Military Culture: United States

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

Although the United States military strives to create a common culture among its service personnel, it is neither a monolithic nor stable entity. Similarly, the U. S. military's relation to homosexuality is extremely complex and contradictory. On the one hand, it has until recently defined itself explicitly in opposition to homosexuality, but in practice, it has often facilitated the very behavior and, through its regulatory policies and their inconsistent enforcement, promoted the identities it has attempted to exclude.

Throughout the U. S. military, common elements distinguish its culture from other organizations. These elements include a high standard of discipline that helps organize and structure the armed forces, a professional ethos of loyalty and self-sacrifice that maintains order during battle, a distinct set of ceremony and etiquette that help create shared rituals and common identities, and an emphasis on group cohesion and esprit de corps that connect service members to each other.

Yet military officials insist that any discussion of U. S. military culture must take into account the distinct cultures and traditions of each service branch. Over the years, the U. S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard have all developed their own uniforms, rituals, institutions, and organizational strengths that make each unique.

As the oldest service branch, the U. S. Army continues to define itself in terms of its most triumphant historical experience, World War II, and its vision of ultimate service to the nation. Moreso than other branches, it remains structurally dependent on its Cold War-era divisions and has moved slowly towards creating more rapidly deployable and flexible forces. In spite of its resistance to structural change, the U. S. Army has most successfully integrated racial minorities into its ranks. As of 2000, 40% of active Army personnel were racial minorities.

In contrast, the youngest service branch is the U. S. Air Force, and its culture is most distinguished by its dependence on and enthusiasm for technology. In recent years, the Air Force has continued to develop new aircraft even at the expense of maintaining high levels of personnel. Even so, its reliance on such expensive equipment requires very large combat and services support structures, resulting in the greatest integration of women of any service. Women comprise 18% of Air Force personnel, and almost all its positions are open to them.

The Inconsistent Exclusion of Homosexuality

Cultural differences between branches notwithstanding, in relation to issues of race, gender, and sexuality, Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Judith Reppy caution us not to place too much importance on the "complex and competing elements of military culture." Instead they encourage us to interrogate the values that the armed forces especially privilege.

Until the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" became effective on September 20, 2011, the entire military ostensibly conformed to anti-gay regulations. Even following repeal each branch continues to follow the

Uniform Code of Military Justice laws that prohibit sodomy and other forms of same-sex sexual behavior.

Officially, the U. S. military defined itself in opposition to homosexuality after World War I when the Articles of War went into effect in 1917, outlawing sodomy. Since then, the U. S. military subscribed to a variation of the idea that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service," a position that was first codified in 1981 and remained in effect until 2011.

Yet as much as the military openly distanced itself from homosexuality, it could never rid itself of gay and lesbian service members. Allan Bérubé and Leisa Meyer have shown that the military's attempt to exclude homosexuals and prohibit homosexuality during World War II was unsuccessful. Worried that the military was allowing homosexuals into the services, military officials developed an elaborate system to bar gays and lesbians from the armed forces. They used doctors and psychiatrists to interview and evaluate suspected homosexuals at induction and prevent them from serving.

Largely dependent on stereotypical gender markers and direct questions about sexual orientation, these techniques proved futile: gay men and lesbians who fit stereotypical gender roles simply "passed" and those who knew themselves to be homosexual and wanted to serve often lied.

Ironically, these attempts to regulate gay and lesbian identity introduced hundreds of thousands of young Americans to the idea of gay and lesbian identity, inadvertently foregrounding the very sexuality the military had hoped to rid itself of. And once in the military, gay and lesbian service members found themselves living in same-sex environments that often facilitated their meeting each other and the creation of fledgling homosexual communities.

The relative tolerance of gays and lesbians in the military during World War II is true of other wars. In fact, the U. S. military has a record of retaining gays and lesbians during times of war, only to discharge them during peace.

During the height of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, for example, the U. S. Navy discharged 483 and 461 gay men and lesbians in 1950 and 1970 respectively, about half its annual average. An even more extreme example occurred in the 1991 Persian Gulf War when the Pentagon issued a "stop-loss" order, which effectively ceased all discharges on the basis of homosexuality until the war was over. According to Michael Desch, research shows that "during wartime, open homosexuality has been relatively well tolerated."

In spite of its long history of officially banning gays and lesbians from service, the U. S. military has never treated them consistently. Indeed, sometimes it exercised great discretion in retaining them in the face of the official policy. An oft-cited example of this discretion occurred during World War II, when General Dwight D. Eisenhower issued an order to expel the lesbians in the Women's Army Corps only to discover that were his order carried out, he would lose many of his most outstanding personnel, including his secretary and a member of his staff. He is reported to have said, "Forget that order."

Even in the most tolerant of times, however, gay and lesbian military personnel have occupied a precarious position, subject to a long list of discriminatory and arbitrary practices, including witch hunts, courts martial, and dishonorable discharges.

The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy which was in effect from 1993 until 2011 was supposed to prohibit witch hunts, such as the 1980 investigation into lesbianism aboard the ship USS *Norton Sound*, which became famous for the tactics of intimidation and harassment employed by the Naval Investigative Service; but because the emphasis in the "Don't, Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue" policy was much greater on the first two elements than on the third, witch hunts nevertheless continued.

Significantly, however, most of the investigations into homosexuality under DADT resulted in honorable discharges, rather than the stigmatizing dishonorable discharges that in the past often ruined the civilian

lives of gay men and women expelled from the military.

Still, the DADT policy, which resulted in the discharges of over 14,000 servicemembers, nevertheless exacted a serious toll on the careers of gay and lesbian military personnel.

The Warrior Ethos

The U. S. military's inability to deal consistently with homosexuality stemmed in large part from its intense valorization of traditional forms of masculinity. Serving as a model for the perfect soldier, these ideal qualities include aggression, independence, risk taking, and sexual bravado. Even though many gay men and lesbians possess these qualities, and may on that account be particularly attracted to military service, military culture and its officials continue to see masculinity as an exclusive attribute of heterosexual men, thereby excluding homosexuals and women.

In its conflation of homosexuality and effeminacy, the U. S. military cannot imagine masculine homosexuals who can succeed as soldiers, despite the fact that homosexuals have always served in the military, often with distinction.

Women in the Military

This culture of masculinity has proven especially vexing to women in the military. In the past thirty years, women have begun to play an increasingly important role in the U. S. military. As it has moved from a conscription-based service to an all-volunteer force, the U. S. military has begun to give women increasingly more important roles to play in the military.

Yet as women have risen in importance and gotten closer to serving in combat roles, they have faced increasing difficulties. To prove their abilities, they often have to conform to masculine standards of behavior, yet succeeding as warriors invites sexual harassment and scrutiny of their sexuality. The more they fulfill the expectations of "masculinity," the more vulnerable they are to charges of lesbianism.

In 1999, a study found that 23% of women in the military have been targets of threatened or actual violence during their military careers. Critics of the military argue that sexual abuse helps maintain a clear gender distinction in the military, that it is in fact a brutal way to keep women from infringing on a male-dominated profession.

In spite of the military's insistence that service members may report such harassment without fear of retribution, women who do so often faced discharge, because reporting such abuse often leads to being labeled as a lesbian.

This happens in part because the heterosexist assumptions that structure the military's attitudes toward harassment insist that women who do not wish to be the object of men's desire, no matter how violent, must be lesbian. And even if such accusations are not true, the mere suggestion of lesbianism is enough to ruin a woman's career, given the ease with which "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" allowed such gossip to be used as proof in investigations and administrative discharge hearings.

It is widely believed that lesbians are disproportionately represented in the military. Whether they are or not, they were certainly disproportionately discharged from the military under DADT. For example, in 1999, women comprised 14% of the military, but accounted for 31% of the discharges under the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. From 1994 to 2000, women have ranged from 12% to 15% of the forces, but have accounted for 21% to 31% of the gay discharges. During those seven years, on average, women comprised 13.6% of the military but were 25.9% of the gay discharges.

Military Demographics

In the past thirty years, increasing numbers of military personnel have come to identify as Republican, with a disproportionate number of its officers coming from the South. The end of conscription has also meant that personnel serve for longer periods of time, resulting in a professional military that has become more insular over the years.

In spite of the conservative trends in military demographics, in the past ten years service members' attitudes towards gay and lesbian service members have grown slowly more tolerant. In 1993, Laura Miller surveyed almost 2,000 U. S. Army soldiers and found that 67% of the male soldiers and 32% of the females "strongly opposed" allowing gays and lesbians to serve in the U. S. military.

Yet this strong sentiment against homosexuality has not remained consistent over time. In 1998, the percentage of U. S. Army men who "strongly opposed" allowing gays and lesbians in the military dropped to 36%, while the percentage of Army women "strongly opposed" fell to 16%.

Other surveys of military personnel bear out this shift in attitudes about homosexuality. Between 1994 and 1999, the percentage of U. S. Navy officers who felt "uncomfortable in the presence of homosexuals" decreased from 57.8% to 36.4%. A survey measuring male Marines' attitudes towards homosexuals in 1999 found that on a scale of 0 to 100, the average score was 47.52, meaning that indifference rather than extreme like or dislike characterizes their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

Harassment

Even as tolerance for gays and lesbians in the military has grown within the military, it remains a place in which harassment of gays and lesbians is unofficially condoned. Anti-gay hatred has even motivated murder.

For example, in July 1999, Private First Class Barry Winchell was attacked and beaten with a baseball bat while he slept in his barracks at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, because his attackers believed him to have been gay. He died the next day. PFC Winchell's murder was the culmination of months of harassment, which many peers and commanders witnessed but did nothing to stop. His murder illustrates the culture of homophobia and harassment that characterized the environment at Fort Campbell.

PFC Winchell's murder may be an extreme manifestation of anti-gay harassment, but harassment based on real or perceived sexual orientation is hardly rare in the military. A recent study in which 71,570 active duty service members from all branches of the military were surveyed found that 38% of people experienced or witnessed harassment based on perceived sexual orientation in the twelve months prior to the survey.

Conclusion

With regard to homosexuality, U. S. military culture appears to be deeply conflicted. Even though studies that measure attitudes have shown a decrease in anti-gay sentiment, the actions and observations of service members clearly tell a more complex story, one that confirms the homophobic and violent reputation of the U. S. military culture.

Despite this reputation, however, gay men and lesbians have served throughout the history of the U. S. military and continue to do so. Many have risen in the ranks and achieved distinguished careers in the military. Like their heterosexual counterparts they have served for any number of reasons, including patriotism, personal growth, and travel and educational opportunities. Considering the obstacles and dangers that they face in the military, gay men and women committed to a career in the service must exhibit an intense determination.

However, it needs to be observed that in military culture, homoeroticism is rife. Despite the homophobia frequently encouraged in the military, the same-sex emotional bonding and close physical contact are

themselves important facets of military life that attract both homosexuals and heterosexuals. It is not accidental that soldiers and sailors and their uniforms occupy an important position in the fantasy lives of many gay men.

With the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, the military has an opportunity to integrate openly gay men and women into its ranks in a way that may help to lessen its reputation for homophobia.

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About the Author

Geoffrey W. Bateman is the Assistant Director for the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military,

a research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that promotes the study of gays and lesbians in the military. He is co-editor of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military,* as well as author of a study on gay personnel and multinational units. He earned his M.A. in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in eighteenth-century British literature and theories of genders and sexuality, but now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is co-parenting two sons with his partner and a lesbian couple.