

From All Angles: A Look at Gays in the Military

Hugh Coyle

(Note: This series intends to look at controversial questions from a number of various perspectives, sometimes seriously, sometimes not so seriously. Several grains of salt are recommended before reading.)

I don't know but I've been told
Right-wing folks are pretty cold
Want to keep the ban on gays
They think hate is A-okay
Forward march...right right right right...

For decades now, gays and lesbians have been asking for equal rights in areas such as employment and housing, but conservatives have fought long and hard against such legislation and claimed that it grants homosexuals "special rights." Now it seems as though they've changed their minds. Gay men and lesbians, they believe, should be able to legally dodge the draft if they want to.

That's one special right I've held dear for years, and I thank the opposition for working hard to preserve it for me. I've always treasured the fact that I was a privileged member of society and could avoid the draft if I wanted. To me, it was one of those extra special benefits associated with being gay, something like being able to share your partner's wardrobe and cut clothing costs in half.

But what if gays and lesbians finally find popular acceptance in American society, as it appears they will? And then what if the U.S. starts in on some unpopular war campaign somewhere in the world? There were thousands of young men during the Vietnam era who wished they could avoid the draft, but with homosexuality still viewed as a stigmatizing moral sin, few were apt to take advantage of the military's sexual loophole in order to obtain their freedom and maintain their pacifist ideologies. If there

were to be another Vietnam in the future, there might be far more than ten percent of the teenage population wearing pink triangles on their way to the draft board. Rather than pull up stakes and haul off to Canada, all the savvy draft-dodging boy would need to do is invest in a pair of purple pumps.

If the ban on homosexuals in the military is still in place at that future time, the conservatives would have made draft-dodging easier than ever for Americans. Who cares if that might put the nation even more at risk in a time of war? It sure beats having all those pansies on patrol at the front.

Those like columnist Mona Charen of the Burlington Free Press know the dangers of having gays at the front. Though her logic strains like a constipated elephant through-out her popular columns, she inevitably gets her final point across: the army is there to win wars. That means hating and killing the enemy, and with gay and lesbian people in the service, there just might not be enough hate and bloodthirst to satisfy the likes of Charen.

Of course, hate is what this thing is all about, as E. Anthony Rotundo beautifully demonstrates in his article "Where the Military's Antipathy to Homosexuals Comes From" (Chronicle of Higher Education, March 31, 1993). The problem isn't homosexuals in the army; it's homophobes in the army. They're the ones that threaten to cause unrest in the ranks, who claim that morale will be undermined by lifting the ban, who can't stand the idea of appearing naked in a shower before someone of the same sex. They're also the ones beating up gay servicemen as a means of getting their messages across to Congress. Nice people, these; Charen suggests we should listen to what they're saying rather than pay attention to all those gay rights activists with their hidden agendas.

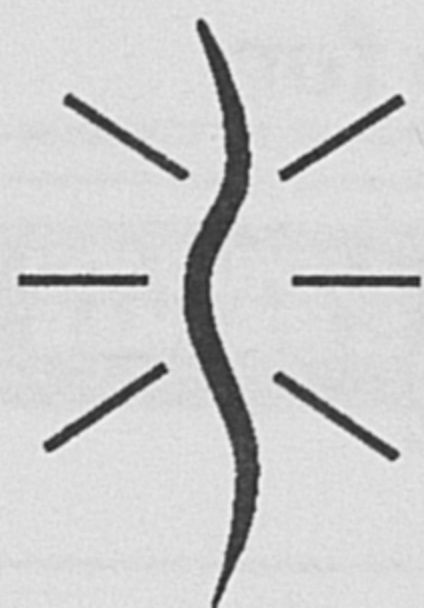
Arguments like Charen's are full of fear. Her basic argument is that society's perceptions of gays will make it difficult to have them in the army, so it's best to just exclude them and keep society's ignorance intact. It's kind of the same argument rape

victims often fight against in courts. "Sure, the man was depraved who raped you, but you asked for it by being a woman and trying to look attractive." In the end, it's the woman's fault, not the man's. With gays in the military, it's our fault that others feel the urge to spit on us, others who have been "properly" trained by homophobes like Charen in a home-front version of militaristic indoctrination.

Then again, maybe having gays and lesbians in the military would best perpetuate that desired warlust in the armed services. What better way to train our troops to hate than to have actual objects of hatred right there to work with? After all, the army can't motivate men any more by comparing them to women in basic training. If they can't use words like "faggot" or "dyke" any more either, what will be left? "Move it, you bunch of no-good newspaper columnists! You're running like a herd of goddam congressmen!" It just doesn't have the same ring to it (but I like it all the same).

And to look at things from an even more extreme angle, have the conservatives ever thought that maybe putting gays and lesbians on the front lines would be a good way of getting rid of them? I mean, as long as they think we're worthless human beings, why not draft us and use us like they used to use black battalions in the old days — as expendable pawns in the rich white game of war?

It's no secret then when a war is actually on somewhere in the world, the ban gets set aside anyway, since the army needs all the willing and trained personnel it can find. That's why during the Persian Gulf Crisis, gays and lesbians were asked to continue to serve, even though they would be dishonorably discharged once the conflict was over. After all, it's mostly during peacetime that homo-witch-hunts take place, most likely as a re-direction of the military need to actually have some kind of enemy in mind. In their world view, peacetime sucks. Gay people provide a necessary role in giving the army something to do when the troops aren't desperately fighting someone else.



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