

The Politics of Paranoia

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For almost 20 years, gay rights advocates and defenders of military anti-gay discrimination engaged in a phony debate about whether allowing open service would undermine unit cohesion. To be sure, a preponderance of evidence showed that open service would not undermine cohesion, and the repeal of don't ask, don't tell (DADT) required advocates to prevail on that point in the court of public opinion. But concerns about cohesion were never the basis of opposition to open service. Rather, opposition was a modern incarnation of the politics of paranoia, a dangerous tradition in American history. Acknowledging that DADT had nothing to do with cohesion and that military leaders allowed the armed forces to be implicated in the politics of paranoia could facilitate disabling paranoia as the basis for other political projects such as anti-immigrant xenophobia. For a video on DADT and paranoia, search for "Donnelly Belkin DADT" on YouTube.

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This speech was given at the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama on Wednesday, May 26, 2010, where I was an invited guest on a panel discussion on "Gays in the Military." I thank Jim Parco for his generous friendship, his incredible work on this project, and his brave and relentless pursuit of equality for those who haven't achieved it. The full debate is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4s_kkmwEJY

Thank you so much for the hospitality and generous introduction. I have to tell you that I'm missing my dance class in San Francisco this morning. I go

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about five times per week, and I can't tell you how many times the dance class has consisted of me and forty-five other women. Once, I asked the teacher, "Where are all the other gay guys?" This is a true story by the way. He answered, "Well, you know, they attend sometimes but they don't like getting their asses kicked by the suburban heterosexual women." And I said, "I'm comfortable here because that's the story of my life." So we'll see how the debate goes today.

It's a big honor to be here with my distinguished colleagues, Michael Allsep and Elaine Donnelly. Elaine Donnelly and I disagree on many issues (turning to the panel) but I respect very much your passion and your fighting for your values and it's an honor to share this stage with you. So I'm very glad to be here.

I only want to make three points today. The first point I want to make is that don't ask, don't tell is gone. Repeal is a done deal. It actually might happen tomorrow when the Senate Armed Services Committee marks up this year's defense authorization bill. It might happen next year. It might happen in two years. The timing is indeterminate, but the policy is gone. The majority of the American people, including Republicans, want it gone. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff wants it gone. The Commander in Chief wants it gone. The Secretary of Defense wants it gone. It's gone. So, you can think that's a good thing, or you can think that's a bad thing. You can think that's going to harm unit cohesion. You can think that's going to help unit cohesion. But the main thing that I want to say today is that this policy's demise is inevitable, so we as a community need to think about how to deal with that and how to plan for that day, whether the day is in the immediate future or slightly beyond that.

Now there will be pressure once don't ask, don't tell goes away to pretend that it never happened, and to smile and to say, "Well, that was a part of our history and we've moved on as a culture. We've moved on as a military. And now, after don't ask, don't tell, we're an inclusive force and were going to get along just fine." But, I actually think there's a little bit of a danger when historical memory works like that.

So, for the second of my three points—and again, I only make three points today—I want to meditate for a minute about what I think don't ask, don't tell has been about. I think there is a danger in forgetting what this policy has really meant to the military and to the culture. I want to argue that don't ask, don't tell is an example of the politics of paranoia. I take this from a fantastic, classic book by Richard Hofstadter (1965), *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter finds paranoia on the American right and the American left, so this is not a phenomenon that's unique to one side of the aisle or the other. But, in this case I want to make the claim that don't ask, don't tell is a classic example of what Hofstadter is talking about.

So, how do you know the politics of paranoia when you see it? How do you know what the politics of paranoia is? Well, Hofstadter gives us three

different ways to know when we're looking at the politics of paranoia, and I want to go through each of those three elements and talk about the resonance with don't ask, don't tell. So, I'm going to read—and I know it's horrible to be read to—but I'm going to read a very brief passage. Regarding the first of three elements that make up the politics of paranoia, Hofstadter says:

The central image [of the politics of paranoia] is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life. (p. 29)

That is the most important element of the politics of paranoia. If you look at the rhetoric in the conversation about don't ask, don't tell among the people that defend anti-gay discrimination, you will see that that is exactly their mentality. They believe that a gay agenda is taking over this country, destroying our way of life, and that we have to draw the line in the sand at gays in the military. I'll read one or two passages to you. Here's one from Ronald Ray, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense:

Citizens must make an effort to understand how the elite . . . are working together to establish an entirely new morality. The morality of the New World Order. The new morality seeks to "free" people including our children from any moral limits on commonsense right and wrong. Good and decent people must see that the opening up of the military to homosexuals (right on the heels of allowing women to serve in combat) is simply the latest step in an agenda that has at its end the complete transformation of the nation's moral and spiritual being (Britt & Dickinson, 2006).

And here is Elaine Donnelly on the radio:

If this kind of [homosexual] agenda is forced upon the Marine Corps, if it's okay for the Marines, then why is it not okay for the local school, the local marriage bureau. Ultimately, all of civilian life would be affected (Corley, 2010).

So, this first element of the politics of paranoia is the idea that there is a great conspiracy out there to change the country and undermine the country, and this is a classic element of don't ask, don't tell and the politics of paranoia.

A second element of the politics of paranoia has to do with sexual deviance and sexual power. Again, I read to you briefly from Hofstadter. In the political paranoid mind,

sexual freedom [is] often attributed to him [the enemy], his lack of moral inhibition, his possession of especially effective techniques for fulfilling his desires, give exponents of the paranoid style an opportunity to . . . express unacceptable aspects of their own minds. (p. 34)

Now, I'm not going to go on at great length about this second element of the politics of paranoia. I think we know it when we see it. But I will tell you based on my reading of the literature that if you look at the defense of anti-gay discrimination and its history, you will find that literature littered with claims about gays as predators, gays as rapists, gays as people who drink each other's urine, gays as people who ingest each other's feces, and on and on and on. This is a classic element of the politics of paranoia.

A third and final element of the politics of paranoia that maps perfectly onto don't ask, don't tell has to do with the relationship to fact. Here, again, is Richard Hofstadter:

What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts . . . but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events. (p. 37)

So, how does that map onto don't ask, don't tell? Well, the examples are all over the debate, all over the literature, but I'll give you two recent examples of that curious leap between the tiny little fact that may actually be accurate and the consequences of that fact. General Sheehan, a retired, four-star Marine general, recently testified in the Senate and went so far as to tell Senator Levin during his testimony that the 1995 Srebrenica Massacre, the worst massacre in the history of Europe since the second World War, in which 8,000 Bosniaks, mostly men and children were killed, was the responsibility of gay soldiers in the Dutch armed forces. That it was because the Dutch included gays and lesbians in their armed forces that the Srebrenica Massacre happened, because the Dutch couldn't be effective peacekeepers. Now, this caused such a firestorm in the Netherlands that the general was forced to retract his remarks. But you get the picture. Or, consider the one thousand generals who recently signed a statement, urging President Obama not to repeal don't ask, don't tell, that said if don't ask, don't tell is repealed, this will "break the All-Volunteer Force" (Center for Military Readiness, 2009). It will break the all-volunteer force. Really?

This is the worst tradition of American politics, the politics of paranoia. We see it in McCarthyism. We see it in the Korematsu ruling. It's divide-and-conquer politics. It's the politics of divisiveness.

And you might ask yourself, "But isn't don't ask, don't tell about unit cohesion? Isn't it about military readiness? Is it really about the politics of paranoia?" I'm glad to have a debate with you about unit cohesion. I've been having it for the past decade, and it's certainly true that the preponderance of evidence shows that the repeal of don't ask, don't tell will not undermine unit cohesion. But don't ask, don't tell has never been about unit cohesion. Peter Pace, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was honest enough several years ago to say at an editorial board meeting of the *Chicago Tribune* that the reason we have don't ask, don't tell is because homosexual conduct is

immoral (Shanker, 2007). He was also forced to retract his remarks, but what I told the media at that time was that I was probably the only gay person in the country who was happy that he had finally been honest. Someone defending the policy had finally been honest about the real reason for the policy. It's not unit cohesion. It's morality. And I am glad to have that moral conversation.

Now to my third point, my conclusion. If I asked you to name the military's proudest moment, some of you might vote for Gettysburg. Some of you might have another moment that you'd point to, but in my mind, the military's proudest moment was the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings. Because during the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings, the military finally stood up and said to Senator McCarthy "Enough. Enough." Senator McCarthy, consistent with Richard Hofstadter's views, actually did have some facts on his side. It turns out, as the decryption of Soviet cables shows, that there actually were some Communists in government. It's not clear that they were doing any harm, but there were some Communists in government, and Senator McCarthy's politics ripped the country apart. It was the politics of paranoia in perhaps their most extreme manifestation, and the military was the only organization capable of standing up to him.

In my opinion, civilian control is not just about having a nonpartisan military. It's not just about having an officer corps that stays out of politics. It also depends, more institutionally and organizationally, on the military's ability and willingness to avoid the temptation to get dragged into the politics of paranoia. On don't ask, don't tell, not only did you allow yourself to get dragged into the politics of paranoia, but frankly, your leaders did not tell the truth. They were not honest about the real source of their opposition to gays in the military—the moral basis of their opposition—and so they made up these arguments about unit cohesion. As don't ask, don't tell fades into the dustbin of history, that's what we must remember.

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