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Universal Service, and the Embrace of Gays

By: YOAV SIVAN

As a former officer in the Israeli Navy, where LGBT people serve openly, I was delighted to see last week's communique by 28 retired US generals and admirals calling for the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell - specifically mentioning Israel as an example of successful integration of gays and lesbians in the military.

A critical reason the Israeli army is progressive on LGBT issues, however, is usually overlooked - we have a draft. The draft leads to stronger pressure on the military to liberalize than is the case when service is voluntary. When everybody is called to service, you have to go out of your way if you wish to exclude someone from getting into basic training. The universalism at the philosophical core of compulsory service makes it harder to discriminate against specific groups, though of course not impossible.

But as society makes progress toward more acceptance of LGBT people, as Israel clearly has done in recent years, that shift necessarily reflects on an institution that plays such a central role in its life-in the sense that almost everyone knows it firsthand. Since the mid-1990s, Israel has adopted pro-gay legislation, such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and witnessed a consistent series of liberal court rulings. The effects of those rulings have permeated the army, affecting its organization and its culture.

In similar fashion, direct intervention of the Supreme Court and more generalized political pressures have changed the role of women in the military and the Israeli army has now become famous for its efforts at integrating women in combat units.

From where I sit, it seems likely that if there were a military draft in America, the pressure for change of policy, and even the lingo used in the public debate, would be evolving on a far more dramatic course. It is not a coincidence that the discussion about Don't Ask, Don't Tell has become more out in the open in the years since the war in Iraq began; the apparent want of new recruits is changing the climate of the debate, and the halving of discharges under the policy since 2001 is a clear indication of this shift.

As the Israeli example suggests, the more the army matters to every American, the more it matters to every American gay. The campaign to repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell now longer relies solely on a relatively abstract notion regarding the right to serve regardless of sexual orientation. The instrumentality of gay people's contributions to the military is coming to the fore. When the army gets bigger-or strains from the current constraints on its size - becomes heavy on staff and budgets, and even more central to the nation's agenda than it had already been in the world's only superpower, discriminatory practices feel the uncomfortable glare of the spotlight.

Stories about the skills of Arab linguists being tossed away grate amidst the anxieties about a newly uncertain world.

This may prove to be an unintended repercussion of the war in Iraq on equality in America, perhaps the only way this might ever be judged a war for freedom! But before we thank President Bush for what might be the only favourable outcome of his Middle East policy, let's wait to see whether we get there. Still, it is now clear that even a Democratic win in next year's presidential election will not get America out of Iraq at any foreseeable future date. The continuation of the mess will in turn keep the pressure for liberalization on the army and its biggest supporters.

The letter from the generals and the admirals provides yet another nail in what is hopefully the coffin of this Pentagon policy. Together with General John Shalikashvili's op-ed article earlier this year in the New York Times, this letter seems proof positive that even the army's insiders are finally willing to yield to progress. In that light, General Peter Pace's infamous homophobic expressions earlier this year now seem a temporary setback on a sure path forward, and in hindsight the general appears as a detached reactionary, poorly informed about the change of times and fashions.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell is doomed if indeed a Clinton or Obama takes over the White House next year - and thanks to the incumbent, the election is the Democrats' to lose. All Democratic frontrunners have publicly committed to putting an end to this gay discrimination. So it is costless for the Democratic hopefuls to compete with each other on criticizing this policy. It is safe ground where you can be gay-friendly, while at the same time evade stronger and more controversial advocacy positions

on issues such as marriage equality.

Yet even the staking out of their postures on Don't Ask, Don't Tell, mixed with movement, even if not yet success, on hate crimes and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, keeps the pressure up so that the military will finally have to yield. Last week's letter from the retired military brass proves that the Democrats' advocacy on ending the ban has now become little more than mainstream American opinion.

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