Spam Filter: Gay Rights and the Normalization of Male-Male Rape in the U.S. Military

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At a recent conference on the "don't ask, don't tell" policy (hereafter DADT) held at the University of Hawai'i Law School, I was stunned to find that half the speakers spent their time at the podium taking potshots at the U.S. military. I have participated in many conferences on the gay ban, and such a critique of the military is atypical. At most events, it is assumed that the military is a noble institution whose readiness must be preserved at all costs. Because the integration of openly gay and lesbian service members would enhance the military's ability to fulfill its mission, the argument usually goes, the ban should be repealed. At the Hawai'i conference, by contrast, critiques of the armed forces were so vehement that, during one question-and-answer session, an audience member asked the leader of a mainland organization dedicated to DADT's repeal whether he suffered any internal turmoil in the course of doing his job. "No," he responded, "the military is an outstanding institution."

Perhaps it is no accident that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) advocates in Hawai'i seem more attuned to critical understandings of the armed forces than do their mainland counterparts. Several prominent scholars have argued that the U.S. military's presence in Hawai'i has been particularly heavy-handed and that its imprint can be seen on museums, highways, schools, cemeteries, parks,

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houses, and other social and cultural institutions. "The military order," some have concluded, "is heavily written onto Hawai'i, marking literal and figurative spaces in manners both subtle and gross."[1] At the University of Hawai'i conference on DADT, participants expressed concern with the pervasiveness of the military's physical presence in the islands but seemed even more concerned by a related phenomenon: the militarization of civilian society.

The scope of the armed forces' physical presence in Hawai'i and elsewhere is one aspect of militarization. American forces are deployed in 766 foreign bases around the world, to say nothing of the 77 bases in American territories and the 2,888 bases in the United States.[2] But militarization is not only characterized by a physical military presence; it refers to how the broader civilian culture thinks about the use of armed force. According to Cynthia Enloe, militarization is "the step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to depend for its well-being on militarist ideas."[3] We might see militarization, for example, when John Kerry saluted the audience at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston and announced that he was "reporting for duty!" It is also apparent when the public comes to regard soldiering as the epitome of citizenship, when the military seems like the most ideal embodiment of patriotism (such as in the undifferentiated message of "Support Our Troops" offered on bumper stickers), and when promoting the military's interests is believed to enhance the overall welfare of a population. Militarization prevails when unbridled support for the military seems natural and unproblematic.

Many U.S. citizens perceive the military as a benign force in the world. But accepting the militarization of American society as an unremarkable phenomenon can be problematic, in part because of the central place of violence in military culture. Consider, for example, male-male rape. Based on a series of interviews with victims and mental health providers who counsel service members, I have come to understand how something as violent as male-male rape can actually shore up coercive forms of military masculinity through a range of actions, including punishment, the enforcement of the pecking order, and the expression of homophobia. A soldier at Fort Jackson in 1972, for example, reported that he "found about forty guys lined up eagerly near the latrine. The other recruits had realized there was a faggot in the barracks, and two of the bigger guys had pushed him down on his knees and held him in the shower while the entire platoon lined up for blowjobs. The next day, the soldier was gone."[4] This incident is not unique. While estimates must be interpreted with caution, available evidence suggests that each year approximately 12,500 men in the military are the victims of rape or attempted rape.[5]

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Naturalizing militarization requires sanitizing this and other forms of brutality, either by hiding or reframing or, when things get badly out of control, excusing such behavior as the exception rather than the rule. Hiding such brutality is important because few Americans would want to believe that male-male rape is a central

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feature of military culture, and few would want to join the ranks of men who rape other men or men who cannot fend off sexual assault. This is not, of course, to imply any fault or essential weakness on the part of the victims of rape, but rather to gesture at the ways in which many recruits, in particular men, equate going through military training with becoming tough. If they realized that even military training is insufficient to prepare a man to fend off rape, they might be less inclined to enlist.

In addition to domestic implications that would follow from widespread public awareness of male-male rape in the armed forces, the international consequences could be dire. Similar to other imperial projects, the American empire requires local collaborators who govern in ways that are consistent with U.S. interests, not least of which is to downplay their countries' subordinate positions to U.S. hegemony. Given this particular historical moment in which thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed in the ongoing war, the subjects of American imperialism do not need any outside help to think about and remember the ways in which the American military project is undermining their well-being. That said, anti-imperialists around the world can and do use information about American military brutality as political ammunition against collaborators who do the heavy lifting for American imperialism. For that reason, concealing or at least smoothing over such evidence so as not to provide additional propaganda ammunition is crucial. It may not be much of a stretch for subjects of U.S. imperialism who learn of male-male rape in the U.S. military to think about the ways in which they get screwed by the American military project.

How, then, does militarization get naturalized, given the prevalence of brutal conduct like male-male rape? Ironically, stigmatized out-groups—those condemned by the military as rapists—have played a central role in making militarization seem natural and unthreatening. Gay men, for example, have long been accused of being rapists who cannot control their desires around other troops. General Norman Schwarzkopf exemplified such an outlook while testifying before the Senate Armed Service Committee in 1993: "I am aware of instances where heterosexuals have been solicited to commit homosexual acts, and, even more traumatic emotionally, physically coerced to engage in such acts."[6] Stigmatized as sexual predators, libidinous gay men help construct and reinforce silences surrounding male-male rape by pursuing strategies that conceal militarization in plain sight.[7]

In response, some LGBT rights organizations tend to depict the armed forces as noble and upstanding; and they also rely on spokespersons that reflect homonormative, loyal, and harmless gendered archetypes. Despite the fact that most perpetrators of male-male sexual violence in the military are heterosexual and many victims identify as gay, most LGBT organizations rarely mention male-male rape or assault, even in the context of opposing gay abuse in the armed forces. Many who are working to repeal DADT believe that directing the public's attention to male-male sexual violence might undermine their case by connecting gay men with rape.

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The choice to ignore male-male rape and to depict the armed forces as an unproblematic institution reflects movement leaders' convictions that the best strategy for convincing legislators, the military, and the public to repeal DADT is to demonstrate that gay men and lesbians are equally capable of conforming to the military's expectations of discipline, honor, and self-sacrifice. At the same time that LGBT organizations and activists have made such strategic decisions, they have had to face the perception of being antimilitarist. I have not been immune to such influences. Recently, an assistant to a U.S. congresswoman asked me to review a documentary film about a gay Christian Marine from Alabama who had come to oppose both the ban and the Iraq war. The congresswoman wanted to know if her office should circulate the film to other members of Congress to generate support for repeal. Although I found the narrative to be compelling, I told her that the Marine's story would make anti-DADT efforts seem antiwar, and antiwar efforts seem pro-gay, and I recommended that her office refrain from endorsing the film. To take another example, at the now defunct Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military at the University of California at Santa Barbara, a gay veteran removed himself from the organization's mailing list when it declined to post a banner on its Web page expressing support for U.S. troops in Iraq.[8]

Advocacy groups for LGBT people follow the same strategies used by many advocates for women and racial and ethnic minorities, who tend to depict the U.S. armed forces as a virtuous institution when calling for the right to serve in uniform on an equal basis with others. This does not mean that stigmatized outsiders respond like firefighters dousing the flames of controversy every time that the military faces a crisis in its public perception, nor does it mean that they find consensus in their relationships to militarization. Rather, decades of positive portrayals of the armed forces have created a reservoir of favorable attitudes about the military, dispersed widely throughout civil society, that can be activated to repair cracks in the military's reputation when they do appear.[9] These strategies reflect the tradition of extreme normalization within mainstream civil rights activism. These tactics are almost likely to work since it seems that the gay ban will someday be lifted. Gay men and lesbians who seek a place at the military's table surely will have their desires fulfilled.[10]

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But how much do queers have to pay, ultimately, for a seat in the military mess hall? Some answers to this question emerged during a November 2006 panel at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose, California, where I heard an outstanding presentation by Christopher Ames, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.[11] According to Ames, Okinawa, like Hawai'i, is home to several U.S. military bases, and Japanese and American officials have had trouble making the U.S. military presence there seem unremarkable. After three American service members raped a twelve-year-old Okinawan girl in 1995, protesters questioned not just the U.S. military's influence

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over the islands, but the militarized dimensions of U.S.–Japanese relations as well. Ames described a "town resort" in Okinawa known as American Village, "conceived by the local mayor as a theme park wherein 'only the good things about America' are incorporated." According to the presentation, restaurants in American Village enable visitors to ascertain what it means to live the good life in the United States by serving American food like Spam. American Village may seem innocuous, but antimilitarist activists in both Okinawa and Hawai'i understand that the processes by which militarization gets normalized can be subtle. As Enloe notes, militarization can take "humdrum forms" in addition to the explicit ones and "insinuate itself into ordinary daily routines where it is rarely heralded or even deemed noteworthy."[12] Perhaps residents of Okinawa and mainstream LGBT rights activists in the United States are implicated in the same subtle commodity chain, one that invites us to affably disavow our own complicities in militarization.

When Okinawans buy Spam, they generate profits for Hormel Foods, the company that produces and distributes it. In turn, Hormel Foods has been a primary source of wealth for James C. Hormel, the former U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg and a generous donor to numerous LGBT rights organizations, including those that fight for the repeal of DADT. In consuming Spam, residents of Okinawa internalize what are imagined to be the good things about America, literally absorbing those things into their bodies while they are summoned to experience their homeland as a benign approximation of the United States itself, not a site where, as antimilitarists argue, American soldiers rape or where local priorities have taken a backseat to U.S. military interests. And at the same time, the profits generated by visitors to American Village help gay rights groups promote the message that the repeal of DADT would enhance the quality of the American armed forces. When LGBT rights advocates make this argument, they wear away at the edifice supporting discrimination, but they also simultaneously gloss over male-male rape and the Pentagon's efforts to blame gay troops for it. When we reinforce the notion that the U.S. military is a noble institution worthy of loyalty and praise, we make the jobs of antimilitarist activists in Hawai'i, Okinawa, and everywhere more difficult. The staying power of both empire and homonormativity, it seems, turns on its capacity to induce accomplices into uttering good-natured silences that gently confirm that all is well in the U.S. military.

Notes

1. Kathy E. Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull, *Oh Say, Can You See? The Semiotics of the Military in Hawai'i* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii, xiv. At the time of writing, Ferguson was a professor of political science and women's studies, and Turnbull was an associate professor of political science, both at the University of Hawai'i.
2. *Baseline Structure Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2006), quoted in Seungsook Moon, "Politics of Gender and Sexuality in the Global U.S. Military Empire: A Case of South Korea" (paper presented as part of the Division of World Cultural Studies 2007 Lecture Series, California State University, Dominguez Hills, April 26, 2007).

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3. Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3. The argument and language in this paragraph are drawn from a proposal for a new project on the study of militarization and democracy that I coauthored.
4. Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 179.
5. By comparison, my lower-bound estimate is that at least 6,500 women in the military, approximately, are raped or experience attempted rape each year. My estimate hinges on the fact that many surveys of military personnel confirm that 1 percent of men and between 3 and 6 percent of women say that they experienced rape or attempted rape during the previous year. Other sources confirm that about the same number of men and women become victims of sexual violence while serving in the military. A comprehensive Veterans Administration (VA) study, for example, found that "the actual numbers of men and women who screen positive for MST [military sexual trauma] in VA are about equal." See *Military Sexual Trauma* (Washington, DC: Department of Veterans Affairs, 2004), 3.
6. Other portrayals of gay service members as rapists are discussed in Aaron Belkin, "Breaking Rank: Military Homophobia and the Production of Queer Practices and Identities," *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law* 3 (2001): 83–106. The Schwarzkopf quote is from "Policy Concerning Homosexuality in the Armed Forces, Hearing Held by Senate Armed Services Committee," 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993), 598.
7. The argument in this section depends heavily on Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 15–23.
8. For a history of queer movement's roots in antimilitarism, see Justin David Suran, "Coming Out against the War: Antimilitarism and the Politicization of Homosexuality in the Era of Vietnam," *American Quarterly* 53 (2001): 452–88.
9. Rhonda Evans, *A History of Ethnic Minorities in the U.S. Armed Forces* (Santa Barbara: Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, 2003).
10. Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Touchstone, 1993).
11. Christopher Ames (University of Michigan), "Okinawa's American Village; Reversing the Gaze" (paper presented at the 2006 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, San Jose California, November 16, 2006.
12. Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 3.

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