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Gays in the Military: Texts and Subtexts

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Female Caller: "The biggest tragedy would be having two men in dress [unintelligible] dancing in, you know, in the Marine Corps Ball. I'm serious, to see two men dancing at the Marine Corps Ball. I mean which one is gonna wear the dress?"¹

In his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton announced that if elected to office, he would issue an executive order lifting the ban on gays in the military. He was, he did, and all hell broke loose. This intense resistance to acknowledging the historical and contemporary reality of gays in the military is often criticized as a homophobic response.² Surely this is part of the story, but the military nonetheless has always had many homosexual soldiers.³ Many assume that allowing homosexuals in the military is a recent, radical departure from standard practice, but in fact it is the prohibition of homosexuals in the military that is a recent event: The U.S. armed forces have had policies prohibiting homosexuals from serving only since the beginning of World War II.

Prior to World War II, the military considered sodomy a criminal act (sodomy defined as anal, and sometimes oral, sex between men), and any man convicted of it, whether heterosexual or homosexual, could be imprisoned. But the military never officially screened, excluded, or discharged *homosexuals as a class of people* until the mobilization for World War II. That exclusion policy was a product of the expansion of the psychiatric profession's authority in the military.

At that time, the rationale was that the psychiatric screening of recruits for mental disorders [of which homosexual orientation was only one among many] would enhance the psychiatric profession's prestige, as well as be less costly to

the government over the long term. That is, it was anticipated that such screening would reduce the patient load of veterans' hospitals after the war.⁴

It was also hoped that psychiatric screening would weed out soldiers who might break down in battle given the high number of mental casualties on the battlefield in World War I. Although attempts were made to exclude homosexuals from joining the military and to discover homosexuals already within the military, discharge of homosexuals was not automatic during this period. Homosexuality was viewed as a treatable illness. The psychiatrists' inclusion of homosexuality as a mental disorder introduced the idea of homosexuals *as a kind of person* unqualified for military service, thereby shifting the military's attention from punishing individual sexual acts viewed as criminal behavior to identifying and excluding a category of person viewed as inherently unfit.⁵

It was not until January 16, 1981, that the Department of Defense formally declared that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service."⁶ And even with the prohibition, the armed forces turned a blind eye to openly homosexual soldiers when it served their purposes, especially during wartime. For example, in World War II, all the branches of the military had a hard time meeting their quotas for female recruits. Women were screened much less thoroughly than men and not subjected to the same questions about their sexuality. Even after formal regulations for screening out lesbians were finally put in place near the end of the war, many overt lesbians were accepted into the military.⁷

Accommodation to individual gays and lesbians in the military, then, is not unprecedented and does not itself seem problematic enough to have provoked such a powerful response. Instead, the congressional hearings sparked by Clinton's order and the public discussions that surrounded them suggest a different concern—not about gays in the military per se but about the cultural meaning of the military as an institution.⁸ What is so upsetting and unacceptable is not homosexuals in the military but having people who are *openly* gay in the military—having the military appear as anything other than a strictly heterosexual institution.

Mixed public reaction to the military's appearing as anything other than a masculine, heterosexual institution is not simply a reflection of individual heterosexual men's feelings, whether those feelings are moral repugnance or a desire for privacy (as asserted by pro-ban forces) or homophobia and heterosexual soldiers' anxiety about their sexuality (as is sometimes asserted by the anti-ban forces).⁹ To explain the public outcry on both sides of the issue, we need to focus on the way the military functions in our society as a central guarantor and producer of masculinity (see also Chapters 5 and 6). Pro-ban sentiment appears to represent anxiety about sexuality, but I think this anxiety is just as much, if not more, about *gender*, and more specifically, *male* anxiety about gender.

One striking factor that points to this conclusion is the relative absence of lesbians in the controversy. The specter that haunts Marine Corps balls and boot camp showers is not just any homosexual but a gay *man*. The arguments made at the hearings themselves make this point immediately evident. Military sociologist Charles Moskos, an opponent of lifting the ban, announced that he would focus on homosexual men because “data collected from American soldiers by Laura Miller and myself convincingly show that support for the gay ban is significantly higher among men than it is among women. . . . If we had an all female force we probably would not be having these hearings today.”¹⁰

One apparently gender-neutral argument at the hearings actually had men as its subtext. “Military effectiveness” was the banner under which gays in the military were most frequently opposed; more specifically, we were told that the military’s mission of providing national security would be compromised by the difficulty of maintaining unit cohesion if homosexuals were allowed to serve openly. Speaker after speaker warned that gays in the military would undermine good order, discipline, and morale, especially since most regarded it as self-evident that some heterosexual soldiers would beat up homosexuals. Marine colonel Fred Peck, in one of the more dramatic moments of the hearings, announced that he had a gay son (he had only just learned about his son’s sexual orientation) and that although he loved his son, he did not think he should serve in the military. “I would be very fearful that his life would be in jeopardy from his own troops.”¹¹ It stretches credulity to suggest that these speakers were worrying about heterosexual women beating up on lesbians in their unit.

Another issue raised repeatedly, namely homosexuals’ higher rates of AIDS and HIV infection, was portrayed as a threat to the already overburdened military health care system; a threat to the health of other soldiers (since they might come into contact with each other’s bloody wounds on the battlefield or receive transfusions from each other); and again, a threat to unit cohesion, as soldiers would reputedly fear going to each other’s aid. Here, too, it is perfectly evident that the image of homosexuals is really an image of male homosexuals, since lesbians have the lowest HIV infection rate of any group in the country. Since the fastest spread of HIV infection is now among young heterosexual adults, if HIV were really the issue, current pro-ban advocates would actually be in favor of a military predominantly composed of lesbians.¹²

This chapter will largely focus on the response to the idea of openly gay men in the military. This is in part because the military’s response to lesbians and its persecution of both straight and gay women as lesbians should be as much understood as a product of its misogyny as its homophobia (and thus needs its own analysis and discussion) and in part because I think the debate reveals that it actually is gay men whose specter haunts the minds of heterosexual military men.

I begin with a brief overview of the current framing of the policy debate about gays in the military with specific focus on the logical structure of the arguments. More specifically, I look at the way the debate is framed and the discourses largely absent from current debate that occasionally burst through and reveal another layer of meaning. I also look at the social construction of gender and sexuality and its relation to the military as an institution and at the central, if often unarticulated, role this relation plays in the debate.

Rights Versus Readiness

The debate about gays in the military has been framed in several different ways. The congressional hearings represent what might be considered the official story, that is, the carefully crafted arguments made by both proponents and opponents of the ban on gays in the military, arguments that each considers the most respectable and justifiable to the public. At this level, we hear a civil society, equal rights discourse (i.e., gays should not be denied the privilege of serving their country in ways they have already proven they are capable of, etc.) set in opposition to a discourse on military readiness and national security (see Chapter 5). As one general I spoke with said, "It is the concept of civil rights of the individual versus military necessity."¹³

At first these discourses seem incommensurate, talking at cross purposes: If you accept one, you deny the competing claims of the other. In the context of the role and value we place on the military, its national security discourse would seem to have priority. If it does take precedence, the only remaining question would appear to be whether gays *do* compromise military effectiveness. Indeed, opponents of the ban seldom challenge prevailing assumptions about what constitutes military effectiveness, devoting most of their efforts to proving that gays do *not* compromise this aspect of military life.

However, even at this first, public, official level of discourse, the reality is far more complex than simply two competing incommensurable discourses. We need to examine the arguments in more detail.

The military's argument goes as follows:

1. The military is separate and different from the rest of civil society.
2. The military's mission, to provide security for the country, is singular, and the needs that follow from it must take precedence over all else.
3. Therefore, the military must be an institution that does not grant the same individual rights to its members as does the rest of society.
4. And thus, it is inappropriate to ask the armed forces to be laboratories for social experimentation or engines of social change. Their

mission is national defense, not carrying out any of society's other goals and values.

The military thus claims that a civil rights discourse may be fine elsewhere in the society but is irrelevant here. The military is a world apart from the wider social world with requirements coming not from that world but from the military's purpose and mission. This perspective was frequently articulated in the congressional hearings:

Civil rights do not apply to people in the service. Civil rights must be subordinated to the good of the whole.

The military cannot and should not be concerned with individual rights. The question is what is best for national security, and not social policy.¹⁴

In this way, spokespeople opposed to gays in the military suggest that issues of importance to a civil society can have no meaning or relevance to the military if the military is to fulfill its mission of protecting that same society.

Civil rights for gays in the military would undermine combat readiness, military effectiveness, and, by extension, national security itself. This argument's logic and its rhetorical impact both direct and divert our attention—toward encoding a distinction between civil society and the military and away from questions about the military's role in civil society and the cultural assumptions about masculinity that inform that role.

Is the Military a Part of Civil Society?

The question in the heading requires redefinitions of what we consider "military" and "civil" in order to be entertained seriously because the two as currently defined seem mutually exclusive. Yet the separation between civil society and the military is in many ways a false one; the borders between them are far more fuzzy and permeable than portrayed in recent debates. The problem begins when we frame the question in terms of oppositions: Is the military separate from *or* a part of society? Is its primary, even its only, role to guarantee national security, *or* is it a reflection of society and a social laboratory? Within this framing, calling upon the military to formulate its policies in light of issues conceptualized as being in the realm of civil rights is seen by many as a perversion of a long-accepted separation and a threat to military effectiveness and autonomy.

But in a general sociological sense, the military has never been (and could never be) independent of social mores and values. In the United States, the public conception of and support for the military are based on the idea that the institution's function is not to uphold authoritarian regimes but to uphold the American way of life and American values, including equality of oppor-

tunity and tolerance. Public support for the military is largely based in the perception that the military should defend and uphold civil society's values.

The military has always been a reflection of society. The shape of the military and its place in the society always reflects societal organization at a general level—democratic instead of authoritarian, for example. And at a more particular level, individual military policies are always affected by the politics of the day.

As is amply evident in the history of African Americans and women in the military, public opinion and values are cited as justification for military policies and actions when they fit the institution's purpose. When they do not fit, they are ignored. Clearly, some decisions about the military have been made on the basis of using the military for explicitly social (rather than national security) ends—such as the integration of African Americans into the military after World War II. As a general who is influential in the policymaking community said to me, "Of course I let cultural mores drive policy."¹⁵

Although arguments to exclude gays from the military that are based on a rigid separation and opposition of military and civil priorities are neither logically nor empirically supportable, this in itself does not mean there are no conflicts of interest. The possibility that the needs of one can conflict with the needs of the other does exist, and the demands of society may lessen military effectiveness. For example, the political need to end the draft following the Vietnam War, combined with economic conditions, reduced training and manpower quality in the military in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The inescapable social embeddedness of the military sometimes does have military costs. But would it in this case?

What Are the Costs?

Suppose we do not accept the *separability*, the rigid borders between the military and society, but still accept the distinction between the two. In this case it is not clear that the goals of the military and of society are actually opposed to each other; it is not clear that meeting the claims of equal rights for gays will prevent meeting the claims of national security. Such is repeatedly asserted but is unproven. So we need to ask whether lifting the ban would have the costs that the ban's proponents claim. The answer is far from self-evident.

The assertion that gays in the military would degrade morale, discipline, and unit cohesion is an assumption based on expectations rooted in stereotypes and social attitudes. There are anecdotal, but *no empirical*, grounds to support this claim, and no one in or out of the military refers to research demonstrating that the presence of openly gay soldiers will degrade unit cohesion. The claim is based on the suppositions of current military lead-

ers—all of whom have themselves been socialized by the military to believe that homosexuals are not fit for military service.¹⁶

The qualities that reputedly make gays unfit to serve, however, have little to do with them and everything to do with the heterosexual men with whom they serve. This shifting of the subject from gay soldiers to heterosexual ones is especially evident when we compare and contrast the debate about gays in the military with the debate about women in combat. The objections to women in combat can be divided into two categories: claims about women and their bodies, which supposedly make them less effective combatants than men; and claims about heterosexual men and their responses to having women in their units.

The claims about women's bodies all come down to the idea that women are incapable of doing the job (that is, are unfit for combat). They include assumptions about women's physical capacities (upper-body strength), pregnancy, single parenthood, menstruation, and their reputed need for greater privacy and more frequent showers. (The issue of upper-body strength has surprising staying power, considering that it is widely acknowledged to be easily resolved by having uniform job-related standards and testing for soldiers, male or female.) All of these are seen as problems that will not only prevent women from doing their jobs but will also, due to women's pregnancy-related nondeployability, impede units from carrying out their missions. Claims about women's bodies thus loosely correspond to the "readiness" issue.

The second set of arguments ignores the question of whether women are capable of doing the job and asserts instead that heterosexual men's responses to women in combat would degrade the *men's* ability to do their job: Men will be demoralized by seeing women injured or taken prisoner; men will go out of their way to protect women, doing things that will unnecessarily tax or endanger themselves; they will sexually harass women, which will undermine unit cohesion; and fraternization will undermine unit cohesion.

The subject of this second set of arguments—not what women bring into the military but how men in the military will respond to them—is similar to the position struck by supporters of a ban against gays in the military. Gay men's capacities to serve honorably and well are rarely seriously questioned. Instead, the threat to military effectiveness is seen to come from the difficulty of maintaining unit cohesion and morale *among heterosexual soldiers* should openly gay soldiers be allowed to serve. Gays are seen to cause the problem not because they are inadequate as soldiers but because heterosexual men do not want to serve with them. These are the more often claimed problems and, again, relate to unit cohesion and morale.

Central to the position against gays in the military is the idea that effectiveness in protecting national security depends upon unit cohesion, morale,

and discipline, since soldiers' willingness to fight is seen to stem from their devotion to their unit. Opponents claim that the presence of gay men would undermine this devotion for a number of reasons:

- Sexual harassment and fraternization will undermine unit cohesion.
- Straight men will not take orders from gay officers because they do not respect gay men.
- Straight men's discomfort with openly gay men will lead them to commit acts of violence against men in their own units.
- The male bonding upon which unit cohesion depends will be impossible with gay men present.

It is not my purpose to address the validity of these particular arguments. I simply want to note the peculiarity that one group's problem is taken as reason to discriminate against another group. Although parallel arguments were made regarding other issues, American society did not find this an acceptable rationale for racial or sexual discrimination. Why is it deemed reasonable, then, in relation to sexuality?

Anti-ban forces, acknowledging the problems that might arise from the concerns and antipathies of straight soldiers, point to what the military learned when it integrated African Americans and women into the armed forces and suggest that similar antidiscrimination training for officers and enlisted personnel would go a long way toward overcoming whatever problems might exist. Senator Warner's response to this idea is typical: He objected that such training would burden already overburdened commanding officers and that the time they devoted to it would endanger readiness.¹⁷ Looking at the structure of this argument, what is interesting is not so much the size of the burden but rather the question of what counts, what is even *seen* as problematic and time-consuming compared to what is ignored. The time and expense required for antidiscrimination training is seen as a problem. What is not seen or defined as a problem, or a readiness cost, is the inordinate amount of time and money spent investigating and discharging homosexuals; the cost of recruiting and training their replacements; and the time and money lost when highly trained gay soldiers decide to leave the military because of the burdens of secrecy and threat of exposure or because they know that the security clearances necessary to reach the top of their profession require investigations that could destroy their careers. (Although it is impossible to collect all the data that would allow these costs to be tallied, the cost of discharges, of "chasing down gays and running them out of the armed services," was estimated at a half-billion dollars for the 1980s.¹⁸ And that figure, of course, does not include the costs associated with those who left "voluntarily" for fear of exposure.)

Finally, before we move on from the “claims about straight men’s minds” category, there is one argument worth examining in more detail—the argument that unit cohesion will be destroyed, that the great intangible of high morale and esprit de corps will be impossible because the presence of gay men will make male bonding impossible. In this vision, esprit de corps, cohesion, and high morale are *equated* with male bonding; male bonding is seen as the indispensable key to making them all possible. And male bonding is assumed to be grievously threatened by the presence of gay men. Why? Surely, we could make the argument that gay men are even better than straight men at bonding with other men, and so they could be central to a fighting force. Although this may seem a flippant response, it actually reflects a different historical construction of masculinity. Randy Shilts points out: “In the Spartan armed forces, the most respected soldiers had an intimate male partner. . . . The Greek Sacred Band of Thebes was ‘one of the most fearsome, and thoroughly homosexual, corps of soldiers in the history of warfare. . . . As the popular saying of the time went, ‘An army of lovers can never be defeated.’”¹⁹

My point, however, is not that an army of lovers is better than an army of men who are straight; I want only to denaturalize the idea that for male bonding to occur, all soldiers need to be heterosexual.

Yet this is obviously a strongly held idea, deeply felt. But why? Why is the presence of gay men so disruptive to male bonding?

This leads to an even bigger question: Why is male bonding seen as such a self-evident good? In the public discourse, emphasis on male bonding is justified because it is seen as the key to unit cohesion. But is it really? Does cohesion depend on some mystical bonding activity that in some way depends on male hormones or male experience? Is there any reason for male bonding to be the glue that creates cohesiveness?

This male-bonding assertion is not explored. Although General Wm. Darryl Henderson testified in the Senate in favor of the gay ban, his well-respected book on unit cohesion emphasizes many different elements, including shared values, the ability to look up to officers, the belief that your leader has your interests at heart, and shared experience of adverse conditions.²⁰ Soldiers’ accounts tend to emphasize bonds forged in adversity—be it in basic training or combat.²¹ Whatever the complex combination and weighting of forces, male bonding is not reducible to heterosexual maleness. Major Rhonda Cornum, an army flight surgeon and POW in the Gulf War, when asked if women’s presence prevented male bonding, addressed the question by saying, “Male-bonding is not gender specific.”²²

Yet this belief endures because although male bonding is neither a sufficient explanation for what makes it possible for men to fight nor the root of unit cohesion, men do care about it enormously. The preciousness of these bonds to the men who experience them gives rise to talk of “costs.”

Civic Discourses, or a Fight Based on Feelings?

I totally disagree with homosexuality as a normal lifestyle. It goes against my values not to mention God. I can't change or want to change any of them. But if you place one in my room, bunker, tent, or showers, I'd bash his head in.

I'd go AWOL. I don't want fags staring at me while I shower or dress or anything.

It's not right. It's sick, it's despicable, nauseating and I'll kill them.

Gays should be shot. Gays should all die.²³

Whatever the merits and peculiarities of the military-readiness-discourse versus civil-rights-discourse framing of the debate, one thing is clear: Just underneath, there is a different sort of debate altogether, a debate not about institutions and their roles but about people's feelings—heterosexual male soldiers' "fear of intimate situations with someone of the same sex who is sexually attracted to them,"²⁴ their moral or religious objections to homosexuality, their anger about possibly being asked to accept gays in their midst, and their feelings about their military commitment and whether they want to reenlist. Gays name those feelings differently—homophobia, bigotry, or ignorance—but feelings they are nonetheless, especially about buddies and others in the unit. The issues of military readiness and soldiers' feelings are entangled: What makes gays so threatening to military readiness is not their abilities to be soldiers but straight soldiers' feelings about them. Feelings play such a predominant role in the debate that this might be read as a debate about feelings versus fairness, one in which cultural constructions of masculinity play a key role.

In our culture's gender hierarchies, the abstract, masculine ideal of fairness would typically be more highly valued than, and be expected to take precedence over, feelings, which are generally culturally coded as feminine. Yet in this case, feelings (straight military personnel's feelings) are transmuted into "military readiness," "unit cohesion," and "morale," masculinized terms that legitimate what men feel by transforming those feelings into abstract instrumentalities of military effectiveness.

The argument that gays cannot be in the military because they threaten morale and discipline is a good example. "Morale" and "discipline" are abstract, neutral-sounding terms, terms also coded as masculine and positively valenced in the military. In fact, they are an abstract overlay for prejudice, fear, sexual tension, and uncontrollable urges to commit acts of vio-

lence. It is easy to say, "Homosexuals in the military threaten morale and discipline." It is far harder to say, "We can't have gays in the military because of the prejudice, fear, sexual tension, uncontrollable urges to commit acts of violence on the part of heterosexual soldiers."²⁵

But understanding that intense feelings underlie a debate cast in abstract terms still leaves much to be explained. For example, why the repeated emphasis on "openly avowed" homosexuals? Why are people so upset about gay men rather than lesbians? Why are men (both inside and outside the military) so much more opposed to gays in the military than women? We are left with a puzzle. Why is the opposition to openly gay men in the military so emotionally intense? Where does the enormous depth of feeling come from?

General Norman Schwarzkopf has said that "open homosexuality is the problem."²⁶ It appears that *visibility*, rather than the mere *presence* of gays, is the issue. This is evident in the congressional hearings with their many solemnly intoned warnings about an "openly avowed" or "declared" homosexual (with echoes of being an "avowed Communist" echoing through the chamber). The "openly avowed" seems to connote brazenness, impudence—as though open acknowledgment constitutes a challenge to heterosexuality. And daring to openly acknowledge one's homosexuality implies that it is not something to be ashamed of. There seems to be some outrage on the part of heterosexual soldiers that gays dare to act as though they have nothing to be ashamed of. The image invoked by the comments in the hearings about "avowed" homosexuals is not of people who just want to be honest about who they are; the underlying image seems to be of legions chanting, "We're queer, we're here; get used to it!"—with all of the in-your-face attitude this implies.

The issue is not homosexuality per se but people speaking of it. Why is this problematic? First, because by speaking of it, homosexuals simultaneously deny not only that homosexuality is shameful but that it is natural to be secretive and silent about what others may consider shameful. They deny the inferiority of their sexuality and identity and that they are incompatible with military service.

Visibility becomes even more clearly the issue in the compromise passed by Congress in November 1993, which amounts to a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. On the face of it, this position appears to be a way to protect gays: We won't throw you out by starting witch hunts; we won't interrogate you about your sexuality, so you can serve. As long as you KEEP IT QUIET.

But who is really being protected by this compromise? Not gays in the military. First, they must still fear being open about their identities. Second, the compromise does *not* rescind the 1981 statement that homosexuality is incompatible with military service; it leaves intact the formulation that gays do not belong in the military. Third, in practice, it offers gays no protection.

By February 1995, one year after the new policy was implemented, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) had already documented over 340 violations of the policy. In addition, SLDN reports that the discharge rate for homosexuals has remained unchanged since the policy went into effect—about .04 percent of total military personnel, or 597, in 1994.²⁷

Since the policy does nothing to protect gays, the question becomes, Who and what is being protected by the “compromise”? The debate’s focus on the feelings of straight soldiers would suggest they benefit most in that they are spared the discomfort of knowing about their buddies’ homosexuality. Far from being a compromise, the policy’s subtext speaks for the discomforted heterosexual: “You homosexuals can be in the military as long as you don’t force us to acknowledge that your sexuality is in the military. Your sexuality is not in any way to be recognized by the military; nor is it to be associated in any way with military life, since that would implicate us.” The need to protect the presumption that military life excludes homosexuality is preeminent.

Conversely, what is protected is the appearance of the heterosexual masculinity of the institution itself. The heterosexual grounding of the official policy perspective is preserved. By silencing gays, the policy suppresses the *open* legitimation of sexual relations between men, which are deemed incompatible with military service if they are practiced within a gay identity. This last distinction (sex between men vs. gay sex) is crucial to understanding the character of male bonding in the military, for it sustains the heterosexual commitments of the military’s otherwise homosocial and homoerotic arrangements.

Sexuality and the Military Man

In the United States, males’ anxiety about homosocial emotional intimacy, homoerotic feelings, and homosexual behavior is heightened by the way our culture conceives of sexual categories and identities. As Robert Padgug (and later, queer theory) points out, we think of sexuality as an essence in an individual.²⁸ And in mainstream culture at least, we believe that each individual has one of two diametrically opposed essences—either hetero- or homosexual. As with all binary categories, each is defined not only as the opposite of the other but also as the negation of or absence of the other. “Heterosexual” does not mean predominantly heterosexual but means utterly without homosexual impulse or desire. Apparently, if you feel one kind of impulse, you cannot feel the other. If you *are* one, you cannot *be* the other.

In this construction, to “be” a heterosexual and to experience a homosexual desire or participate in a homosexual act becomes far more than the feeling or act in and of itself. It becomes a threat, a potential negation of one’s heterosexual status; it seems to belie the entire edifice upon which

one's identity is founded. In seventeenth-century colonial New England, if a man had sex with another man, he was condemned for having sexual relations outside the bond of marriage, but in a society that lacked the category of "homosexual," his basic identity was not in jeopardy.²⁹ In modern America, because of our conception of sexuality as being composed of binary essences and the equation of those essences with identities, a (dominantly heterosexual) man who has sex with another man must immediately question if he is a member of the other category—if he is "really" gay. Thus behavior is equated with identity.

This modern conception of sexuality plays out in the military in contradictory ways. On the one hand, the military embodies this idea of sexuality. Ideologically, it recognizes two different categories of sexuality, heterosexual and homosexual. Heterosexual is normal, moral, good, glorified, and homosexual is immoral, abnormal, and clearly subordinated.

Yet the reality of military life seems to undercut this neat bifurcation of sexual categories. For young recruits, entering the military traditionally has meant entering a world without women. Many young men who would have been unlikely to engage in sexual activities with other men in the civilian world do so in the military. Whereas for some men this is an opportunity to discover and explore their own homosexuality, for far more of them, having sex with other men is simply what young horny males do when there are no women around. Allan Berube, for example, writes about sailors coming into port and looking for women prostitutes. When no more women prostitutes were available on the streets, soldiers went with male transvestites without thinking anything of it. They were not considered gay; it was just simply what one did. The phenomenon of soldiers who think of themselves as heterosexuals engaging in homosexual behavior without losing their heterosexual status is common in the military. This reality is enshrined in such soldiers' sayings as "It's only queer when you're tied to the pier" and in the riddle "What's the difference between a straight Marine and a gay Marine?" Answer: "a six pack," "three beers," or "a shot."³⁰ The idea that the absence of women and getting drunk are both reasons that nominally heterosexual men might engage in homosexual behavior is generally accepted. The men who participate in this activity think of themselves as heterosexual without fear of "really being gay." The culture's binary conception of sexuality is thus sustained—not undercut—in the military through the practice of distinguishing between sexual identity and sexual practice, now codified in the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Men's desires to look at each other and sexual tensions between men already exist in the showers, the barracks, and other gathering places. Berube suggests that if you ascribe that tension to homosexuals, then you can pretend that if you get rid of the homos you will get rid of the sexual tensions. Thus, keeping homosexuals out of the military keeps the military

safe for homoeroticism.³¹ Or more precisely, keeping acknowledged homosexuals out of the military or at least keeping the appearance of no homosexuality in the military makes the military safe for the rampant homoeroticism and homoerotic tension that already exists—from butt-grabbing to drag shows to hazing rituals to facultative homosexuality. With the exclusion of homosexual desire in the military, as embodied by the gay ban, all that homoerotic activity is simply what men do in the military. And because the military is defined as the apotheosis of heterosexual masculinity, such activity could not be gay. If the military includes gays, what assures military men that all that homoerotic activity doesn't mean that they are queer? And then what assures them that they are men?

The Military and Manhood

The power of the U.S. military to transform male sexuality is integral to its cultural identity, which has long promised to “make men out of boys.”³² Indeed, the military has traditionally offered lessons in masculinity as a part of basic training.³³ New (male) recruits are called “girls” and “ladies” to convey to them that they are nothing. This is a part of the process of mortification of the self, stripping them of all previous identity claims before rebuilding them into military men who fight enemies referred to as “girls” or “faggots.”³⁴ Recruits learn to hate, fear, and destroy the feminine—in themselves and in others (see Chapters 4 and 5).³⁵ Moreover, by virtue of its primarily male-centered history, the military is the most homosocial and homoerotic environment that recruits may ever encounter: Large numbers of men engage in very intense and intimate experiences, live in close quarters with little privacy, and focus on the body in training. Some military rituals, including the navy's famous crossing-the-line, or shellback, ceremony have typically featured such elements as transvestitism, simulated fellatio, sadomasochistic role playing, and group nudity.³⁶ Given that recruits usually are *young*, late-adolescent males who are confronting questions of self-definition, the situation would seem to foster erotic impulses at precisely a time when identity is in flux and experimentation occurs.

This sense of sexual vulnerability informed the policy debate masked as a discussion about the privacy rights of heterosexual soldiers. The image evoked repeatedly was of the straight soldiers forced to take showers with their gay comrades, their naked bodies subject to the lustful gaze of the gay.

The image itself is based on stereotypes of gay men. Implicit in the image of gay soldiers lusting after their buddies in the showers and “hitting on” adamantly heterosexual men are the following beliefs: Unlike straight men, gay men are defined by their sexual practices; sexual desire is the center of their identity, running their lives and determining their actions to such an extent that other considerations are close to irrelevant; gay men cannot or

will not control their sexual and social behavior; gay men are predatory, driven to “convert” or seduce heterosexuals. In contrast, for most gay men the idea that one’s thoughts are always on sex or that showers would be spent sizing up their straight brothers or even that they would find a bunch of straight, homophobic men attractive is ludicrous. When the Canadian government called upon (heterosexual) American psychologist Lois Shawer, an expert in bodily modesty, to assess whether the privacy rights of heterosexuals are violated by having to share quarters and facilities with homosexuals, she concluded that “homosexuals would not be likely to leer at heterosexuals or violate their modesty traditions.”³⁷

The introduction of the issue of privacy is all the more striking because although lack of privacy is uncomfortable, it is a fundamental characteristic of the military, and accommodation to it is an adjustment that all new recruits must make. This is so much the case that if the issue of privacy is raised in any context other than the gays-in-the-military debate, most soldiers dismiss it as a trivial concern. (The issue has, of course, also been raised in the women-in-combat debate. When Major Rhonda Cornum was asked about the lack of privacy for women combatants during the Gulf War, her manner clearly communicated that she thought this an extremely trivial matter, and she just said, “Let ’em look.”³⁸) Nonetheless, speakers at the hearings uttered dire predictions about the large numbers of men who would leave the armed services if the gay ban were lifted.

A psychoanalytic analysis of why men get so upset about the (imagined) male homosexual gaze is that they are insecure about their own heterosexuality. Fear and hatred of homosexuals is understood as being rooted in fear of incompletely repressed homosexual desires in oneself. The straight man is in terror of having a gay man come on to him not because he cannot fend off the advances but because such advances might mean that for some reason he appears to be gay. At the least, he would question the solidity of his heterosexuality.

Other feelings probably come into play as well. For many men, few insults are worse than being called queer; the gay man’s implicit suggestion that the straight man might be interested would be experienced as an insult of the most grievous kind. Even worse, the idea that anyone might even wonder, might see the slightest hint of ambiguity in their sexual identity, must feel to some men like an incredible violation of their sense of self.

Although this psychoanalytic interpretation has some power and might well be an accurate analysis of some men’s responses, it fails to capture the social meanings attached to privacy in relation to sexuality in our culture. Sexual practices are a private matter, but gay sexuality, unlike heterosexual sexuality, is taken to be practiced in public. Heterosexual sexuality, in this construction, gets displayed as a kind of model in the hearings, where the speakers repeatedly argued, “We wouldn’t make women take showers or

share quarters with men—so how can we ask soldiers to put up with a similar violation of their privacy?” (Of course, the fact that straight soldiers *already* share showers and quarters with closeted, and sometimes known, gay soldiers all the time without apparent damage is left out.)

This line was played like a trump card, as though once this analogy was made, no comeback was possible. In U.S. culture the image of people involuntarily being looked at by members of the opposite sex is disturbing. If you can transfer that sense of violation to heterosexual males sharing quarters with gays, the game is won.

But although the analogy may at first seem perfectly appropriate and reasonable, one aspect of it is glaringly incongruous—the comparison of straight male soldiers to women, the analogical positing of men in the women’s position. In the military, this is simply not done.³⁹ Military men do not invoke women’s experiences to explain or legitimate their own. They do not align their experiences with women’s. It is close to inconceivable that they would use the argument “Women aren’t expected to do it, so why should we?” in relation to any other activity. So we have to ask, What does the evocation of women in this argument reveal?

Returning to the fact that straight soldiers already share showers and quarters with gay soldiers, we need to ask why things would be so different if the ban were lifted. With the ban in place, the military is officially a heterosexual institution, and straight soldiers need not imagine anyone in the showers is gay. But if gays are no longer banned and if openly avowed homosexuals are integrated into the units, anyone in the showers might be gay—and straight soldiers would suddenly begin to imagine themselves as the objects of the male gaze—just as women are. It is not the absence of bodily privacy that is disturbing to male heterosexual soldiers but rather the imagining of themselves in the female subject position—being the object of the gaze, being desired, being powerless before the gaze, instead of being the gazer. Straight male soldiers do not want to be in that position and do not know what to do in it. Women have been treated that way for years and have learned to deal with it (although not without cost). But to straight men, being the object of the male gaze is utterly unacceptable; it is to be feminized.

The right argued for here is thus not the right of privacy but the right of heterosexual men not to be looked at (possibly with desire) by gay men whom they know to be gay. What they really cannot bear is being in the female subject position, the object of the gaze instead of the subject, the object of the fantasy instead of the one doing the fantasizing.

In this analysis (in contrast to the previous homophobia analysis), the problem is not that the imagined homosexual gaze turns straight male soldiers into gay men but that it turns them into women. Their gender, not their sexuality, is at stake.

No matter how definitely a man experiences himself as heterosexual, what it is to be a man is at stake here. Years of enacting and accomplishing masculinity arm men with a repertoire of ways to do the active gazing and desiring. But when they are put in the position of the recipient and have to find a way to respond, they are left in a realm where they have few resources in their behavioral repertoires, few known performance pieces that fit their gender (apart from beating the bastard up).

Conclusion

Although military leaders may articulate the question of gays in the military as one of morale, good order, and unit cohesion, such rationales do not even approach explanations for the intensity of emotion in the debate. To understand it, we need to look at the subtext, where issues about not only sexuality but gender emerge. The overarching concern is with maintaining the institution's heterosexual masculinity.

Gender is not a given but a situated accomplishment, a daily set of ways of being with different meanings in different contexts.⁴⁰ An important attraction of the military to many of its members is a guarantee of heterosexual masculinity. That guarantee is especially important because the military provides a situation of intense bonds between men, a much more homosocial and homoerotically charged environment than most men otherwise have the opportunity to be in. In that the military guarantees their manhood, men are allowed to participate in the intimacy of male bonding without being taken as sissies. In that context, the military's official heterosexual masculinity enables men to experience erotic, sexual, and emotional impulses that they would otherwise have to censor in themselves for fear of being seen (by others or themselves) as homosexual and therefore not real men. They are not only escaping a negative—imputations of homosexuality—but gaining a positive, the ability to be with other men in ways that transcend the limitations on male relationships that most men live under in civilian life.

So we have a paradoxical situation of an institution that constructs and upholds the most rigid stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity but at the same time provides a context that allows men to transcend some of these limits: the rigid constraints that typically prevent men from bonding with other men. These constraints break down in a controlled but nonetheless real way.

The foregoing is not the whole story behind the reaction to Clinton's plan to include gays in the military. It is important to recognize that massive campaigns of opposition were orchestrated by the military and right-wing political groups. However, the key to understanding the strident response is the fear that with gays officially in the military, the military can no longer be synonymous with manhood.

If gays are officially allowed in the military, it becomes impossible for the military to exert the same kind of masculinity-granting power; it also disrupts the chain of signification: military, real man, heterosexual. When African Americans fought for civil rights through ending racial segregation in the armed forces, leaders explicitly made the connection between the right to serve and *manhood*,⁴¹ and being able to serve was seen as an acknowledgment of manhood. For some, opposition to gays in the military stems from resistance to acknowledging that gays are "real men."

A third issue involves the accepted concept of masculinity. If military masculinity still is our image of manhood, can manhood now expand to include homosexuals? The debate over gays in the military reached to the foundations of gender identity without, of course, making these issues explicit.

Notes

I have delivered versions of this chapter to various audiences, including the Workshop on Institutional Change and the U.S. Military at Cornell University and the 1994 ISA meeting in Washington, D.C. I am grateful to the many people who listened and offered insight and amplification. I also want to express my appreciation to Jane Parpart for a most useful conversation at a critical moment in this chapter's genesis and for her patience. My greatest debts are to Barry O'Neill and Mary Wyre; throughout the preparation of this final version I have benefited enormously from their insightful comments and support.

1. *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, April 2, 1993. This quote comes from a call to a radio talk show in Jacksonville, North Carolina, where Camp Lejeune, the largest Marine Corps base in the East, is located.

2. In trying to understand what happened, we need to be aware of the politics behind the organization and timing of each side's mobilization. For example, the apparently spontaneous outpouring of outrage that greeted Clinton's January announcement was the product of months of extensive organizing by both the military and the religious right. These groups took Clinton's campaign promise far more seriously than did gay groups, for whom military service was not a front-burner issue.

3. Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 3–36.

4. *Defense Force Management: DOD's Policy on Homosexuality*, GAO/NSIAD-92-98, June 1992, p. 10.

5. For a more specific and extended account of the psychiatrist's role in the development of the post-World War II exclusion policy, see Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Plume, 1990), pp. 1–33.

6. *Defense Force Management*, p. 2. The full text of the statement reads: "Homosexuality is incompatible with military service. The presence in the military

environment of persons who engage in homosexual conduct or who, by their statements, demonstrate a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct, seriously impairs the accomplishment of the military mission. The presence of such members adversely affects the ability of the Military Services to maintain discipline, good order, and morale; to foster mutual trust and confidence among service members; to ensure the integrity of the system of rank and command; to facilitate assignment and worldwide deployment of service members who frequently must live and work under close conditions affording minimal privacy; to recruit and retain members of the Military Services; to maintain public acceptability of military service; and to prevent breaches of security."

7. Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire*, pp. 28–33. Most recently, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, soldiers who were known to be gay were deployed during the Gulf War and then subjected to discharge proceedings upon their return. Wade Lambert, "U.S. Moves to Discharge Some Gay Veterans of Gulf War," *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 1991, p. B6. Also see Doug Grow, "Captain Did Her Duty, Despite Military's Mixed Messages," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 16, 1993, p. 3B. For a general historical overview of the ways in which policies against gays are ignored in wartime see Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, pp. 60–71, 725–734; and Randy Shilts, "What's Fair in Love and War," *Newsweek* 121, 5 (1993). During the Senate hearings of April 29, 1993, Senator Kennedy cited statistics showing that discharges for homosexuality go up in peacetime and down in wartime and pointed out that this directly contradicts the arguments of gay-ban proponents, since wartime is when cohesion is most critical. Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing, April 29, 1993.

8. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, *Assessment of the Plan to Lift the Ban on Homosexuals in the Military on H.A.S.C. 103-19*. 103rd Cong., 19th sess., July 21–23, 1993; House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, *Policy Implications of Lifting the Ban on Homosexuals in the Military on H.A.S.C. 103-18*. 103rd Cong., 18th sess., May 4–5, 1993; Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Policy Concerning Homosexuality in the Armed Forces S. HRG. 103-845*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., March 29 and 31, 1993.

9. Throughout this chapter, I use the term "soldiers" to refer to enlisted personnel and noncommissioned officers in all branches of the military.

10. Senate Armed Services Committee Hearings, April 29, 1993.

11. Col. Frederick Peck USMC, Senate Armed Services Committed Hearings, May 11, 1993; Associated Press, "Gay Son Differs with His Marine Father on Perils of the Military," *Boston Globe*, May 13, 1993, p. A3.

12. Judith Stiehm makes the argument that the military's policies about gays are really based on gay men and ignore the realities of both lesbians and heterosexual women's reactions to them. She discusses two other arguments made at the hearings to illustrate her point. Judith Hicks Stiehm, "The Military Ban on Homosexuals and the Cyclops Effect," in Wilbur J. Scott and Sandra Carson Stanley, eds., *Gays and Lesbians in the Military* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 149–162.

13. Personal communication, April 3, 1993.

14. Senate Armed Services Committee Hearings, March 31, 1993.

15. Personal communication, April 3, 1993.

16. Stiehm, "The Military Ban," p. 150.

17. Senator Warner, Senate Armed Services Committee Hearings, March 29, 1993.

18. Barry M. Goldwater, "The Gay Ban: Just Plain Un-American," *Washington Post*, June 10, 1993, p. A23. The problem is that only the costs of recruiting and training the personnel needed to replace those discharged for homosexuality can be estimated; no figures on amounts expended for investigations, out-processing, or court costs are available. (During fiscal years 1986–1990, Department of Defense investigative agencies conducted a total of 3,663 such investigations.) The General Accounting Office reports that in FY 1990, the costs of recruiting and initial training of replacement personnel were estimated at \$28,226 for each enlisted person and \$120,772 for each officer. *Defense Force Management*, p. 4. According to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, the cost of training replacements for the 597 men and women discharged in 1994 after the new policy was implemented was \$17.5 million, and again, this figure does not include the costs of investigations and discharge hearings. Lawrence Korb and C. Dixon Osburn, "Asked, Told, Pursued," *New York Times*, March 19, 1995, sec. 4, p. 15.
19. Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, p. 33.
20. Wm. Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985).
21. See, for example, J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970).
22. Major Rhonda Cornum, comments at Quail Roost Conference, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, April 3, 1993.
23. Laura Miller, "Fighting for a Just Cause," in Scott and Stanley, *Gays and Lesbians in the Military*, pp. 79, 81. These are spoken and written comments by male servicemembers who participated in Miller's study.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
25. Allan Berube, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, March 30, 1993.
26. Eric Schmitt, "Compromise on Military Gay Ban Gaining Support Among Senators," *New York Times*, May 12, 1993, p. A1.
27. Korb and Osburn, "Asked, Told, Pursued," sec. 4, p. 15.
28. Robert Padgug, "Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History," *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring-Summer 1979), pp. 3–23.
29. John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 104.
30. Steven Zeeland, *Sailors and Sexual Identity: Crossing the Line Between "Straight" and "Gay" in the U.S. Navy* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995), p. 14.
31. Berube, *Fresh Air*, March 30, 1993.
32. Randy Shilts cites several instances of gay men who joined the military explicitly because they hoped it would, as recruitment posters promised, "make a man" out of them. Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, pp. 32, 115, 134.
33. For the classic explorations of the ways in which the U.S. military has defined heterosexual masculinity as central to its functioning, see the writings of Cynthia Enloe, including *Does Khaki Become You?* (Boston: South End Press, 1983); *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); "The Right to Fight: A Feminist

Catch-22," *Ms.*, July-August 1993, pp. 84-87; "Clinton Doctrine: The Masculine Mystique," *Progressive*, January 1994, pp. 24-26.

34. For an account of the use of gendered imagery in basic training, see C. J. Levy, "ARVN as Faggots: Inverted Warfare in Vietnam," in Michael S. Kimmel, ed., *Men's Lives* (New York: Macmillan, 1989). On the processes of breaking down and rebuilding the self that are part of the practices of total institutions, see Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

35. Levy, "ARVN as Faggots"; John A. Ballard and Aliencia J. McDowell, "Hate and Combat Behavior," *Armed Forces and Society* 17, 2 (Winter 1991), pp. 229-241.

36. Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming*, pp. 400-402, 406; Zeeland, *Sailors and Sexual Identity*, pp. 143-145. The shellback ceremony marks the first time a sailor crosses the equator. The navy has revised its guidelines for this ceremony since the Tailhook incident.

37. Lois Shawer, *And the Flag Was Still There: Straight People, Gay People and Sexuality in the U.S. Military* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995), p. xiv. It is interesting that despite her track record of research on the issue, neither the Senate nor the House called on her to testify.

38. Major Rhonda Cornum, April 3, 1993. Once people are in a context in which privacy is no longer possible, this attitude quickly becomes common.

39. The exception, of course, is in basic training, when it is done to new recruits before they become real men, real soldiers.

40. On the conception of "gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction," see Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender and Society* 1, 2 (June 1987), pp. 125-151.

41. "I must emphasize that the current agitation for civil rights is no longer a mere expression of hope on the part of Negroes. On the one hand, it is a positive, resolute outrea[ch]ing for full manhood. On the other hand, it is an equally determined will to stop acquiescing in anything less. Negroes demand full, unqualified, first-class citizenship." A. Phillip Randolph in 1948 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, cited in Bernard C. Nalty and Morris J. MacGregor, *Blacks in the Military: Essential Documents* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1981), p. 237.