

The New Armed Forces

GAYS AND MILITARY CULTURE

To listen to the top brass, you might think the American military culture had not changed since the days of General Grant. Think again—and not just about gays in the mess hall.

A. J. BACEVICH

IN THE HEATED debate over whether or not to permit gays to serve openly in the American military, both sides have been guilty of considerable disingenuousness. Those who insist that a change in the current policy is somehow essential to national security—the “we can’t afford to waste the least bit of talent” school—are certainly engaged in some collective leg-pulling. Ignoring for the moment the droves of capable soldiers, sailors, and airmen receiving pink slips as part of the ongoing drawdown of American forces, existing rules appear to have done little to deter gays from joining the military. Judging from a flurry of media reports—is there a gay bar within a hundred miles of a major military installation that has not hosted at least one enterprising reporter?—gays are everywhere, serving their country with distinction in every branch of service, in every specialty, at every level of responsibility.

The truth is that without making a big deal about it most commanders tolerate homosexuals in the ranks. (To be sure, military gays and lesbians purchase this tolerance at a price, being obliged to remain utterly discreet about their sexual orientation.) This live-and-let-live tolerance—to which egregious exceptions can certainly be found—stems not from enlightened thinking on the part of military officers, the majority of whom *if asked* can be counted on to express views now commonly referred to as “homophobic.” Rather it reflects the realities of workaday life, not all that much different in the military from outside it. Organizational energies are finite and there is other, more important work

to be done—missions to accomplish, training to be conducted, events to prepare for—work substantially more germane to the well-being of the unit and, for that matter, to the boss’s prospects for advancement than mounting witchhunts to ferret out homosexuals.

The Terms of Battle

ALAS, the progressive transformation of American culture has made it all but impossible to sustain the existing bargain. In the face of intolerance, there can be no accommodation: so say the celebrants of diversity and the imperial self. Students of military history know that the supreme advantage of owning the initiative is the ability to dictate the terms of battle: those who have seized the initiative in the ongoing culture war have singled out the prohibition on gays in the military as an outpost of benighted traditionalism especially ripe for attack. Although within the ranks of Queer Nation and ACT-UP, fervor for marching down to the nearest Army recruiter would seem to be muted at best, those who insist that this is the right thing to do *now* have imparted to their cause a well-nigh unstoppable momentum. Most significantly, President Clinton says that he agrees.

So that which hitherto had not been a big deal has very much become one. There has been no small amount of talk—blunt to the point of being extortionate—of service chiefs quitting rather than caving in to a policy seen to be so alien to traditional military values and so likely to damage morale and *esprit de corps*. Remembering that no senior military officer in recent memory has resigned over a matter of principle, the extent of the rumored unhappiness is extraordinary. The top brass claim to take no position on the question of

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homosexuality per se. Instead, they base their argument on the premise that military life differs fundamentally from life on the "outside."

This notion of a unique military culture received its classic formulation in Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, published in 1957, but still the best description of how military officers like to see themselves. There is indeed a military mind, says Huntington, one that he characterizes as committed to "the supremacy of society over the individual," believing in "the continuity and value of history," and devoted to civilian control as "essential to military professionalism." The military mind, according to Huntington, is "realistic and conservative." Contrasting that conservative ethic with the liberal orthodoxy predominant in American society, Huntington found much to admire: he ascribed to military life an "ordered serenity," its "rhythm and harmony" deriving from the willing subordination of "individual whim" to the common good. A "sense of organic unity and consciousness" binds soldiers to one another as members of a "community of structured purpose." Huntington makes no bones about it: American military professionals—to the extent that they are truly professional—are un-American in outlook.

From the moment that *The Soldier and the State* appeared in print, it captivated the profession that it exalted. Intended as a sophisticated contribution to social science, Huntington's book became something more akin to an inspirational tract, a wellspring of collective identity and self-esteem. In the intervening years, it has lost little of its ability to beguile—so little that those inside the military seldom ask whether Huntington's model still fits. In fact, it doesn't. If the "garish individualism" that Huntington ascribed to mid-1950s America seemed somewhat at odds with military culture, then surely the social upheaval of the past three decades has been altogether antagonistic. One might have expected, then, that the military would have isolated itself from such trends. Such has not been the case. As anyone familiar with the modern "all-volunteer" force can attest, the methods, the mores, even the fads prevalent in today's military mirror those of the society from which the services fill their ranks.

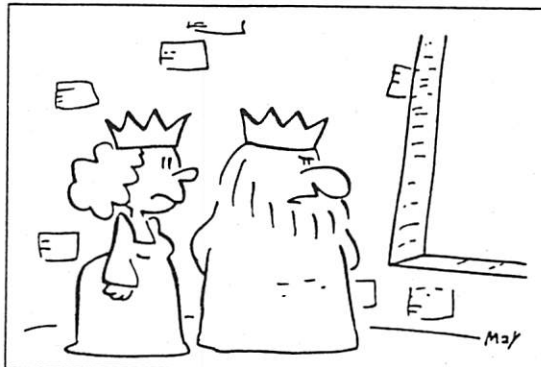
Sentimentalists will deny that much has changed, insisting that devotion to old-line values such as Duty, Honor, Country remains as genuine as ever. Although this may be true, it is largely irrelevant. Grand ideals do little to explain behavior, whether individual or collective. If asked, most journalists would no doubt profess their devotion to the principle of free speech; but it seems unlikely that concern for the First Amendment is what gets the average American reporter out of bed in the morning. At some level, police officers no doubt believe that respect for the law is essential for the functioning of a free society. Whether or not the typical cop has that in mind as he cruises the mean streets of the modern American city is another matter.

Slogans may indeed have remained intact. Likewise, quaint rituals that give soldiering a patina of being "different" survive—ribbons and badges, uniforms and

ceremonies. Yet the persistence of such martial tokens serves only to conceal the extent to which the real fabric of American military life has changed. The transformation of American military life since the 1960s—particularly since the Vietnam War—has undermined precisely those qualities that the acolytes of *The Soldier and the State* would cite as distinguishing the military professional from his civilian counterpart.

Blending In

THE ARGUMENT in favor of a distinct military culture begins with the insistence that the military man (or woman) is more than a mere technician. Whatever gratification soldiers, sailors, and airmen derive from exercising their craft—piloting a jet aircraft, standing watch on the bridge of a fighting ship, or leading an armored column—the case for military distinctiveness is not to be found in any of those things. The "rhythm and harmony" to which Hunting-



"Two weeks without an assassination attempt—
I wonder what they're up to."

ton admiringly refers are to be traced to less bellicose surroundings—to the barracks, the orderly room, the mess hall. If indeed the military can lay claim to some sense of "organic unity," it will be found in the intimacy of platoon and company life.

That intimacy derived from two factors. First, as members of a unit, soldiers lived, worked, ate, slept, and played together; second, subordinated to a common leadership—classically, the company commander and first sergeant—those same soldiers were subject to authority that made itself felt in ways that were direct, immediate, and personal. The changes experienced by the military in recent years have whittled away at both.

Start with the barracks itself, the premier symbol of the military vocation as something apart—an austere, incontestably male, almost monastic domain. Needless to say, it is no longer male, co-ed being the order of the day. More to the point, an increased propensity of very junior soldiers to marry and a pay-scale that gives even single soldiers options for other living arrangements have progressively reduced the proportion of serving men and women who call the barracks home. For those who remain, the trend is toward barracks configured

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like apartments, with separate rooms, private lavatories, and provisions for cooking. Space is managed not with an eye toward unit identity (one building to Company A, another to Company B) but on the basis of efficiency (keeping overall occupancy above some prescribed level). The intermixing of the soldiers of Company A with those of Company B—once condemned as “violating unit integrity”—is no longer a concern. Accompanying this indifference to unit identity comes the dilution of responsibility for what happens inside barracks. Restrictions on decor, on the use of alcohol (never very effectively enforced), on the age and gender of visitors—even overnight visitors—have fallen by the wayside. Barracks residents—and not the chain of command—determine the tenor of barracks life.

This shift from barracks to “dorm” (increasingly the

preferred term) undermines the separateness that was once emblematic of military life—the sense of being apart (from civilian life) and yet together (with your own kind). As soldiers have become less likely to bunk with their squad mates, so also are they less inclined to socialize with them. In choosing buddies to hang around with, Smith looks first not to his unit but to the racial or ethnic group with which he identifies. Jones, living off-post, has a wife who probably has her own full-time job and may, in fact, be a soldier herself. She has no time and little inclination to participate in traditional “distaff” activities—the coffee groups and volunteer work—that once served as essential adjuncts to unit solidarity. The concept of “service wife” as a viable career verges on extinction. After work, both Smith and Jones shed their uniforms, don the latest in fashion and footwear—along with perhaps an earring or two—and

How Many Gays?

NEWSEEEK recently reported that, “like the population at large, the armed forces are 10 per cent gay.” The magazine never revealed the source of its information about the make-up of the armed forces. Considering that the armed forces are openly hostile to homosexuals and that military applicants are screened for the AIDS virus, as are active-duty soldiers, such a presumption is probably not warranted. But as to the population at large—well, we all know that’s true, don’t we?

Certainly we are constantly reminded of the assertion. For example, a homosexual group in Madison, Wisconsin, calls itself the Ten Per Cent Society. The 10 per cent figure is also regularly employed by such groups as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which claims to represent “23 million gay and lesbian persons.”

Indeed, the 10 per cent figure often seems to be used as a minimum. Outgoing New York schools chancellor Joseph Fernandez, in justifying his Rainbow Curriculum, says: “It’s not about sex, but it’s about the fact that there’s at least 10 per cent of the population that’s gay or lesbian” (emphasis added). The *Boston Globe* recently stated, “According to the classic Kinsey study, 10 per cent of the general population is estimated to be

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gay—a conservative estimate by all accounts.”

Putting “all accounts” aside for now, the main problem with the 10 per cent figure is that Kinsey never said it. At least, not in the way that is suggested.

Professor Alfred Kinsey, in his landmark *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), did not simply count “homosexuals” and “heterosexuals.” Rather, he rated his subjects on a scale of 1 to 6, least homosexual to most homosexual. He then came up with figures for three levels of homosexual behavior. He figured at 37 per cent the proportion of the male population that had “had some homosexual experience” to the point of orgasm. The 10 per cent figure that Kinsey did use was that 10 per cent of males are “more or less exclusively homosexual for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55.” The figure for men who are exclusively homosexual throughout their lives drops to 4 per cent.

This, mind you, applied exclusively to men. While Kinsey used no such classification system for women, he did say in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* that the incidence of lesbianism was about half that of male homosexuality.

In addition to misrepresentations of Kinsey’s own words, one problem with the original data is that half the men studied were literally a captive group: they were prisoners. Properly weighting one’s data could reduce

this apparent problem; this is what Kinsey defenders have argued. Yet some of his own researchers at the Kinsey Institute thought that the large prisoner sample skewed his data in favor of homosexuality. When two of these researchers retabulated the original data to exclude persons “convicted of any offense other than traffic violations and who did not come from any source which we knew to be biased in terms of sexual behavior,” they found that the broadest category of homosexuality was still close to Alfred Kinsey’s 37 per cent figure, but that Kinsey’s 10 per cent figure was really about 4 per cent.

Usually the 10 per cent figure is given in a context implying that no other studies of male homosexuality have been done. Indeed, some writers say as much, lamenting that in the age of AIDS, there are no more current data. In the August 1992 *American Demographics*, Diane Crispell wrote, “In 1948, the Kinsey report estimated that 10 per cent of men and 2 to 3 per cent of women were exclusively gay or lesbian. No subsequent research has improved on that estimate.” In fact, there have been a number of studies and they all point in the same direction.

For example, a telephone survey reported in the January 1990 *Journal of Homosexuality*, by DeKalb University sociologist Joseph Harry, asked 663 men: “Would you say that you are sexually attracted to mem-

Colonel I have found other very good articles opposing Kinsey.

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head to the movies, a local night-spot, or the mall. They slip comfortably into the mainstream of American pop consumerism—and are lost from sight.

Yet they are by no means a frivolous group. On the contrary, knowing that the modern military works on the principle of “up or out,” service men and women are acutely sensitive to institutional cues about what it takes to survive. Is completion of a service school a prerequisite for re-enlistment? Soldiers will know precisely the requirements for eligibility. Have the services ordained civilian education to be an important predictor of individual “potential”? The ranks of those signed up for night school multiply. With these changes has come the tendency to define ambition in terms of pay grade instead of rank. Rather than aspiring for promotion to sergeant, young soldiers talk of “getting my E5.” Officers speculate endlessly about the O3 list, the O4 list,

and so on—the failure to make any such cut spelling their demise.

Linked to these changes has been a radical recasting of the role of leadership. Like the rest of corporate America, the military has embraced the goals of rationalization and efficiency, manifested in ever-increasing emphasis on centralized management, automation, and deference to specialists. At the level of the company orderly room, the impact has been to diminish the leader's authority and to erode the link between leader and led. The soldier who once instinctively looked to his sergeant and his captain for sustenance, shelter, pay, promotions, and discipline now finds that their ability to affect his life is dwindling. Problems that were once solved with dispatch within the confines of the company are now “referred” elsewhere—to a counselor or “care-giver,” most likely a stranger, or to a clerk with access

bers of the opposite sex or members of your own sex?” Only 3.7 per cent said they were attracted to their own. Underreporting is always going to be a problem in such surveys, because of social opprobrium against homosexuality. But even if everyone who didn't answer the question was classified as homosexual, this would add up to only 5.7 per cent. Professor Harry concluded: “The present data provide no support for Kinsey's 10 per cent estimate of homosexuality in adult men,” but rather “are considerably closer to Gebhard's [one of the aforementioned Kinsey researchers] 4 per cent.”

Another telephone survey, conducted in 1986 of San Francisco males, found that 56,000 claimed to be either homosexual or bisexual. This accounts for 15 per cent of the total male population of the city, or about 18 per cent of those over the age of 13. Considering that San Francisco probably has one of the highest concentrations of male homosexuals in the country, this would tend to indicate that 10 per cent as a nationwide figure would be quite high.

The largest single analysis of surveys pertaining to homosexual prevalence appeared in the November 1991 *Journal of Sex Research*. It looked at five surveys conducted between 1970 and 1990, three of which asked questions concerning sexual preference. One of these was actually conducted by the Kinsey Institute

and received a fair amount of media attention when it appeared in a 1989 issue of *Science*. The authors reported: “It is estimated that 1.4 per cent of men had adult homosexual contacts (for example, at age 20 years and older) whose frequency was characterized as being ‘fairly often’ (at some point in time). An additional 1.9 per cent of men had adult experiences whose frequency was characterized as ‘occasionally.’ Taken together, these two groups made up 3.3 per cent of the adult male population.”

The *Science* article went on to say that while “these numbers appear similar to the 1948 Kinsey estimate” that “4 per cent of U.S. men are ‘exclusively homosexual’ throughout their lives . . . the interpretation of our estimates is different. Most of the men included in our 3.3 per cent estimate could not be classified as ‘exclusively homosexual’ throughout their lives.”

The report was even more direct in challenging Alfred Kinsey's 37 per cent figure for any kind of homosexual activity, instead concluding that a more accurate number was about 20 per cent.

When the new Kinsey Institute study was combined with the other four studies, the *Journal of Sex Research* reported, “an unexpectedly consistent view” emerged. “Roughly 5 to 7 per cent of American men,” it said, “report some same-gender sexual contact in adulthood” (emphasis

in original). Further, it said, “the evidence, although sketchy, suggests that same-gender sexual contact may be a sporadic occurrence for many of the men who report such contacts during adulthood.” In the category of men who had had sexual contact with other men in the past year it found only “roughly 2 per cent.” Looking at the other side of the coin, the analysis said: “96 per cent of adult American males report some heterosexual contact since age 18,” and 87 per cent had had such contact within the last 12 months. Incidentally, the survey analysis found that only 0.3 per cent of the respondents had had sexual contacts with both men and women in the previous 12 months, helping to explain why doomsayers who predicted (and even announced the arrival of) an explosion of AIDS cases among female heterosexuals were wrong.

None of this intrinsically says anything about the morality of homosexuality or homosexual practices. By definition, geniuses account for a tiny portion of the population, yet nobody calls them deviant or demands that they be denied rights. But to the extent that homosexual activists believe it is very important for the world to know that they constitute 10 per cent of the population—and therefore, by inference, 10 per cent of the electorate or of the military—it seems that it ought to be very important to know if they do not.

—MICHAEL FUMENTO

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to the right data base. Faceless boards in distant cities decide whom to send to school, whom to promote, whom to terminate, basing their judgments not on first-hand knowledge or personal contact but on a hastily read microfiche—with due consideration, of course, for the dictates of affirmative action.

In the context of the modern American workplace, the changes in the military are unremarkable. In the eyes of most observers, moreover, the impact of these changes has been positive. Certainly, today's military men and women enjoy a better quality of life and a broader range of opportunities than their predecessors in the era celebrated by Huntington, are treated with greater dignity, and are less likely to be victimized by either favoritism or old-fashioned abuses of power. Young people of talent see this and join up ("Be all that you can be"), providing a steady stream of smart, competent, and reliable recruits. That so many of them subsequently seek to make a career of it is powerful testimony to the military's success in satisfying their expectations.

Even so, within the military itself, some have watched with uneasiness the intrusion of civilian norms and values. As a result, the extent to which the new methods have taken root is uneven. If the Air Force, as the most technical and least traditional of the services, has embraced the process with something like exuberance, the Marines have done so with notable reluctance. Within a single service, there exist pockets of resistance. Yet the piecemeal nature of the process has inhibited efforts to fathom its broader implications. Furthermore, the applause generated by victories in the Gulf and elsewhere has drowned out many such misgivings. Having suffered through the humiliation of Vietnam, military leaders can hardly be blamed for savoring their recent success. That the price of that success may have included dismantling much of what had made their profession a distinctive calling—and that this tendency may yet have adverse consequences—is a notion that they have little inclination to contemplate.

Which brings us back to gays. For years after Vietnam, the services labored assiduously to regain the support of the American people by shedding the image of being "alien" or "different," by becoming more genuinely American. They succeeded. Yet having conformed to virtually every expression of cultural orthodoxy, the admirals and generals now argue that the military must preserve itself from contamination by "unmilitary" influences at large in American life and that this *particular* influence will have uniquely adverse effects. The argument will not wash. Having embraced the American experiment, the military cannot now on the specific issue of gays opt out of what that experiment has come to signify—with regard to individuals, unfettered equality of opportunity; and with regard to sex, a permissiveness that approaches the absolute. Like it or not, an *American* military cannot arbitrarily exempt itself from either the first or the second.

So the generals and the admirals will lose on the issue of gays. Although some will find the adjustment

painful, those in the ranks will quickly adapt themselves to the new order of things—which will prove soon enough to be all but indistinguishable from the previous order. The controversy will fade. The deracination of American military culture will continue unchecked—and there lies the pity of it all.

The New/Old Face of War

TODAY, in particular, the relationship between military effectiveness and traditional notions of military professionalism positively cries out for *systematic* reassessment—not as a device for bashing some cultural proclivity, but as a starting point for the much-discussed restructuring of American forces. Such a reassessment should begin with this question: What will be the character of war in the new era? To many, the answer is self-evident. Future conflicts will resemble Desert Storm: brief, decisive, almost bloodless (for the victor), enthusiastically supported at home, decided by the skillful employment of high-tech weapons, which is America's strong suit. To those who see war's future in such terms, the Gulf suggests that combat will henceforth become impersonal and remote, its essence reduced to the efficient manipulation of advanced sensors to locate targets that are "handed off" and then "serviced"—a war of cathode-ray tubes, stealth platforms, computers, lasers, and long-range missiles.

If this is so, then the demise of military culture since Vietnam would seem to be of little consequence. Military professionalism might be redefined altogether, with surviving manifestations of traditional pomp and ceremony discarded as so much expensive nostalgia. The same for the expensive academies that provide preferred access to the officer class, for the officer/enlisted class structure, and for heavily subsidized "on-post" services (housing, supermarkets, recreation facilities) that duplicate those available downtown. What do these relics of privilege contribute to our ability to wage push-button wars? A leavening of gays—or of women, for that matter—in the cockpits of jet fighters or in rifle squads (to the extent that any are required) is unlikely to alter the effectiveness of such a force one way or the other.

Yet just perhaps the Gulf War is not the first war of the new era, but the final one of an era now past—an era in which Great Powers clashed with one another to dominate continents or to advance universalistic ideologies. Liberating Kuwait provided a festive dénouement to nearly a century of gore, the century of "world" wars. Although their long-intended opponent had opted out of the script, the hosts raised for World War III finally had their day. Yet to postulate that the era of modern military crusades may now be closed is not to suggest that peace is at hand. War will continue but in an altogether different shape—conflicts short on villains and high on moral ambiguity, for which technology provides no silver bullet, in which the fighting is prolonged and indecisive, casualties are substantial, public support is ephemeral, and the media are testy about progress that

is too slow, collateral damage too widespread, or non-combatant suffering too severe. It is not difficult to envision the origins of such conflicts—a Somalia turned sour, a Bosnia that won't go away, a disintegrating Russia unable to secure its nuclear arsenal, any of a dozen or more scenarios. The Pentagon will be uncomfortable with such wars, but they will land in America's lap just the same, boosted by the rising belief in the invincibility of the world's only superpower. As the conventional wisdom would have it, "the troops" can do anything.

Rather than being sanitized by a "military-technical revolution," the personal experience of war in this new era may don once again the face that it has worn through most of history. Moments of glory may be few in comparison to the demoralizing loneliness and boredom borne of protracted campaigns, terror deriving from combat at close quarters, anguish that comes from seeing friends mutilated and killed, the inevitable suspicion among those carrying the short swords that the cause trumpeted from on high fails to justify the sacrifices exacted of them. Adversity may well require a military establishment that in character resembles less the victorious forces of the Cold War than the forces that in former days disposed of the thankless task of maintaining order in distant lands—the Thin Red Line that policed the British Empire, the Foreign Legion that garrisoned the colonies of France, the American constabulary that eliminated the Indian as an obstacle to territorial expansion and then "pacified" the subject lands acquired in 1898. Although we may dismiss as politically incorrect the causes in which these soldiers fought, their willingness to suffer and die for their queen, for their civilization, or for their regiment cannot help impressing us. To be sure, technology and individual competence played an important role in whatever success they achieved. Yet such qualities would have availed little absent a bedrock of discipline and cohesion that bonded soldiers to one another and to their leaders—and that derived in no small measure from a clear understanding manifested in the fabric of his day-to-day existence that a soldier's life was indeed fundamentally different from life on the "outside."

Future wars may summon American soldiers once again to demonstrate great reserves of the very intangibles that the services in recent years have found it expedient to neglect. Yet to argue that such intangibles were once byproducts of traditional military culture is not to say that the solution lies in flicking some switch to restore that culture.

America's headlong rush toward its strange New Jerusalem has gone too far for that, making the rekindling of a distinct military ethos in any form into a daunting proposition—one that goes far beyond the question of gays to touch on basic issues of what makes some men warriors.

Revolving around familiar questions like roles and missions, force structure, systems acquisition, budget share, and, yes, gays, the debate now being joined over America's post-Cold War military policy seems destined to consume itself with matters of secondary importance. The character of American military culture, how that character has been changing, its relevance to the challenges that lie ahead—such matters are unlikely to receive serious attention. Inattention to these issues outside of the military may be excusable. The inattention of the military itself—the continuing pretense that the distinct "rhythm and harmony," the sense of "organic unity" of their profession remain intact—is not. Would that the military's reverence for Huntington would lead soldiers to contemplate his warning of the consequences of failing to nurture and sustain their culture. Should soldiers ever "abjure the military spirit" that makes them special and makes them different, he wrote in his peroration, they would "destroy themselves first and their nation ultimately." That the essence of such a "military spirit" may well have vanished just when the nation needs it most may someday overshadow the posturing by both sides in the controversy over gays. □

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