

The Boston Globe

Obama's pledge to gay soldiers

By Derrick Z. Jackson | February 3, 2009

DON'T ASK too soon, our new pragmatic president says, if you want to do away with "don't ask, don't tell." The Globe reported this week that President Obama wants to coolly build irrefutable facts to support ending the ban on openly gay and lesbian soldiers, and break down old attitudes in the Pentagon and among politicians. Many gay activists seem prepared to give Obama at least a few months. **Rea Carey, president of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said, "We're not worried we'll be left behind."**

Cool pragmatism is getting a chance, especially given how the molten lava of President Clinton flamed out.

During his 1992 campaign, Clinton spoke before 600 mostly gay and lesbian supporters in Hollywood, then the biggest such gathering. The San Francisco Chronicle said Clinton "choked up" in his address. The Globe said "his eyes filled with tears." In speaking about AIDS, he said he would give up his race for the White House "if I could wave my arm for those of you who are HIV-positive and make it go away tomorrow." He was resolute on lifting the ban on homosexuals serving in the military.

A 1992 General Accounting Office report said the Defense Department expelled an average of 1,500 gay soldiers a year during the 1980s. The report said the Defense Department's own reports concluded that "there was no factual data to substantiate" claims that homosexual soldiers were a particular security risk. One draft report compared the ban on gays to the former resistance to integrate black soldiers, commenting that none of the "dire consequences" and "predictions of doom" for discipline, group morale, and achieving military goals "has come true."

Clinton knew that when he said, "Every day that we discriminate, that we hate, that we refuse to avail ourselves of the potential of any group of Americans, we are all less than we ought to be. This country is being killed by people who try to break us down and tear us down and make us little when we have to be big." Clinton specifically said of the ban, "My fellow Americans, we have too much to do to endure quaint little rules. We can't afford to waste the hearts and minds of the gays and lesbians."

The quaint rules endured, as Pentagon and political backlash forced Clinton into the convoluted policy of upholding the ban but telling the military not to pry into personal affairs and essentially telling gay and lesbian soldiers to stay in the closet. It did not work. A follow-up Government Accountability Office report in 2005 found that expulsions were briefly cut in half in 1994 and 1995, but climbed back to over 1,100 a year in the last three years of the Clinton administration. Four out of five of the 9,500 total soldiers kicked out in the 10-year period from 1994 to 2003 were discharged simply for admitting they were gay.

The estimated replacement cost for these soldiers was \$95 million. The loss of skills was priceless in a post-9/11 world, as 322 of the kicked-out soldiers could speak some levels of languages such as Arabic, Korean, Russian, Chinese, and Farsi.

The American people get this, as CNN and Washington Post polls last year found that 75 percent to 81 percent of Americans say openly gay soldiers should be allowed to serve. President Obama gets this, citing the 2005 GAO report on his new White House website, saying he "agrees with former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili and other military experts that we need to repeal the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. The key test for military service should be patriotism, a sense of duty, and a willingness to serve."

In his pre-inauguration speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Obama specifically mentioned gay Americans among the people he hoped Americans could "recognize ourselves in one another." If Obama can get the military to recognize the value and valor of soldiers regardless of sexual orientation, even if it takes a few months more than the gauntlet of an executive order, cool pragmatism may be the new molten lava of true change.