

Leading Through Change

A tough decision is pending

by LtCol Michael D. Grice



Senior leaders of the Marine Corps may soon face a tough personal decision regarding military personnel. (Photo by Sgt Juan D. Alfonso.)

In the dynamic and free society that is the United States of America, change is constant. This is particularly true within the American military where, as a result of two protracted conflicts, warfighting doctrine has fundamentally shifted away from full-scale war predicated on fighting a peer competitor to the prosecution of counterinsurgent campaigns in the Middle East and Central Asia. In addition to transforming doctrine, this refocusing of combat operations away from the high end of the kinetic spectrum has given rise to many novel concepts and innovative ideas. Newly designed weapons

beget refinements in tactics, techniques, and procedures, and innovative technologies evolve at a rate that the Marines who preceded us would have found unnerving, if not inconceivable. These types of changes are to be expected, however, as being part and parcel to life in the fast-moving Marine Corps of the 21st century.

What about change that isn't expected? Change, for example, that has

nothing to do with the enemy that we currently fight or with our doctrine, weapons, and technology? Change that originates from the free society that all Marines are sworn to protect and defend? What about change that we, as leaders, may have to implement, regardless of our personal dispositions, backgrounds, or beliefs?

The change in question is one being discussed throughout American soci-

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ety. It addresses the right of persons to serve in the military without the fetters that currently exist in law and within the *Uniform Code of Military Justice*, and it may very soon directly affect the United States Marine Corps. It is being debated right now, at this very hour, on this very day. It is, of course, the proposed integration of openly gay men and women into the U.S. military.

Background

In 1993 President Bill Clinton signed into law the "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding homosexual conduct in the Armed Services. At the time there was a tremendous hue and cry about how such a change would bring about the destruction of the Armed Forces. Similar claims were made in 1975 when President Gerald Ford signed the Defense Authorization Bill of 1976 and allowed women to enter West Point, Annapolis, and the Air Force Academy.

That controversy was preceded by yet another immensely contentious and divisive Presidential act—Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981, which in 1948 directed equal treatment and opportunity for Black servicemen and resulted in the racial integration of the Armed Forces. All three of these extraordinary events had tremendous effects on the military and were widely debated and decried by the very martial institutions that had to accept them.

Despite the often vociferous and obstinate determination within the military to block these changes, they were made. The Armed Forces were racially integrated, women entered the Service academies, and the don't ask, don't tell policy became law. These events, driven by society and enacted by the executive and legislative branches of government, placed the military in the position of implementing social policy. More importantly to those in uniform,

however, was that the policy put leaders at all levels on the horns of a personal dilemma: how can one reconcile personal beliefs that are inconsistent with the laws and regulations that govern military service?

Before a decision is made, Marines are free to discuss the issue. Passionate debate within the Marine Corps over the issue of homosexuality is not unprecedented. In the early 1990s, when the debate surrounding don't ask, don't tell was raging, Marines of all ranks and backgrounds voiced their opinions in a variety of forums. Letters and articles from officers and enlisted leaders inundated the *Marine Corps Gazette* in 1992 and 1993, one of which went so far as to call for the dissolution of the Marine Corps should the policy allowing homosexuals to serve be passed.¹ Other opinions were presented as well. Marines professed viewpoints that ranged from ambivalence on the sub-





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ject of sexual orientation to their avowal that their love for the Marine Corps was more important to them than the issue at hand, and that should such a law be passed they would indeed follow it. Others, who found the prospect of serving with gays loathsome, resigned their commissions and left the Armed Forces.² How each Marine dealt with the policy was an intensely personal matter, and the debate today is heating up and will rise to levels that are just as intense as they were nearly two decades ago.

The Leader's Dilemma

Every Marine, officer and enlisted, swears an oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States and to obey the orders of the President and of the officers appointed over them. By the constitutional design of the American Federal Government, the U.S. military is subordinate to the elected civil authority that constitutes its executive and legislative branches. The rule of law and the organization of the government very clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the military, and they clearly articulate that soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are duty bound to follow the laws, orders, and directives promulgated by duly elected civil authorities.

There isn't any gray area that surrounds the duties and responsibilities of military leaders in this regard. If a directive is issued that repeals don't ask, don't tell, then it is the duty of every member of the military to comply with that directive. Compliance is not an area for subjective interpretation. So, what can a leader do? What is an ethical response that a leader can present in this situation?

Leaders can address and debate the issue until it becomes law, whereupon the opportunity for debate is closed. Debate must always be tempered with the professionalism expected of Marine leaders, commissioned or not. If leaders are not careful with their words and judicious with their opinions they may find themselves painted into a corner from which there may be no exit; for

example, if a leader announces that "there won't be any homosexuals in my unit," then that leader has made a statement that may well be overruled should the law be repealed. What, then, can the leader do? He has let it be known that homosexuals are not going to be accepted, and such a declaration from a leader carries with it the same weight as any other statement that the leader has made. Unfortunately, it undercuts the credibility of the leader and places him in a position where he must recant; however, such a retrenchment will be greeted with skepticism. Skepticism in a Marine's leaders is devastating to the concept of good order and discipline and can result in myriad negative consequences—all of which are unacceptable. In short, intelligent and honest debate is a critical part of being a professional leader of Marines; prejudicial and bombastic debate is not.

Should the decision to repeal don't ask, don't tell be made, then every Marine must focus inwardly to determine whether or not he can continue to lead and serve in light of what for many is a deeply moral dilemma. If a leader cannot subordinate his personal beliefs to such an extent that he can perform his duties, then it becomes necessary for that leader to resign.

Although resignation may seem drastic, the requirement is based on another part of the oath that we all have sworn, which requires that juniors render obedience to the officers appointed over them. This enormously important component of military service is the reason why leaders cannot place their personal feelings or morality above the rules, regulations, or laws that govern military service. Leaders do not have the luxury to deviate from the law because they disagree with it. Were that the case then each leader would be able to enforce his own private agenda on his subordinates. Such an idea shatters the foundation of good order and discipline on which the entire concept of military leadership is based. To empower each and every leader with the ability to choose which orders and directives he will follow and enforce re-

moves the hard earned traditional mantle of professionalism and replaces it with a void filled with chaos.

The Contemporary Debate

With the ushering in of a new administration, the issue of homosexuals serving openly in the Armed Forces has again become preeminent. The possibility that the don't ask, don't tell legislation could be repealed is a real one, and with that possibility the debate about gays and the military has resurfaced with a vengeance. The discussion places Marine leaders on the horns of a personal dilemma: how would such a decision change their abilities to serve and lead their fellow Marines? Is it a moral conflict that could drive them from their military service, or is it a nonissue? Every Marine will have to determine what such a change means to him, because Marines, as with all military professionals, are duty bound to follow the orders of the President and the laws enacted by Congress. Every leader must decide how to reconcile his personal beliefs with the duty he is expected to perform. What will you do should the decision be made?

Notes

1. Then-Maj Arthur J. Corbett's article, "Disband the Marine Corps," was published in the January 1993 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*. The article was headed by the following aphorism: "It would be better to disband the Corps than see it dishonored and its virtues and values destroyed."

2. Among the most notable Marines to resign was Maj Charles Johnson, who as a captain was lionized for stopping a platoon of Israeli tanks in Lebanon with only his .45 automatic.

USMC



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