

By **Buster Pittman**

Time to change the rules on gays

How could the military have saved \$606,346,192 from 1980-1995? The answer is at the end of this column.

On Oct. 16, U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge William A. Norris received the "Liberty Award" from the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund in Los Angeles. In his acceptance speech, Judge Norris predicted that the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding homosexuals in the military would eventually be buried in the "national cemetery of shame" along with earlier Supreme Court decisions that permitted slavery and segregated public facilities.

I share Judge Norris' optimism. Several years ago, I appeared before an augmentation board. One of the board members asked me, "what leadership problems do you see arising from President Clinton's proposed repeal of the ban on gays and lesbians from serving in the Marines, and how would you solve those leadership problems?"

My answer then — before "don't ask, don't tell" — was the same as it would be if I were asked that question today. The ban that prevents gays and lesbians from serving openly in the U.S. military is an unjustifiable violation of the principles of freedom upon which this country was established.

Once upon a time, the Defense Department banned gays and lesbians because the department believed gays and lesbians posed a security risk. After the Pentagon's own studies concluded that gays and lesbians were less likely to violate security regulations than heterosexuals, DoD dropped that line of reasoning and resorted to the nebulous assertion that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service."

Under close scrutiny, that is as ludicrous as the old policy that said homosexuals were security risks. Almost every service member who has "come out of the closet" to challenge the military's ban, from Air Force Tech. Sgt. Leonard Matlovich in the 1970s to Army National Guard Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer a few years ago, has had an exemplary record, replete with stellar performance evaluations and awards and decorations.

Any group of people who meets the standards of entry and retention should be allowed to enter the military, and as long as they are competitive with their peers, they should be retained.

But here is where circumventive reasoning usually comes into play. Some of you are thinking, "The standards to get in the military says that homosexuals are not allowed; therefore anyone who is homosexual has not met the standards of admission and should be banned." This reasoning is similar to saying, "we have a rule that says planes cannot fly; therefore planes are not able to fly and should be prevented from flying."

The solution is simple: Change the rule. The rule is wrong. We have had rules in the past that were wrong and our leaders had the moral courage to change them. Let's hope that someday soon we will have leaders with the strength of character to recognize that discriminating against a group of Americans simply because other people do not like them is blatantly un-American.

In the last six years, 4,599 people have been discharged from the military for being gay. The odds are great that there are many more gays and lesbians who served during this period but were not discharged.

Like it or not, you already shower and live with homosexual men and women. Gays and lesbians have been in the military since Alexander the Great, and will continue to be in the military as long as recruiters keep their doors open.

What is truly amazing is how few problems there have been. Was Tailhook a homosexual problem? The Marines at the Moscow embassy were not trading secrets for sexual favors from Russian men. And as long as male drill instructors have been training male recruits, there has never been a gay "Aberdeen scandal."

Some might claim that the absence of any major problem with homosexuals in the military is that, because of the ban, there are no homosexuals in the military, but once we let them in, there will be a multitude of problems.

That is simply not the case. When we finally do the right thing and allow gays and lesbians to serve openly, yes, there will be a few isolated problems. I for one, though, have full faith and confidence in the military's leadership — when the leaders truly behave as leaders — to handle these problems.

Answer: According to the General Accounting Office, the cost of discharging gay service members from 1980-1995 was \$606,346,192, not adjusted for inflation. If we had changed the rules in 1980, we could have built new barracks, bought more jets, upgraded our communications equipment and outfitted our Marines with top-quality packs, helmets, sleeping bags and boots.

Buster Pittman is the pseudonym for a captain in the ground community with 10 years in the Marine Corps. These are his opinions.

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