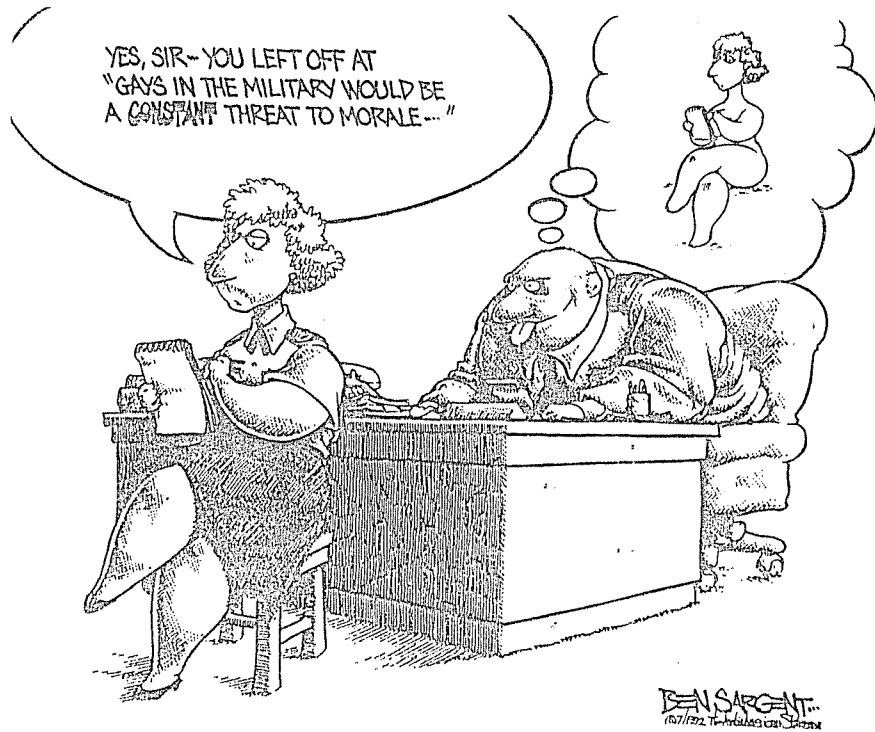


FORUM



Navy has trouble dealing with sex

FOR over two centuries, the Navy — as the nation's first line of defense — has protected the American way of life.

But with the recently diminished strategic threat, the Navy appears to be struggling for an identity, going through a delayed, protracted and ugly adolescence. As for most adolescents, this crisis is focused on sexuality and especially the place of women and homosexuals.

The Navy will not allow women in fighting ships or planes because of their vulnerability to sexual crimes should they become POWs. Women are allowed to fly transports and tankers over hostile territory.

One such woman flyer became an Iraqi prisoner last year and did suffer sexual abuses.

Some activists contend as many as 20 percent of American women are forced into sex at some point.

At least if a civilian woman is raped, she can report it to the police. A female soldier, raped by her sergeant during the Iraq conflict, was told by her superiors that reporting him would only make life more difficult for herself.

More American military women have been sexually abused by "friendly" hands than by those of enemy forces. Last year's obscene Tailhook Association meeting of naval aviators merely marks the most recent and large-scale example.

Rather than showing contrition, flyboys have shown a "boys will be boys" attitude and have blocked investigations. Nor have they been subject to any real discipline in the Reagan-Bush Navy.



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The Navy's ambiguities regarding women complement its relationship with homosexuals. Hounded throughout the modern era, and officially banned from service for 50 years, lesbians and gay men have been the subject of increasing ire in the last decade.

The Navy has put a new twist on an old problem. In 1844, the largest naval gun at that time, the Peacemaker, exploded on the U.S.S. Princeton killing the secretaries of state and of the Navy. Six decades later in 1904 a turret on the Missouri exploded during gun trials, killing 36 officers and enlisted men. In both cases, the Navy sensibly acknowledged that freedom is not without costs.

When the same thing happened to the aging battleship Iowa in 1987, investigators fabricated a plot about a frustrated homosexual's murder-suicide in revenge for love scorned.

In the last decade the Navy, with only 27 percent of all military personnel, completed over half of the discharges for homosexuality, running roughshod over their civil rights and spending hundreds of millions of dollars to replace 7,000 highly trained men and women.

Despite service claims that homosexuality threatens morale, the history of other nations' military, and indeed our

own, fails to record this having occurred. A 1988 Pentagon report denied homosexuality had any deleterious effect on morale or performance.

Why all these identity problems? Part of it must be attributed to failings of the leadership. Recent secretaries of the Navy have encouraged chauvinistic and irrational behavior.

Further, ranking officers are accustomed to being outside American norms.

Consider the strategic ramifications of these identity crises which are only now coming to light from the 1980s.

The billion-dollar Aegis cruiser U.S.S. Vincennes crossed into Iranian territory on July 3, 1988. That bravado led to the shooting down of an Iranian commercial airliner by our Navy and the deaths of 290 Iranian men, women and children who were religious pilgrims. It nearly brought the United States into war on the side of Saddam Hussein.

Actions like that make me doubly glad that President Bush has taken the tactical nuclear weapons off naval vessels.

The Navy offers its men and women fabulous, unique and expensive opportunities including: travel, education, technical training and relative job security.

These are privileges to which Americans — men or women, gay or straight — have a right of equal access, not one decided by irrational and unfounded problems.

The new Navy Secretary Sean O'Keefe must address these issues or Congress and the taxpayers will do it for him.

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