

Women in Combat, Homosexuals in Uniform: The Challenge of Military Leadership

RICHARD H. KOHN

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Bill Clinton's promise to end the ban on homosexuals serving openly in the military, and the continuing furor over women in combat, threaten an ongoing civil-military battle that could damage military professionalism, alienate an otherwise friendly incoming Administration, and, ultimately, ruin the military effectiveness of the American armed forces for the foreseeable future. Military leaders who oppose these changes ought to consider some facts and principles that might change their minds.

First, history. Women have fought successfully, sometimes integrated with men, as in the World War II Allied underground, where they proved just as adept at slitting throats, leading men in battle, suffering torture, and dying, as men; sometimes segregated, as in Soviet air force units, which produced many female aces fighting the Germans. Homosexuals have for centuries served honorably and effectively, in the United States and abroad. Arguments against open service assume that proper policies and effective leadership will fail, even though the services succeeded in integrating African-Americans and women, switching to a draft military in 1940 and then back to an all-volunteer force after 1973, and adjusting to other very divisive social changes over the last half century.

Second, there is fairness. In times of emergency, service is a fundamental obligation no citizen should escape unless disqualified physically

or excused on religious or moral grounds, or because their skills need to be used in some other capacity. But also, participation in combat—dying for one's country—has historically enabled minorities to claim the full privileges of equal participation in society, something basic to our form of government. That is why African-Americans for generations “fought for the right to fight” and why combat and military service are so important to women and homosexuals. Combat and service promote equal protection of the laws and undermine prejudice and discrimination.

Third, the very real practical problems can be overcome. Without question, change will be complicated and costly and take time, and military efficiency will suffer in the short term. Unless carefully explained to the American people, these changes could harm recruiting, precisely in those areas and among those groups which have been traditionally supportive of military service. To accommodate women on combat ships and in flying units (few advocate women in ground combat units), facilities and perhaps weapon systems will need modification. There will be ticklish, perhaps intractable, problems of privacy and personal discomfort (there already *are* in the military). The services will be distracted from their primary peacetime duties of readiness, preparation, and modernization. Leadership at all levels will be challenged to maintain morale and effectiveness in circumstances where, historically, macho behavior and explicit sexual banter helped forge the personal bonds that enabled units to train and fight effectively.

Cohesion, the key to military success, will be more difficult without traditional methods of male bonding. The strict authority, harsh discipline, and instant obedience required for victory in battle have always been subject to abuse, and adding more women and ending discrimination against gay men and lesbians will increase the problem. To deal with it, military leaders will have to redouble their efforts to define appropriate conduct and to punish or expel those in the ranks who cannot or will not control their language and their behavior. The problem, as Tailhook so clearly reveals, already exists; the fundamental issue in the short run will not be attitude, but behavior, and the military can be extremely effective in controlling behavior. The services will have to review policies on acceptable conduct, on and off duty. Research on maintaining cohesion without scapegoating homosexuals and treating

Dr. Richard H. Kohn chairs the Curriculum in Peace, War, and Defense at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He was the Visiting Professor of Military History at the US Army Military History Institute and Army War College in 1980-81, and was the Chief of Air Force History from 1981 to 1991. He edited *The United States Military Under the Constitution of the United States, 1789-1989* (New York Univ. Press, 1991). Dr. Kohn is currently the president of the Society for Military History.

women as sex objects will have to be undertaken. The challenge to our military leadership, at all levels, will be enormous, and it will last as long as sexism and homophobia afflict significant portions of our population.

And yet, our military can adjust—once again. It is natural to resist because change poses a diversion from the primary purposes of preparing for and deterring war, and engaging in combat. That is why as outstanding a public servant as General George C. Marshall during World War II opposed racial integration, believing it divisive and concerned that the Army could not afford to act as a “social laboratory” during a national emergency. But civilian control means that our military will be organized and will operate according to the nation’s needs and desires. Historically our national security and our social, legal, and constitutional practices have had to be balanced. The services know that military efficiency and combat effectiveness do not always determine our military policies, and less so in times of peace and lessened threat.

If President Clinton follows through on the promise to let gay men and lesbians serve openly, and if, for reasons of fairness and justice, he permits women to fight in combat units at sea and in the air, then the American military must comply, and without resistance. To resist would only make the adjustment more time-consuming and disruptive, and would itself undermine military effectiveness.

In the long run, the services should find that their effectiveness, as in the experience of racial and gender integration, will be enhanced rather than diminished. The strength of our military depends ultimately upon its bonds to the people; the armed forces will be stronger the more they reflect the values and ideals of the society they serve. □

For perspectives strongly at odds with that of Dr. Kohn, see the articles following by Martin van Creveld and by R. D. Adair and Joseph C. Myers.

—The Editors
