

Don't Repeal "Don't Ask/Don't Tell"

Don't sacrifice unit cohesion for a social experiment.

BY STUART KOEHL

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American soldiers in battle don't fight for what some president says on TV, they don't fight for mom, apple pie or the American flag, they fight for one another.

—Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, U.S. Army, *We Were Soldiers Once, and Young*

On May 27, 2010, the House of Representatives [voted](#) to repeal the so-called “Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell” (DADT) law of 1993 that, while leaving intact the military’s ban on homosexuals serving in uniform, prohibits the military from inquiring into the sexual preferences of military personnel or requiring them to answer questions about it. The [Senate](#) is expected to follow suit in coming weeks, though the [public dissent](#) by the chiefs of the individual Armed Services in opposition to Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, shows how contentious the issue remains. Just a month earlier, the Navy announced that it would allow [women to serve on submarines](#), further eroding the military’s traditional prohibition on women to fill combat roles.

Both issues—women in combat and gays in the military—are different manifestations of a single problem: the failure of America’s political leadership to understand the factors that motivate men to fight in battle and to continue fighting under the most horrific conditions—what professionals call “combat effectiveness” and “unit cohesion” respectively. In all the discussions of the issue, these terms seldom come up; when they do, it is only to be dismissed out of hand by those who wish to see all military positions opened to both women and homosexuals.

Those who have never served in combat have no idea what it is like. The most graphic books and movies do not even scratch the surface. Take the first twenty minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*, amplified by an order of magnitude, plus the smell of blood, vomit, excrement, explosives and burning vehicles would still not be sufficient. After more than thirty years investigating the experience of men in battle, I don’t even pretend to understand it as well as a soldier who has been through just one firefight. This is why combat veterans are so reluctant to speak of their wartime deeds—civilians, and even rear-echelon military types, lack the frame of reference that would make understanding possible.

Most people think men fight in war for patriotism, or abstraction like democracy, freedom or “the revolution.” But this is incorrect. Men enlist for such reasons, but they do not explain why men fight, and more importantly, why they keep fighting and do not simply run away at the first opportunity. As the French *philosophe* Montesquieu noted, “A rational army would run away”; i.e., war is so terrible no one in his right mind would choose to fight.

Until the advent of modern warfare, men were held in the ranks by “external” discipline. Fighting in close formations, under the watchful eyes of their officers, it was difficult to shirk or to flee. The tactics of the time also meant survival depended on staying in ranks, while the closeness of the formation itself lent psychological support to the individual soldier. But intelligent commanders found other ways to bolster morale, including smart uniforms, distinctions on regimental flags, and shiny medals.

But the most effective of all was the creation within the larger unit of small groups of eight to ten men (what the Romans called a *contubernium*), who lived and served together. Often recruited from the same village or region, these men, if not already friends, neighbors or even family, soon established a very close personal bond as a "primary group." Through shared hardship they became a "band of brothers" who would look out for each other, fight for each other, die for each other. Fear of death is ubiquitous in combat, and the desire to hide or run often overwhelming, but for a man there is a worse fear—being perceived as a coward in the eyes of the primary group, of letting down his friends, his mates, his buddies. The instinct for self-preservation fights with loyalty to the primary group, and the stronger the primary group, the harder and longer the men in it will fight, the more pain and suffering they will endure, before, finally, the flight instinct takes over and the rout begins.

If this was so in the age of musket and sword, it is far more important today, because one can no longer control armies through external discipline. The lethality of modern weapons requires modern armies to fight dispersed. Instead of standing shoulder-to-shoulder in serried ranks, they spread out, several yards between men, deliberately exploiting cover to avoid detection. The frontage held by a 600-man battalion in the Civil War is today held by a platoon of just 40 men. With everybody diligently cultivating invisibility, the result is an apparently "empty battlefield." But if the enemy cannot see the soldier, neither can his officer, most of the time. Effectively alone, it is much easier for the individual soldier to just cower in his foxhole, or even slink away to the rear, with nobody the wiser.

Modern "fire-and-movement" tactics are based upon the principle of "shared risk": one element of a unit shoots to suppress enemy weapons, while a second element rushes forward to positions from which they can fire upon the enemy, at which point the two groups switch roles, repeatedly, until the enemy position is overrun. This demands a high degree of trust: the fire unit is not going to expose itself to enemy fire unless it is sure the movement element is actually going to rush forward; and the movement element is not going to rush forward unless it is sure that the fire element is going to suppress the enemy. Even within elements, every man has to be sure the other will do his job, otherwise he is less likely to do his own.

Modern armies try to ensure this through "internal discipline"—training and indoctrination intended to inoculate the soldier against the noise and chaos of the battlefield, reducing the necessary actions to an instinctive drill that enable him to respond automatically to commands and other stimuli. But even more than this, modern armies rely on small unit cohesion, the bonding of the primary group (still, after two millennia, your basic 8-man squad). If the group bond is strong, then the men will shoot and move rather than let their buddies down. Conversely, when the group bond is weak, it's every man for himself.

In World War II, the U.S. Army ignored small unit cohesion. Rather than pulling units out of the line to rebuild and integrate replacements were inserted directly into combat from "replacement depots," like interchangeable parts in a machine, without time to acclimate to combat or to form bonds with the men in their squad or platoon. Strangers fighting among strangers, they were far more prone to "combat fatigue" (now called PTSD) and took casualties at a far higher rate than men who had trained together for months or years. Major General Charles Gerhardt, commander of the 29th Infantry Division from D-Day to VE-Day, observed: "Our first replacements, right after D-Day, had to be put right into units, and many a man joined the division at night—and if his unit was heavily engaged, he was dead before anyone had really known him."

The U.S. Army repeated the same mistakes in Korea and Vietnam; not until the 1980s was small unit cohesion given the attention it deserves.

So what has all this to do with gays and women in the military? Everything.

In Stephen Pressfield's novel *Gates of Fire*, the Spartans at Thermopylae, knowing in the morning they will "Dine in Hades," debate among themselves the question, "What is the opposite of fear?" The men give various answers—courage, hatred, anger, duty—but Deinokles, the hero of the piece, has the last word. Looking at his comrades, tired, filthy, bruised, many wounded, he shakes his head and says, "The opposite of fear is love."

This is absolutely true. That which overcomes fear in battle is love—the love of the members of the primary group for each other. But it is a very special sort of love. The Greeks had a word for it: *agape*, the total and selfless love that God has for mankind. Opposed to *agape* stands *eros*, passionate love with overtones of sexual desire and possession. The military cultivates *agape* in its ranks, but has no room for *eros*. *Agape* will inspire a man to sacrifice his life for a comrade. *Agape* keeps him in his place alongside his friends. Countless observers have seen and written about this. Combat veterans intuitively understand it, even if they have difficulty putting their feelings into words. This particular type of *agape* is unique to men in a purely military setting—because nowhere else are the conditions as extreme and the stakes as high. Whenever sex is introduced, whether hetero or homo, *eros* raises its head and group cohesion crumbles.

The issue of women in combat is relatively easy to address. Leaving aside legendary Amazons, only two armies in history have deliberately allowed women to fight alongside men—the Soviet army in World War II, and the Israel Defense Forces in the 1948 War of Independence. Both had an ideological commitment to radical egalitarianism, and both discontinued the experiment almost as soon as it began, for the same reason: it didn't work. Women did not stand up as well to the rigors of life in the field, and most literally could not pull their weight. In addition, discovering that they were being opposed by women tended to enrage the enemy—whether the Germans or Arabs—causing them to fight with extra ferocity (not to mention what they did to women soldiers who fell into their hands). This, in turn, caused the male soldiers in their units to coddle them all the more, to protect them from the most dangerous tasks, and to endanger the mission to avoid endangering the women.

In the Soviet army, women were also subject to sexual abuse by male soldiers, and most attached themselves to a male officer for protection, becoming *pokhodno-polevy zheny* (field-service wives) for the duration.

Even when such blatant abuse was not present, women tended to have a corrosive effect on unit cohesion, simply because they were young women living in close proximity to equally young men under stressful situations. It was impossible to keep male and female soldiers from “fraternizing,” and when a woman in a unit paired up with a man in a unit, it created unnecessary friction and jealousy. In some cases, female soldiers took advantage of their position to unload onerous duties on the men in return for the promise (or delivery) of sexual favors; others played one man off against the other. This was true not only in combat units, but in combat support and combat service support units as well. At the end of the day, the presence of women had a negative effect on both combat effectiveness and small unit cohesion, which is why both Israel and Russia dropped women from combat units—though the same problems were found in mixed support units as well.

Similar phenomena have been seen in mixed U.S. units (Military Police, Signals, Transportation, Maintenance, etc.), as well as aboard U.S. Navy vessels, exacerbated by a politically correct atmosphere that is widely perceived as promoting a double standard, both physical and behavioral. For instance, the physical fitness standards for women are more lax than for men, which means that most women cannot carry the same loads as men, forcing men to carry more than their share. In addition, the impact of sexual misconduct seems to fall more heavily on men than on women. A man who contracts a venereal disease that renders him unfit for duty is subject to military penalties. A woman who gets pregnant is offered either a transfer to a desk job, or a general discharge from the service—even if she became pregnant through fraternization with her fellow soldiers, which is normally a military offense. The problem is extremely serious in war, since pregnant women transferred out of their units leave a hole in the organization at a critical moment. Some ships, for instance, have lost upwards of 25% of the women in their crews in the course of a single deployment. Some women have deliberately become pregnant to get out of deployment altogether.

Proponents of women in combat roles note that *some* women do have the upper body strength, and should be subject to the same disciplinary standards as men, thus are just as capable as men. The logic is faulty. While some women can be adequate *warriors*, the military is not simply an aggregation of warriors, it is a collective of soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen organized into units and formations, and it is the performance of those units and formations, not the individual that counts.

By their nature, women disrupt the combat effectiveness of those units, while the special accommodations that have to be made for women exert a significant cost on military budgets. The Air Force, for instance, now has to make aircraft cockpits suitable for pilots from 5'2" all the way to 6'5". On ships, they require separate berthing areas, showers and heads. The problem on submarines is even more serious, since space is always at a premium, and on most submarines sailors are required to share a berth ("hot bunking"). The number of women serving on subs is bound to be small, and there are no small berthing areas for enlisted personnel, so women will have to displace either petty officers or officers. If one female officer is assigned to a submarine, she would have to occupy a stateroom meant for two, forcing a male officer to hot bunk with two other officers. No matter, we are talking *equality* here.

In the matter of homosexuals serving openly in the military, physical differences are not a factor. Nor is it simply that, as Colin Powell once put it, *Men don't like to take showers with men who like to take showers with men*. Rather, we're back to the problem of *eros* vs. *agape*.

Historically, most armies have seen homosexual behavior as undermining military discipline. Even the Spartans didn't tolerate it in the field, while the Romans considered it a capital offense. There is just one noteworthy example of open homosexuality in military service—the Theban Sacred Band, 150 pairs of homosexual lovers who swore an oath to stand by each other to death (and who were wiped out by Alexander the Great at Cheironeia). So even fairly tolerant societies found homosexuality unacceptable in the army, for the same reason that women were unacceptable: they introduced sexual tension into small group dynamics, undermining unit cohesion.

That tension has several causes. First, heterosexual men in the unit may not like becoming potential objects of sexual attraction to their fellow soldiers (the same thing also applies to women in mixed units), especially given the close quarters and lack of privacy that is part of field service. Second, there may be the suspicion that one or more soldiers may actually have entered into a sexual relationship, with the disruptive effect that can have on both discipline and performance (i.e., favoritism—will this guy risk his life to save me, or will he look out for his "special friend" first). If the homosexual involved is an officer, it creates all sorts of opportunities for abuse, which we have already seen in sexually mixed units. Given the kind of minefield that civilian workplaces have become due to sexual harassment laws, one wonders about the wisdom of tossing metaphorical mines in among the real ones with which our troops have to contend.

- Homosexuals have the same right to serve in uniform as a heterosexuals. This argument, [supported by a number of conservatives](#), falsely asserts that military service is a right, rather than a privilege. The sole purpose of the military is to fight the country's wars; anything that undermines that purpose must be suppressed. The military rejects people for all sorts of reasons based on military effectiveness, and sexual preference is just one of many.
- DADT creates an atmosphere of deception. Despite DADT, homosexual behavior is still a military offense (so is adultery). DADT merely prevented the military from actively searching for homosexuals in the ranks. If caught, they should not lie about it, but take the consequences of willfully violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The argument does not address the effects of open homosexuals on morale, readiness and combat effectiveness.
- There is no evidence that homosexuality undermines morale or military effectiveness. Several armies now allow homosexuals to serve openly—including the armies of Israel and the United Kingdom. But history provides plenty of evidence that homosexuality does undermine unit cohesion. The current practices of other armies are an experiment in progress, which should not overturn empirically proven policies. There are also significant differences between those armies and the United States military. The first is scale—the entire British army is barely the size of the Marine Corps, while the Israeli army is very small unless fully mobilized. Neither the British nor the Israeli armies undertake extended overseas deployments of the length or scale of the U.S. military; the Israeli army is very much a "commuter" force, with most troops living at home unless serving in the field—which is only an hour or so from home. As a result, neither has any experience with homosexuals serving in the field for extended periods. Finally, neither the British nor the Israeli armies have experienced anything approaching an extended, high-intensity war, so neither has any idea what effect homosexuals in the ranks might have on combat effectiveness.
- The U.S. military needs the skills of homosexual soldiers. Proponents of repeal always bring forth the gay Arabic linguist or battlefield surgeon who has been released from duty. It is implied that our antiquated policies are depriving the military of valuable personnel. Perhaps. The benefits of retaining them have to be weighed against the greater cost to combat effectiveness. Moreover, as homosexuals comprise only some 2.5% of the population, the numbers with which we are dealing are not statistically significant.
- Allowing homosexuals to serve is the same as the fight to allow blacks to serve. This is perhaps the most obnoxious and misleading canard of all. The differences ought to be obvious: race is superficial, while sexuality is ontological; i.e., race affects how one looks, sex and sexuality affect how one behaves. Blacks rightly reject the comparison, and so should the rest of us.

Military professionals ought to know that both allowing women to serve in combat and homosexuals to serve openly, undermine military effectiveness by injecting sexual dynamics into primary group relations. So far, the United States has not paid for its policy of allowing women to serve in positions that increasingly expose them to combat. The U.S. military has not really been tested against a first-rate adversary since the Vietnam war, and we do not know how well our units would perform under pressure from competent opposition in extended combat. We have no idea what effect gays serving openly will have, but we have every reason to believe it will be far more disruptive than either racial integration or the expansion of the role of women. But given that we are at war, do we really want to use the military as a laboratory for social experiments?

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