

Hard to justify 'don't ask' policy
December 21, 2007
By William Butte

Unit cohesion sounds like a phrase used by a high school chemistry teacher.

Instead, it's the phrase used by the Republican presidential candidates this campaign season to explain why they support the military's discriminatory "don't ask, don't tell" policy that prohibits openly gay service members, a policy supposedly created to stop military commanders from performing witch-hunts against gay service members that instead has been used to discharge more than 12,000 gays in the 14 years since its implementation.

After I wrote a column last year in which I questioned how then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld could claim openly gay troops would disrupt unit cohesion and undermine the services' missions when a study he commissioned in 2005 indicated otherwise, I received an e-mail from retired Brigadier General Keith Kerr.

Kerr, who agreed to be quoted for this column, noted that the argument by top military leaders that unit cohesion would be destroyed if openly gay service members were allowed "has been a well-cultivated military myth for decades," that it was the same argument used by "every admiral and general, save one, opposed to Truman's order to integrate African-Americans in the military following WWII," and was used again in the 1970s "against admitting women into the service academies." He also noted "There is strong opposition from the Christian conservative movement to allow GLBT members to serve openly."

Coincidentally, now-retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Gen. Peter Pace, best exemplified that opposition earlier this year.

About the time Defense Department records for 2006 revealed a record 8,129 "moral waivers" were given to recruits with criminal backgrounds, Pace answered a question about the DADT policy by saying, "I do not believe that the armed forces of the United States are well-served by saying through our policies that it's OK to be immoral in any way."

If Kerr's name sounds familiar, it's probably due to his appearance last month during the CNN-YouTube Republican debate. Questioning the argument that openly gay service members would destroy unit cohesion, the general, a long-time member of the Log Cabin Republicans, made a video with a comeback remark: "I want to know why you think that American men and women in uniform are not professional enough to serve with gays and lesbians."

Sidestepping the question, Sen. John McCain claimed military leaders in Iraq told him the DADT policy is working, although two days after the debate, on the 14th anniversary

of DADT's implementation, 28 retired admirals and generals sent a letter to Congress calling for the policy's repeal.

Meanwhile, Gov. Mitt Romney, Gov. Mike Huckabee and Rep. Duncan Hunter all gave answers that mentioned unit cohesion. Hunter, however, went out of his way to dismiss Israelis, Brits, and the 21 other NATO countries that allow openly gay service members by saying that most American kids who enter the military "have conservative values, and they have Judeo-Christian values. To force those people to work in a small tight unit with someone who is openly homosexual goes against what they believe to be their principles, and it is their principles, is I think a disservice to them."

Yet belying such comments aimed at "values voters" opposed to gay rights, a 2006 Zogby poll of U.S. vets of Iraq and Afghanistan found that 73 percent who knew of a gay or lesbian peer in their unit said it didn't negatively affect unit morale.

Then there's Army Sgt. Darren Manzella. Featured last Sunday on 60 Minutes, Manzella is an openly gay medic who served in Iraq and is now stationed in Kuwait, and supported by other soldiers. And though he was investigated, he says a superior officer finally told him, "I don't care if you're gay or not."

There's also former Marine Staff Sgt. Eric Alva, one of the first Americans seriously wounded in Iraq. He said soldiers in his convoy the day he was injured knew he was gay. "And we functioned as a unit together. We functioned as a unit respectfully."

Alva is confident the DADT policy will be overturned. As he recently noted, "The tides are turning in this country."

William Butte is a commentator on issues affecting the GLBT community. His column appears the third Friday of each month. E-mail him at wmbutte@bellsouth.net