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OP-ED

Not asking, but telling

Overturn 'don't ask, don't tell,' says a soldier's wife. It's the right thing to do.

Lily Burana June 1, 2010

Another lovely Saturday in spring, another brilliant West Point graduation. Listening to President Obama's remarks to the class of 2010, and watching the graduates toss their white hats skyward, I wondered: Would these newly minted second lieutenants be among the first to serve after the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell"? The more the policy comes to resemble a house of cards about to topple, the more the issue becomes an overlay for the military rites of passage I witness as a soldier's wife: commencements, promotions, retirements.

Last week, the Obama administration and Congress inched closer to striking down "don't ask, don't tell," pending a Pentagon review (due by Dec. 1) that will gauge the military's ability to sustain the changes required for the repeal. As part of that review, I experienced a rite of passage of my own: For once, the Department of Defense asked me, as a military family member, what I think — specifically about the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, via an online questionnaire. Since I've got the DOD's ear, here are my two cents — or rather, my two words — on the matter: Good riddance.

I come to this view not just as someone who married an Army intelligence officer in 2002. My closest military friend, now deployed, is a lesbian soldier. I, like her other friends in the community, show my love for her in varying degrees of plausible deniability. We get that we can never publicly mention the girlfriend — not at an Army event, on Facebook, certainly not in an e-mail sent to her AKO address. She goes to even greater lengths: no public displays of affection with her partner, constantly qualifying herself as a "confirmed bachelorette." Covering up requires a shamefully large amount of brain share — mental energy that could be better spent on her duties as a soldier.

Is she distracted by this charade? No. But she is burdened. When I dropped her off for her deployment, I said to some soldiers from her unit that I was "just doing my Army wife duty," and she quickly stressed, "But she's not *my* wife." DADT requires such CYA

(cover your ass) measures. She is the proud soldier of a nation built on diversity's bedrock. Can't we do better than this?

A few months ago, a military affairs blogger joked, "The real test [of the repeal of DADT] will be when a gay soldier's partner attends a tea with a bunch of snobby officers' wives." I smiled, for as much as I detest the stereotype, I confess, after seven years as an officer's wife, that it isn't born of thin air. In fact, to some, West Point, with its granite-heavy gravitas of duty, honor and country, epitomizes the airless, inflexible officer corps elite, and by default, the uptight spouses. It is true, we wives revere traditions and twin sets with equal fervor. (I myself own five, along with the alternate spouse uniform — the wrap dress). But we aren't entirely what this man suggests, blinkered domestic biddies clutching our pearls and our outmoded mannerisms, possessed of no greater largesse or intellectual sophistication than what we leech from our husbands: Inclusiveness? If you say so, dear.

Snarky joke aside, this blogger brushed up against a serious point. The changes wrought by repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" will not, as many contend, be most profoundly felt on the battlefield, but rather, on the home front. Military family culture is terrifically intimate. With our bake sales and social clubs, our ad hoc baby-sitting drop-offs and rock-solid mutual support during spouses' deployments (to say nothing of the tiny yards in military quarters), the awareness of one another's personal relationships is acute. You don't have to ask, or to tell. You just *know*. The details are right in front of you, on the post sidewalk, in the commissary, at school recitals, at unit functions. This is where same-sex preference and relationships will become most apparent, and it will be the spouses' and families' job to adapt accordingly.

In March, Lt. Gen. Benjamin Mixon, who opposes the repeal, published a letter in Stars and Stripes urging service members and their families, most of whom he suspects agree with his view, to make their opinions known. And last year, over 1,000 retired flag officers signed a letter sent to the president protesting the repeal. When I saw the letter, I realized why these old senior officers — far from service but still revered — are called "Pachyderms"; I felt like I'd been leveled by an elephant stampede. Many of the generals were West Point grads, and it seemed in that moment as if the Long Gray Line had run me clean over. Yet as much as I acknowledge their right to their position, I won't refrain from voicing my opposition. My conscience — as a wife, as a patriot, as a freedom-loving American — demands it.

I understand that the repeal is a top-down decision, but until the administration and the brass figure out how best to proceed, I will do what the good Lt. Gen. Mixon suggested and what the DOD requested: I will share my opinion — that the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" is less about what we military family members do or don't want than about what is right. And what is best, in the long run, for our nation's military.

And on the day that "don't ask, don't tell" passes from policy to relic, I will be among the first to move that the spouses' coffee group invite list be expanded to include same-sex partners. Amid the nametags and tea sets and twin sets and pearls, I will step forward, hold out my hand, and make the most patriotic statement yet: Welcome.

Lily Burana is the author of three books, most recently, "I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles."