

The New York Times

The Policy That Dares Not Speak

By Janet Maslin
March 18, 2009

Brain Drain: Arabic Linguists

The core message of Nathaniel Frank's book about the American military's ban on being openly gay can be summed up in a single slogan: "Don't Ask, Don't Tell Don't Work." Mr. Frank has also been offering succinct five-minute synopses of his argument as he makes the rounds of the talk show circuit. So why does his book, "Unfriendly Fire," need nearly 300 pages of text to make the same relatively simple points? Because he makes them so discerningly, so substantively and so well.

This book's length would seem even more surprising given Mr. Frank's scant reliance on anecdotes or filler; by his not having personalized or dramatized his nonfiction material; by the small number of major points on which he concentrates; and by his use of the "as we shall see" construction, which would seem to brand him as a dry professorial writer. But to categorize him that way would be using the type of specious reasoning on which, according to his book, American military policy about gay personnel is based.

This is the same logic that allowed a Marine Corps corporal's buying of Anne Rice novels to be used as admissible evidence of homosexuality at the man's discharge investigation. And that example is real, not hypothetical. Mr. Frank didn't have to make it up. Many Americans may not understand what the military's 15-year-old "Don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" policy about gay personnel actually means. If sounds laissez-faire, it is anything but: this expedient-sounding political compromise, sanctioned by President Bill Clinton in 1993 and then voted into law by Congress, has created legal means of terminating the careers of longtime and, Mr. Frank would argue, valuable members of our military. No explicitly sexual act is necessary to bring on accusations. The soldier who receives a warmly affectionate letter from a same-sex correspondent is in jeopardy of being booted out of the service.

"Unfriendly Fire" offers a sharp, vigorously framed analysis of this state of affairs. Mr. Frank begins by assailing the assumption that a gay person in the military is someone who has chosen to break the military's rules; that person, he says, violates the current code simply by existing. "Is a restaurant that bans creatures that bark not a restaurant that bans dogs?" he asks, demonstrating a debating talent that would serve him well in a courtroom. The main attraction in "Unfriendly Fire" is the agility and tough-mindedness with which Mr. Frank presents his arguments.

An early chapter on the history of homosexuals and military discipline points out that there was a time — 1919, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was assistant secretary of the Navy — when gay sailors were entrapped by the sexual solicitations of other sailors, then arrested, court-martialed and imprisoned. "It was not lost on many observers, including the U.S. Senate, which censured the Navy for its 'shocking' and 'indefensible' investigative tactics, that the military had no trouble rounding up its own men to sleep with other men as part of a sting operation to rout out gays," Mr. Frank writes.

What this wound up meaning was that overt sexual activity would no longer be needed as proof. "It was the beginning of the rationale for banning gay people, since the task of banning gay conduct had proven to be perilous, and had inadvertently thrown light on how easily 'normal' men could end up in the jaws of a homosexual rapport," he says. An argument central to this book is that the assumption that heterosexuals are fragile, modest and easily threatened by homosexuals in their midst does a disservice to the military's most fundamental faith in its troops as strong and disciplined fighters.

Having established his subject's historical underpinnings, Mr. Frank moves on to a political analysis of the forces that made the subject of homosexuals in the military so important at the start of Mr. Clinton's first term. The gist is that the president, as a candidate, had glibly made promises he would not be able to keep, while at the same time overconfident gay lobbyists underestimated the combined (and, says Mr. Frank, often overlapping) strength of top military brass and the religious right. In the course of its intensive scrutiny of Senate hearings on the subject, the book finds similarities between that era's rhetoric about homosexuality as a threat to unit cohesion and the same arguments, used four decades previously, to resist racial integration.

The book shows how those hearings made up in hot air for what they lacked in hard evidence. So Mr. Frank brings hard evidence to bear. Fears about sexuality, he says (drawing extensively on data from countries that have less restrictive policies than ours does), do not necessarily predict behavior.

And in passages recounting change that he acknowledges to be "stunningly anticlimactic," he discusses what happened when gay soldiers could openly serve in Israel, Canada and Australia: nothing special. When strict codes of military behavior ban all public displays of affection, they dispel much of the imagined problem.

"Unfriendly Fire" goes on to measure the gay ban's cost and consequences. Mr. Frank does not do this casually; he is armed with budget, recruitment and expulsion statistics. Disturbing as they are to begin with, these figures become even more so when linked to the influx of ex-convicts and other problem recruits to replace those who have been dismissed. The single most alarming statement, in a book that bristles with them, is this one about the military's moral waivers program to admit convicted felons: "Allowable offenses under the program include murder, kidnapping and 'making terrorist threats.' "

Finally "Unfriendly Fire" makes a claim for what "don't ask, don't tell" has now become: a punch line. Gay service personnel, Mr. Frank says, have by and large been assimilated. Homosexual attachment and unit cohesion are understood to be different things. "I have never loved any man more deeply than some of the men I served with in Somalia, and I never had any sexual feelings for them," one gay combat veteran says.

And if popular culture provides signs of the times, as Mr. Frank suggests, then the subject may be even further defused. "I Love You, Man," a Hollywood film in the newly mainstream "bromance" genre, about men who love their attractive male friends in no-big-deal fashion, opens Friday. It's coming to a theater near you.