

Colleges' Housing Hypocrisy

By Steven Menashi

At the first Democratic debate of the primary season, Bill Bradley mused, "If a gay American can be a bricklayer, a doctor, an athlete, a lawyer, a painter, why can't a gay American be a sergeant and a lieutenant colonel? It does not make sense to me." Al Gore, appearing with Bradley at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, agreed. At a later debate at the University of New Hampshire, Gore even said that allowing homosexuals to serve openly in the military would be a "litmus test" for prospective members of the Joint Chiefs.

The candidates received applause at both universities, themselves longstanding combatants in the assault on the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy—the policy crafted by President Clinton in 1992 that prohibits open homosexuality in the ranks. Dartmouth and UNH, along with many colleges nationwide, prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. "Consequently," UNH president Dale Nitzschke wrote in a letter to the Secretary of Defense, "it is very difficult for us to live up to the letter and spirit of our policy when ROTC programs are expected to honor the ban on homosexuality."

Early on in the controversy, Dartmouth's Board of Trustees—always on the cutting edge of political correctness—scolded the Department of Defense, calling their policy "unacceptable." Dartmouth's faculty voted that "the present DOD policy on homosexuals in the military, although changed, remains incompatible with the educational mission of the College and the most generally accepted interpretation of the College's policy of equal opportunity." They insisted that the trustees ban ROTC programs from the Dartmouth campus.

Dartmouth's trustees are always eager to outlaw traditional American institutions, but colleges that ban ROTC lose a number of federal research grants. There are limits, apparently, to the value of diversity; it isn't worth that much, the trustees decided. Still, Dartmouth resolved to fight the

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policy in court and to denounce it publicly from time to time.

Other colleges went through similar contortions to keep federal funds while remaining politically correct. Last year, Rutgers University resolved to "adopt a neutral policy toward ROTC that provides the minimum institutional support for the ROTC programs...while continuing to oppose their discriminatory policies." Harvard University outright refuses to fund ROTC; a special alumni-sponsored fund finances the program.

MIT chose not to eliminate ROTC, but, in the words of Chair of the Faculty Lawrence S. Bacow, to "remake it in our own image." A pilot ROTC program at MIT includes a course on "the history of discrimination" and admits openly gay students, even if they can't go on to serve in the military (they do, however, get to wear military uniforms "as available").

In March 1998, MIT, Dartmouth, Rutgers, and six other institutions—Tufts, Princeton, Appalachian State, Syracuse, Washington University, and the Oregon State Board of Higher Education—joined an amicus brief filed by the American Council on Education in *Able v. U.S.*, a legal challenge to the military policy. The schools claim an interest in the case because they have worked for decades "to

achieve and foster respect for diversity in American higher education."

The universities see the integration of gays into the military as the next frontier in the civil rights movement. But Charles Moskos, a Northwestern military sociologist who helped design the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, says, "You don't get the issue of sexual privacy raised with racial integration." The military holds that the policy promotes the unit cohesion needed in combat by reducing sexual tension and respecting personal privacy.

"Sexual tensions and sex-based favoritism in intimate settings destroys cohesion whether it involves opposite- or same-sex attraction," reports Lieutenant Colonel Robert Maginnis. "If we respect women's need for privacy from men, then we ought to respect the same need on the part of heterosexuals with regard to homosexuals."

The colleges say these claims only mask irrational prejudice. University administrators insist troops in mortal combat should be able to handle the tension of living in mixed quarters.

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Tufts, for example, in the same year it joined the lawsuit against the military, established "The Rainbow House," a college residence for gay students that, according to its mission statement, "exists to provide lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students and allies a housing option where their sexual orientation will not be an issue of conflict." Carl Sciortino, the house manager, explained the difficulties gay students face in mixed living quarters: "Students in the past have found themselves having a major crush on their straight roommate, and that's a really uncomfortable situation," he told *The Boston Globe*. "There are roommate issues where homophobia becomes a major problem."

In fact, the situation is so dire that colleges nationwide are establishing separate barracks for gays, not only as a haven from homophobic sophomores, but also to guard against emotional troubles gay students face in mixed living quarters.

The University of Oregon this year placed homosexual students in special "residence clusters" within university housing. "This is a place where people would know they would be safe," said Heath Hutto, a member of Oregon's University Standing Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns.

For six years, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst has maintained a residence hall especially for gay students. "It's called the 'Two and Twenty floor,'" says housing staff member Chris Budz. "We mention it in the tours. It's been completely filled up in the last two years." Similar residences exist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and the University of California's Irvine and Berkeley campuses.

The University of California at Santa Cruz even has two separate residence halls, Bayit Wiesel and Harvey Milk House, that serve as affinity housing for Jewish homosexuals specifically.

Even apart from straight students, same-sex housing

makes many gay students on campus uncomfortable. "It's institutionalized homophobia," says Sciortino of Tufts. So a handful of colleges—Haverford, Wesleyan, Antioch, and Hampshire—now mix males and females as roommates in some dorms. "The single-sex housing rule 'protected' straight students from having to deal with the possible consequences of living with someone one might get romantically

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involved with," explains Kilian Kroell, a member of Haverford's Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Alliance, "but that 'protection' never existed for queer students."

The hypocrisy in all this has not gone entirely unnoticed. When gay students argue they feel uncomfortable about rooming with straight students, complains Tufts president John DiBiaggio, "it flies in the face of the fact that many of us have been engaged in trying to change military policy on gays. If students can't live in this situation, what will they do in the military living with someone who is not gay?"

Indeed, six months after the colleges' intervention in *Able*, the case left the Second Circuit Court of Appeals with



the military's policy unscathed.

"The military argues that the prohibition on homosexual conduct is necessary for military effectiveness because it maintains unit cohesion, reduces sexual tension, and promotes personal privacy," explained the court. "We find that Congress has proffered adequate justifications for the Act."

The universities had argued that the military's ban on open homosexuality served no useful purpose, and was unrelated to the objectives of unit cohesion and privacy. Yet, as colleges themselves start sparing students the discomfort and sexual tension that mixed housing creates, they seem to be making much the opposite point.