

# The Key Issue Is Trust

## Clinton should review the gay question

BY DAVID H. HACKWORTH

**B**ill Clinton hasn't even had time to try on his commander in chief's helmet, but he's already trapped himself in one hell of a cross-fire. Gays and liberals expect him to keep his campaign promise to lift the ban that prevents gays from serving openly in the military. Pentagon brass and conservatives are going to hold him to his Veterans Day promise to keep the defense of "this country the strongest in the world." Separately, the two principles are unassailable. But when you get them tangled up the way the president-elect has done, you wind up in a fire fight where everyone is bleeding.

The proponents for lifting the ban argue that it discriminates against a large number of Americans, denying them equal opportunity to serve their country. Military chiefs like Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Gen. Colin Powell say lifting the ban will gut the cohesion of combat units. Who's right? What is the true nature of the fighting man? And is an executive order the smartest way to settle things when the executive, as a matter of conscience, stayed out of our last bloody war—and doesn't have a clue about what goes on in a foxhole because he's never been in one?

There seems to be no reason why a gay soldier shouldn't serve in the 99th Maintenance Squadron or the equivalent. Where the question becomes heated is within ground combat units like the infantry, artillery and tanks. There, the issue is trust, not orientation. In a fire fight, if I say to the guy next to me, "Cover me," while I crawl over to lob a grenade at someone who is trying to kill us both, I have to believe that my partner is going to cover me or die. There is no reason why a gay soldier can't do that. But most straight warriors just don't believe it. "Whatever the army makes right on gays, it won't be right for the grunt," says a squad leader from the 82nd Airborne. "If a dude has a flaw, he'll fold."

The mind-set may be illogical or wrong-headed, but it takes on its own reality: no neat little lectures on decency or civil liberties are going to make it disappear. In a combat unit, every individual has to click together, and what makes them click is trust. To survive in a killing field, a warrior has to believe he's invincible, that he's wearing golden armor, that he can buck 1,000-to-1 odds and live. To think that way, he has to be macho. Fairly or unfairly, gays threaten that macho. When it goes, the warrior starts thinking. "Maybe I won't make it." And, from that moment, the unit goes to hell. I admit this is not a politically correct argument. But how many people, gay and straight, can you afford to get killed, how many engagements can you

lose, to settle who is right?

Up to now, gay activists have made their case more effectively than the Pentagon brass, careerists who zig and zag and do the Pentagon Shuffle around the "E Ring." Farther down the line, I've never seen feelings run hotter. Shortly before the election I was on a base down South talking to a group of combat officers when the gay issue suddenly flared up. One of the officers muttered, "If Clinton is president and he walks on this base, he's dead." No good soldier is going to frag the commander in chief, of course, but Clinton needs to approach this problem with greater care.

In the ranks, young men from working class and "moral majority" families will tell you that U.S. Army or Marine Corps combat units don't operate like 8-to-5 in-

stitutions such as the Chevrolet dealer, the Post Office or most of the United States Air Force. Many who fought in Desert Storm now say men and women were having sex behind every sand dune, harming morale and creating tensions that ripped units apart. All believed the problem would be far worse with gays. Hundreds of marine and army grunts and leaders have told me that if the ban is lifted, they're walking.

Wouldn't it make sense to defuse this anger and fear with the same sort of presidential commission that examined the equally explosive issue of women in combat? Can gays and straights train and fight together without a drop in combat effectiveness? Instead of assuming that they can or can't, why not ask open-minded generals and sergeants, civilian psychiatrists and sociologists and gay leaders to investigate the matter openly for the first time? If I am wrong and the answer is yes, there is no problem. If, as I suspect, the answer is no, then we should consider which of the gays can and should serve in. We also

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# Crossing the Gay Minefield

## Clinton grapples with a promise to homosexuals

**P**residential candidate Bill Clinton made a lot of promises. President-elect Bill Clinton must decide which ones to keep. Following a Veterans Day speech before an audience of retired and active officers, he reiterated a commitment to one of his most controversial pledges: overturning the military's 48-year-old ban on homosexuals in the uniformed services. (Gays and lesbians can serve openly, if discreetly, on the civilian side of the Defense Department.) "I don't think [sexual] status alone, in the absence of some destructive behavior, should disqualify people," said Clinton last week.

Clinton may have stumbled into his first postelection minefield. Though he managed to survive GOP charges that he was a Vietnam-era draft dodger, he still has to convince Pentagon skeptics that their new commander in chief will understand military culture and be sympathetic to its concerns. Officially opening the military to homosexuals is hardly the way to generate good will—there is powerful resistance within the ranks and among the brass. Pentagon insiders believe that the Joint Chiefs of Staff would actually consider resigning en masse if gays were allowed to serve openly. The navy is particularly resistant because of the privacy questions presented by cramped conditions and enforced intimacies aboard ships.

Pentagon officials say they have already detected a certain "fuzzing up" in Clinton's campaign position, which called for "an immediate repeal" of the prohibition. Last week the backpedaling began in earnest. At the press conference after his speech Clinton said he would "put together a group and let them advise me"—invoking the venera-

ble political practice of appointing a commission to buy time on a sticky issue. By stressing that gays in uniform should be judged according to their conduct, not their proclivities, Clinton revealed the influence of Adm. William Crowe, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who spent 15 minutes on the phone with the president-elect before the press conference. One source close to the discussions says Clinton especially wants an end to the "witch hunts" that naval investigators use to ferret out gays.

Coincidentally, the future was partway here for one seaman, dismissed by the navy after he announced his homosexuality six months ago. Petty Officer 1/c Keith Meinhold sued, charging the navy with infringing on his constitutional rights. Last week a U.S. district judge ordered Meinhold reinstated pending settlement of his case. Should the military appeal the ruling, the Supreme Court could declare the prohibition against homosexuals unconstitutional. But that outcome is at least several years away—and wouldn't ease the pressure on Clinton now.

Clinton insisted last week that the question is not if, but when and how, he will reverse the ban. That surely came as a relief to homosexuals who helped him win the White House. Gay PACs were among Clinton's top supporters, with about \$3 million in contributions. For the first time in American history, gays and lesbians came out as a voting block. Exit polls suggest that 70 to 90 percent of homosexuals voted for Clinton over President George Bush. In other words, it's time to deliver. Whether Clinton breaks or keeps his word, there will be a political cost.

JOHN BARRY and DANIEL GLICK in Washington

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...interceptor toward the target.

These lightweight, space-based sensors could have multiple uses. Their primary role would be to provide missile warning and tracking for both the national missile defense and for theater defenses for U.S. and allied forces abroad. But their sophisticated sensors also could be used to watch for disasters on Earth and to do other environmentally useful Earth-observing. Despite the opposition of some members of Congress, Mr. Nunn has shown strong support for space-based sensors, and the Missile Defense Act calls for their optimum use.

There are legitimate differences between Republicans and Democrats about the nature of the defenses America should have in the 1990s and beyond. But there is general agreement on the need to continue developing at least limited

ban. Mr. Clinton does, throwing the issue to Congress, which debates whether to amend the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The code makes homosexual sodomy illegal.

A congressional vote to uphold current law would create a schizophrenic national policy, according to the scenario.

Political experts predict a spat will erupt again if Mr. Clinton takes too long to lift the military ban.

"The gay community understands very well what they're doing," the Senate staffer said. "To get Clinton to buy off during the campaign was important. They understand the military is the best place for social change. It's a command social environment. It can give instant legitimacy to the homosexual lifestyle."

...ascendant communists in Russia. He can minimize the chance that U.S. tax dollars will be spent by an ever-less reformist Russian government for purposes inimical to American interests. And he can otherwise put into place fire walls against a new, more serious nuclear threat to the United States from Cuba.

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need to find out what effect and dollar cost the AIDS crisis will have within the services when the ban is lifted.

There is no reason why the head of such a commission should come from the military. But just as everyone would have trusted an Omar Bradley to take on such a sensitive task after World War II, why not ask Norman Schwarzkopf to do it now? A commission would get our president-elect out of the cross-fire and at the same time serve the values that America is founded upon. With the stroke of a pen, Bill Clinton could balance American ideals and keep his twin but contradictory promises. That would be the right sort of executive order.

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the US register; and seized drug-carrying aircraft put back on the register. All have forged documents. Many of these have subsequently been re-exported, and there are reports of aircraft flying in Europe on US-registered "N" numbers thus obtained. Brazilian newspapers have published full details of 24 aircraft, mostly light jets and turboprops, claimed to be illicit imports.

Reports suggest there may be as many as 100 such aircraft in Brazil alone. A Lockheed L-1011 TriStar, leased to the Brazilian president, is also reportedly among the aircraft affected. □