

The culture war within

Reconciling policy change and military culture after DADT

BY L. MICHAEL ALLSEP JR., DAVID A. LEVY AND LT. COL. JAMES E. PARCO

In December, Congress passed a bill to repeal the law that had banned openly homosexual men and women from serving in the military since 1993. On Dec. 22, President Obama signed the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010 into law. Although the law will not go into effect until 60 days after the commander in chief, the defense secretary and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff certify the military's readiness to implement the repeal, the legal path has been cleared to give gay men and lesbians equal status under the law with regard to military service.

This is not the first time the military has faced a monumental integration of a previously banned class of Americans. President Truman integrated blacks into the military with the stroke of a pen in 1948, and Congress began nominating women to U.S. service academies in 1976. It's likely that integrating openly homosexual men and women into the military will ultimately be no different than the previous successful integration of blacks and women. Since 1974, six U.S. allies — Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom — have integrated homosexuals into their militaries. At the time of implementation, each country faced similar opposition warning of threats to "social cohesion" and "unit effectiveness." Yet, years later, the biggest story is no story at all. As with race and gender, the further expansion of the military social aperture to accept homosexuals had the singular impact of making those militaries more inclusive and gave equal social status to a previously disadvantaged class of citizens.

A CULTURE APART

Military service confers special honor and distinction. It has come to constitute in the U.S. a privileged class within a citizenry that has mostly never worn the uniform. This privileged identity derives largely from the genuine appreciation most Americans have for the willingness to sacrifice that military service embodies. At the same time, within the military there is a strong sense of belonging to a superior culture, and

increasing numbers of Americans seem willing to accept that premise.

In a recent article titled "Defending the Culture of the Military" in "Attitudes Aren't Free," an Air University Press publication, Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, argued that gays in uniform represent a threat to military culture, which she contends could be "defined most simply as 'how things are done.'" Like most opponents of repealing "don't ask, don't tell," Donnelly made an implicit assumption that there is a separate military culture that represents the best of America. And she's not alone. In support of her position, she amassed a list of 1,167 retired flag and general officers who were signatories on a letter to the president and members of Congress urging support of the 1993 law and opposing any actions to repeal or invalidate it.

When Donnelly defined military culture as "how things are done," what she really meant was how things had been done in the past. Previous generations of Americans have used different political language, which conjured different images and meanings, but each generation has faced the same vexing question of what it means to be a "real" American — that which entitles a person to claim the full mantle of citizenship. To deny gay citizens the right to serve openly in the military not only denied them the privileges and opportunities that come with military service, but it also branded them as not sufficiently moral to be entitled to the full rights and privileges of citizenship. Moreover, that culture has been created and defended by a military hierarchy increasingly out of touch with majority American culture.

For the past 17 years, the veiled opposition to the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" has been less about social cohesion and unit effectiveness and more about the latent discrimination against homosexuality. Below the veneer is the presumed right of the military profession to protect its own culture against what it considers undue and harmful meddling by outsiders. The recent debate over the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" exposed in a harsh light the usually hidden struggle over what it means to be an American that has been waged since colonial times between those who believe in a separate and special race of Americans and those who believe that anyone who accepts the creed and obligations of citizenship can be fully American. Echoes of that struggle can be heard in the so-called "birther movement," which against all the evidence insists that Obama is not really an American. Echoes can also

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be heard in the command posts of the country's highest-ranking commanders.

Andrew Bacevich recently called attention to the danger of a growing "culture of contempt" within the professional ranks of the officer corps against those not in uniform — even, and perhaps especially, against those civilians appointed over them. Certainly there has to be some credence given to this warning after the revelations in Rolling Stone magazine of the often crude contempt Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal and his staff expressed for

their civilian superiors. Bacevich warns of the danger of "praetorianism, warriors becoming enamored with their moral superiority and impatient with the failings of those they are charged to defend," and continues: "The smug disdain for high-ranking civilians casually expressed by McChrystal and his chief lieutenants — along with the conviction that 'Team

America,' as these officers style themselves, was bravely holding out against a sea of stupidity and corruption — suggests that the officer corps of the United States is not immune to this affliction."

Even within the domain of civilian-military relations, there is an assertion of a superior military culture and the belief that only members of that culture represent the true America — "Team America."

A fuzzy but still-powerful cultural definition of America, understood by most social conservatives as emanating from the Founding Fathers, now competes with the legalistic idea of a national creed that accompanies multiculturalism and is embraced by most social progressives. Like the country it serves, the military cannot escape the impact of demographic and cultural changes, or the arguments they bring, by walling itself off from society. Cultural change is slow, but

changing attitudes rooted in privilege and fear of cultural extinction is even slower. Both are inevitable and neither is pleasant. Such has always been the reality of diversity in America.

The propensity for increased diversity is woven into the American social fabric. Ethnic diversity trends in the U.S. population during the last 30 years remain consistent with the diversity trends of the 1800s. According to Census Bureau data, the "diversity index," which measures the probability that two

people randomly drawn from the U.S. population at large will be from different ethnic backgrounds reveals a very clear shift since 1980. In that year the probability was 34 percent; in 1990, 40 percent; in 2000, 47 percent; and in 2010, 52 percent.

Our nation now finds itself at a point in its history where there is no longer a clear majority ethnic group, and while racially exclusive

attitudes are still held by many, America continues on a path of more diversity, not less. Although the reported data reflect only racial demographic change, there are many lessons to be gleaned from our experience with racial integration that can inform prudent action to future challenges. Maintaining a cultural status quo is not an option as the overall empirical message is clear: Cultural change is inevitable, no matter how much some constituencies may resist.

A QUESTION OF MORALITY

The post-Civil War fear in the Deep South that racial integration threatened the traditional political power structure is not that different from the fear some heterosexual military members have of homosexual integration. Just as the integration of blacks led to larger societal integration by way of civil rights legislation that also benefited women and other ethnic



President Obama signs the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act into law at the Interior Department in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 22

minorities, many perceive a clear and present danger that integration of open homosexuality will lead to their greater fear: the “moral depravity” that will emerge from societal sanction of gay marriage and the erosion of family values rooted in religious belief.

Along America’s journey to becoming more racially diverse, greater religious diversity has also emerged, albeit far more slowly. People commonly use their individually chosen moral codes as a proxy for the institutional values they believe the military should inculcate into its value structure. Yet, when it comes to the issue of homosexuality, such moral judgment is often based more on a person’s desire for exclusivity rather than theology.

For instance, in choosing places of worship, people must determine how inclusive they want to be. For a person who is committed to a belief that homosexuals are sinners and abominations before God, he must seek out a church that shares the same desired level of exclusion. Over the past decade, some churches have suffered congregational losses because they were deemed “too inclusive” by congregants who sought a church family that excluded homosexuals. One needs to look no further than to the crisis facing the newly divided Episcopal Church in the U.S. to understand how the issue of homosexuality is fomenting a disagreement over its moral status, even within Christianity.

For fundamentalists who take such scripture literally, homosexual behavior is unquestionably immoral and the biblical view of it is quite clear: “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable” (Leviticus 18:22). However, for others who view biblical teachings in the context of their metaphorical meaning, the exclusion of gays from military service based on moral grounds is less clear. Just as slavery had once been a morally accepted practice and has since been universally repudiated, religious-based views on the morality of homosexuality are at best debatable given that disagreements exist even within major U.S. Christian denominations.

No one was surprised when the 265-page “Report of the Comprehensive Review of the Issues Associated with a Repeal of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’” delivered to Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Nov. 30, noted the apparent

resistance to a policy change on the basis of religious grounds. Specifically, some of the military’s 3,000 chaplains voiced fears that they would not be able to preach the truth of a religious belief that “homosexuality is a sin and an abomination, and that they are required by God to condemn it as such.”

The co-chairmen of the working group that conducted the review, Army Gen. Carter Ham and Defense Department General Counsel Jeh Charles Johnson, addressed the moral and religious concerns in their report, stating “the reality is that in today’s U.S. military, people of sharply different moral values and religious convictions — including those who believe that abortion is murder and those who do not, and those who believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God and those who do not — and those who have no religious convictions at all, already co-exist, work, live, and fight together on a daily basis. The other reality is that policies regarding Service members’ individual expression and free exercise of religion already exist, and we believe they are adequate. Service members will not be required to change their personal views and religious beliefs; they must, however, continue to respect and serve with others who hold different views and beliefs.”

The report cites three critical elements necessary for effective repeal of the open-homosexual ban: leadership, professionalism and respect, noting that among the three elements, “leadership matters most.” Clearly, the leadership demonstrated by the armed services’ chaplain corps will be critical. According to military regulations, “chaplains care for all service members, including those who claim no religious faith, facilitate the religious requirements of personnel of all faiths, provide faith-specific ministries, and advise the command.” Yet, chaplains will also remain free to preach in accordance with the tenets of their faith as guaranteed by the Constitution. For those who approach their pastoral duties embracing themes of inclusion, respect and compassion, the policy change should be uneventful. Yet, for those who embrace themes of exclusivity, the untold story remains (see “Intolerable tolerance” in the July 2008 issue of AFJ (www.armedforcesjournal.com/2008/07/3497809)). Undoubtedly, the approach adopted by the chaplaincy could

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have profound influence on policy implementation.

Many chaplains will likely follow in the spirit of Father Mulcahy, the good-hearted chaplain from the 1970s television series "MASH." Although a proclaimed Jesuit, Mulcahy ministered to the needs of everyone. With alacrity, he willingly assumed his pastoral responsibilities with respect for other faiths or customs. Never did he denounce others and attempt to create divisiveness. He constantly looked for ways to facilitate understanding in a world that made little sense to him and emerged as an exemplar for tolerance, compassion and understanding.

Other chaplains could instead choose to adopt a dual approach. When outside the confines of the chapel, they and their congregants will be expected to outwardly display respect and tolerance of others as required by military regulations. However, while inside their worship centers, they will be free to promote messages that could be considered to be divisive and exclusionary in accordance with the tenets of their faith. Such a dual approach could relegate such chapels as military-sanctioned respect-free zones where military members could come to express their policy opposition. While entirely legal, the effect could further escalate the culture war inside the institutional walls of the military if some chapels transition into centers of political dissent and protest.

Policy change doesn't equate to cultural change. They progress inextricably linked but separate. Nevertheless, change is inevitable, and to prevent potentially unnecessary escalation and unrest, it will be up to the military's senior chaplains to become the pastoral leaders the military now needs them to be. To underscore the analysis of Ham and Johnson: "Leadership matters most." The complexity of the policy change should not be understated. Successful implementation will take time, but no amount of delay will make it more palatable for those constituencies who oppose it.

THE DESTINY OF DIVERSITY

The pluralist ideal of "e pluribus unum" rooted in our nation's federal constitution is essentially political pluralism. Cultural pluralism has always had to fight for social space in America.

In the words of Frederick Douglass: "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that ... it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

The debate about the cultural values of the military institutions that society creates for itself is a normal and necessary discussion. Disagreement should be expected and, in the end, there will always be winners and losers. The real threat now facing the military is that of discrimination. Both sides of the aisle worry that the policy shift could lead to discrimination against their cultural values. How to prevent discrimination, and worse, harassment, inside the ranks presents a perpetual concern for senior leaders. Yet, the secret to the success of major social integration within the military is tried and true and really no secret at all:

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- Establish clear policy guidance as to the expectations for all service members.
- Provide sufficient training on the policy to ensure the expectations are communicated and understood by everyone.
- Demand leaders at all levels take accountability and responsibility to foster inclusion and respect through their words, deeds and example.

- Punish those who don't comply.

The challenge for societal, political and military leaders is always to prevent too great an incongruence between cultural change and policy change. Nevertheless, as history has taught us, when we come to those moments as a nation and find ourselves at a crossroads, we have a choice between one of two paths: the difficult path of progress or the simple one of obstructionism.

The reality of diversity is that regardless of the choice, it is almost inevitable we will eventually arrive at the same place. The only remaining question for the military is how much self-inflicted damage will it have to endure before reaching that point. The path that diversity has followed in the U.S. over the course of its history has been one of increased diversity. At every step of the way, efforts to increase it have been resisted, and in every case, the efforts have failed. No law, sound bite or political rhetoric has ever been able to stop its advance. Indeed, diversity is a patient adversary. **AFJ**