once they get their hands on a crop of All-American boys. The straight Marine, once considered a lean, mean fighting machine, is suddenly seen as curiously vulnerable. And the homosexual is no longer the pitiful victim but a wondrous stud capable of ravaging a squadron with a single thrust. From poof to predator in 10 short years.

What do straight men want? I wonder à la Freud.

"You're straight, John," I said over dinner to a friend. "You were in the Air Force. What are these straight guys so worried about?"

"Let me tell you, bub," he answered, "it's not just those guys. I'd be uncomfortable too."

"About what?" I asked. "That some anxious kid from Fayetteville, barely out of adolescence, is going to jump you in the barracks?"

"No. That probably wouldn't happen. But that they'd be hitting on me."

"You mean," I said, "that they'd look at you and talk about you the way you all come on to the blonde teller at First American?"

"All right, yeah. Nobody wants to be hit on."

Well, yes and no. Women don't like to be made miserable walking down M Street by men who pinch and whistle. But women do like to be admired, and so do men. Most straight men I know love to fluff up their feathers when a woman they've decided is the right woman gives them the hungry eye. The question is who has control of the hungry eye.

What my friend John was acknowledging is that he—like Colin Powell—would be made uncomfortable by being the object of desire, even silent desire, unless he had already granted that person the right of desire. Bluntly: The right of desire is all about power. As women have been saying for years, a man who visually undresses a woman is in some real way asserting his power over her.

And so it is with men as well. If in the shower or on maneuvers or across the bunks, I let my eye rest a moment too long on the tuft of hair above the sergeant's collar or on the squareness of his pecs, I am seizing the image of his body. I am making him my mental pin-up boy. And pin-up boys, like pin-up girls, have lost authority over that most primal of drives.

The threat is not about gay folk entering the barracks. We homosexual people have been in the bunks and showers at least since Alexander took the night guards into his tent. The problem for straight men in positions of power is acknowledgement. So long as there is no

acknowledgement of homosexual desire, so long as my glance upon the sergeant's body was officially invisible, he could deny within himself—and to others who noticed—that it had ever taken place.

What happens, however, when homosexual desire—not action, but desire—is acknowledged? What happens if all those around us know my taste, and I blush in momentary embarrassment at having been caught enjoying the beauty of the sergeant's flesh? Might he smile, as gay men do, flattered at the grace they find in one another's moves, and thereby let his buddies know that all beauty is honored by generous appreciation? Or will he snarl, offended at the assault on his status? In this thoroughly ordinary and highly theatrical moment, what role will he take?

In the business of war, even in the business of training for war, roles are critical and the hierarchy of command is everything. It is surely no accident that in the great global wars of this century, our leaders referred to the "theaters of war," for surely war is one of the greatest of human theaters. To be a part of the fighting machine and slay other men with whom we would normally prefer having a beer, we must subordinate our private identities to the will of the command. We must wear—and see—special masks that acknowledge only special elements of our human nature. More than any other American institution, more than the board rooms or the councils of government, the armed forces are the last bastion of straight male authority exercised from the top down.

What happens, however, when the highly decorated battalion commander openly acknowledges to his subordinates his desire to lie with another man—to be possessed by another penetrating male ego like his own? Can we suppose that the young men who have consciously chosen the conservative, traditional, mostly male world of the military will merely smile in appreciation of multi-gender diversity? Or does that acknowledgement threaten the

whole arrangement of masks by which the master-subordinate command structure works?

After all, the commander who comes out of the closet will challenge the society's most primal understanding of what it means to be an "authentic" male. If a real authentic hero is revealed not to be conventionally authentic, i.e., straight, what becomes of the hero's subordinates? Won't the young privates, sergeants and ensigns who serve under him question their own authenticity, their own ideas of what it means to be male? Such questions are a test of our most conventional notions of how men wield power in daily life, what stations they hold, what prerogatives they exercise. Indeed, a great many gay men hold the same values and privileges. But it is not their values and attitude that are most threatened by the proposed repeal of the gay ban. What is threatened is the integrity of the heterosexual male's comprehension of himself. What is being revealed is how frail that self-comprehension really is.

These are not "matters of conduct" covered in the Uniform Code of Military Justice. They are not about some phantasmagorical homosexuals ravaging their straight mates. They are the quotidian details of how we as men live our lives. Ending the gay ban will change men's lives in America—change our lives with each other and with women.

As we enter this most hierarchically ordered institution of American life, where the sublimation of desire is critical to the authority of command, we will most certainly disorder and reorder what the generals revere as "military culture." Along the way the military as an institution will have to revise how it treats the multiple faces of human identity. The American military—home to "a few good men," the "stout-hearted men," those semper fi's who protect our hearth and home—is our official guarantor of tradition. No wonder the nation shudders at the prospect of such change. It shudders at the empowerment of women for the same reason.