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the Voyeurism of the Vietnam War Era
Shaped the Gay Rights Movement,
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An Invading Army of Rockettes:

How US Military Policy on Homosexuality and the Voyeurism of the
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“Strike up the band. Here they come,” a *Los Angeles Times* article from 1966 entitled “Problem for Army” says of gay rights protestors, both trivializing and demonizing an outraged community of self-proclaimed homophiles excluded from military service.¹ The article, which later refers to the protestors as “an invading army of Rockettes,” seems at first to be amicable to the supporters of the Committee to Fight Exclusion of Homosexuals in the Armed Forces, and yet, embedded within it are attempts to “other,” downplay and even infantilize the protestors. It contains an interview with a member of the protest group, Henry Hay, suggesting a kind of outreach that provided the protestors agency to speak on behalf of their cause. The article concludes by extinguishing hope for the success of the march. “Such a totally impractical idea turns a serious social problem into material for a burlesque skit.” The author, Paul V. Coates, a television host and regular newspaper columnist, was not new to sensationalizing stories; his television series, *Confidential File*, broached issues like quack doctors, boiler rooms, and mental illness.² The premise of the series was to dramatize headlines and stir fear and intrigue, much in the way that Coates’ columns did.

Articles like “Problem for Army” and Coates’ complicated, sensationalized depiction of the gay community points to larger themes and issues of gay rights brought to the surface by the Vietnam War. The 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident provided an excuse for the United States to enter the Vietnam War officially, and the draft, which had always remained in place, was to be used again to expand US forces in an increasingly unpopular war. The draft, though it disproportionately affected men of color, was most widely protested by a

¹ Paul V. Coates, “Problem for Army,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*; *Los Angeles, Calif.*, April 24, 1966, sec. A.

² Paul V. Coates and James Peck, writers, *Confidential File*, prod. Irvin Kerschner, dir. Ben Pivar, KTTV Los Angeles, 1953.

generation of white, college-educated, liberal-minded upper middle-class white students who feared they would be affected by a war they did not support.

The visibility of the Vietnam War through news broadcasting shaped the way that America interacted with the it. Even sanitized, politically neutral images of war affected the anti-war attitudes held by young Americans. In 1969, over 35 million televisions in the United States were tuned in to news broadcasts nightly, bringing the war into people's homes.³ People wanted to see the war from afar, and their television sets provided an answer for their voyeuristic curiosity. People both for and against the war could see what they wanted to in the images of war. But television stations did not just broadcast news of the war itself: they also reported on protest and the growing discomfort with American involvement in Vietnam. The fact that social protest, alongside images of war, was front-and-center for teens coming of age served to spread social awareness and anti-war sentiments, even without actively pushing an anti-government agenda.

Policies against homosexuality in the military, images of war and protest, and the dawn of modern voyeurism in the 1960s allowed for new pushes for gay rights. The nation's voyeurism, with the spike in television programs like *Confidential File* and news broadcasts offering a window into the rarely seen and taboo, provided a different kind of visibility and unity to the marginalized gay community. LGBTQ protest groups, gaining support indirectly from media attention, adopted more extreme discourse as well as utilized the war and apparent discrimination against homosexuals as a cause to protest, and were ultimately unified by the war itself. This paper seeks to trace the complex attitudes towards

³ Frank D. Russo, "A Study of Bias in TV Coverage of the Vietnam War: 1969 and 1970," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1971): 539.

homosexuality in the 1960s through the lens of the Vietnam War. I postulate that adopting the cause of protesting the ban on homosexuals in the military, coupled with the expansion of voyeuristic and sensationalized depictions of homosexuals, served to unify the gay community and strengthen homosexual identity. The voyeurism of Vietnam as the “Living Room War” brought the homosexual man out from the shadows, and though homosexuality continued to be considered a marker of mental illness and instability, the desire to see the taboo world of the gay man changed the baseline and ultimately began to normalize homosexuality overall.

To understand what brought members of the gay community together against a common enemy in the Vietnam War era, it is important to establish the history of the United States military’s policies on homosexuality. Laws and regulations regarding homosexuals and homosexual behavior were not always clear or properly enforced by the military, and often appeared arbitrarily strict or lenient depending on the military’s need for personnel. This inconsistency led to frustration and, during the Vietnam War, a constant fear amongst homosexual servicemen of losing their jobs.

Before the Vietnam War, precedents of medical and psychiatric screening in the World War II era willfully ignored or overlooked homosexuality because of the need for personnel.⁴ As long as homosexuality was not actively distracting servicemen from their day-to-day tasks, gay men were free to do as they pleased. Historian Alan Berube, best known for his work profiling gay men during World War II, notes in a 1981 article, “...officers were

⁴ G. Dean Sinclair, “Homosexuality and the Military: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 56, no. 6 (July 31, 2009): 703-4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360903054137>.

instructed to overlook homosexual relationships, as long as they didn't disrupt the morale of the unit."⁵ During the 1940s, homosexuality was still regarded as a disease. Though a growing number of psychiatrists disagreed with that notion, it dominated the popular understanding of homosexuality and influenced how the military approached homosexuality in its ranks. Psychiatric screenings were added to the enlistment process in 1940 due to a growing understanding that war could cause psychiatric trauma, but with the start of World War II, troops were in high demand and less than half of the men identified as mentally unfit were actually turned away from serving.⁶ Not only was this the case, but specific measures pioneered by psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan to try to protect homosexuals and other "mentally unfit" individuals from service through screenings for their own benefit failed due to stigma regarding rejection from military service.⁷ Patriotism, norms of masculinity, and the marginalization of the mentally ill all were factors in making it difficult for someone who failed a military psychiatric examination to even find work outside of the military after rejection. Because of this, screening rarely deterred the enlistment of homosexual servicemen. One study on the demographics of the gay and lesbian population even suggests that "gay men who reached draft age [age 18] during the World War II and Korean War eras served in the military at nearly the same rate as other men."⁸ Even though screening

⁵ Alan Berube, "Lesbian and Gay G.I.s in World War Two," *Alternate*, June 1981, in The Alan Berube Papers: Series II: Professional Papers Box 13, Folder 13A. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. *Archives of Sexuality & Gender*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6JN7n6>.

⁶ Naoko Wake, "The Military, Psychiatry, and 'Unfit' Soldiers, 1939–1942," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 62, no. 4 (October 2, 2007): 465–66.

⁷ Wake, 475-6.

⁸ Dan Black et al., "Demographics of the Gay and Lesbian Population in the United States: Evidence from Available Systematic Data Sources," *Demography (Pre-2011); Silver Spring* 37, no. 2 (May 2000): 139–54.

remained in effect for the rest of World War II and into the Korean War, it is clear that there were inefficacies, intentional or otherwise.

However, these policies changed with the 1956 Crittenden Report, a secret landmark document that set out to revise the Navy's policies on homosexuality in its ranks. The objective of the report was "to rid the Navy of habitual homosexuals" and "to provide a deterrent to homosexual activity by naval personnel not habitually homosexual."⁹ The report divides homosexuals into the "habitual homosexual" and the "homophile," or those men who are found to have "homophile tendencies." The report is clearly less interested in removing the latter category from service, only deterring the behavior. To the Navy, the enlistment of men with homophile tendencies is undesirable, but also seemingly unavoidable. Even though the practice of homosexuality is still demonized by the report with the conclusion that it is a "symptom of psychoneurosis,"¹⁰ the report does acknowledge that there are many homosexuals in the population, and utilizes the work of Alfred Kinsey to suggest that 37.5% of men demonstrate homosexual tendencies.¹¹ The report also concedes that there is no evidence to support that homosexuals can be identified by physical appearance, and even notes that homosexuals do not pose a greater security risk than other individuals.¹² In this way, the report seems at once to be both progressive for its time in 1956, but also internally contradictory. It found that homosexuals were not markedly different than other enlisted

⁹ Captain S. H. Crittenden and the United States Navy Department, "Report of the Board Appointed to Prepare and Submit Recommendations to the Secretary of the Navy for the Revision of Policies, Procedures and Directives Dealing with Homosexuals, 1957," in *Homosexuality and the Military: A Sourcebook of Official, Uncensored U.S. Government Documents*. Diane Pub., 1991.

¹⁰ Crittenden, 213.

¹¹ Ibid., 210.

¹² Ibid., 211-2.

servicemen, and yet also suggested that homosexuals still possessed an inherent sickness, a corruptibility of mind at one point identified with schizophrenia.

The report ultimately concludes that homosexuality is symptomatic of failures to cope in one's daily life. Since behavior, in terms of 1950s psychology, was always representative of an individual's outward manifestation of internal struggles with personal motive versus society, homosexuality and sexual misconduct were evidence of "dependency, aggression and competition."¹³ In other words, one's inability to reconcile sexual frustration and the need to control oneself in society led to homosexuality, and this, in turn, was a manifestation of deeper concerns about one's ability to respect authority. These were ultimately undesirable traits for an enlisted serviceman to possess, and thus justified the conclusion that habitual homosexuals did not belong in the military. However, the report also remains somewhat abstract, suggesting that every case be examined individually. This of course leaves room, should the need arise, to ignore homosexuality if an individual was otherwise determined to be of sound body and mind. This ambiguity is also represented in the distinction between the "habitual homosexual" and the man with homosexual tendencies. Directives outlined in the Crittenden report maintain that "when the psychiatric evaluation concludes that they are not confirmed homosexuals and do not possess strong homosexual tendencies, [they] are normally retained."¹⁴ This is to say that individuals who were one-time offenders or otherwise not thought to be extreme homosexuals would not be punished with termination of service for homosexual encounters. This directive also added to the grey area present in the Crittenden report regarding homosexuality that is not habitual or "true." It left

¹³ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴ Ibid., 221.

room for plausible deniability in the case that the armed forces were in need of personnel and could not afford turn away able-bodied draftees.

The Crittenden Report was suppressed and not made public until the 1980s, but the findings demonstrate how the military was wrestling with issues of homosexuals in its ranks. The US Military's choice to suppress the findings of the study is telling in that it points to the complexity of the issue of homosexuality. Even though the conclusions of the Crittenden Report contributed to the grey areas of homosexuality in the service, the military actively denied the report's existence until 1976.¹⁵ This demonstrates how fear and controversy surrounding a taboo homosexual identity shaped the way that homosexuality was approached, and also shows that homosexuality was often willfully misunderstood in spite of psychological research to the contrary.

The grey areas of military policy on homosexuality are significant to the Vietnam War given that the war was both unpopular with draft age males, and draftees often feigned homosexuality to dodge the draft.¹⁶ Because homosexuality, or "hoaxosexuality," was a common claim made by men such as Pete Zavala, a straight draftee from Los Angeles who claimed he was gay to escape being drafted,¹⁷ many psychiatric evaluators stopped barring men from entry based on homosexuality alone. Many men, in spite of the stigma that came with being gay, either did not hide an existing history of homosexuality or falsely declared homosexuality to be exempted from the draft. But as draftees like Perry Watkins prove,

¹⁵ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (University of Chicago Press, 2004) 115.

¹⁶ Steve Estes, *Ask & Tell: Gay and Lesbian Veterans Speak Out* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 59-61.

¹⁷ Pete Zavala quoted in Estes, 60.

homosexuality was rarely grounds not to enlist a man: Watkins, an openly gay man, was examined closely by psychiatrists who believed he was attempting to cheat the system.¹⁸ However, Watkins was neither actively trying to avoid Army service nor lying about his condition. Though he admitted to always being gay, the evaluator determined that he could still serve in the military and was “qualified for induction.”¹⁹ This interaction between Watkins and the evaluator, as well as Pete Zavala’s eventual enlistment in spite of his claims of being a habitual homosexual, suggest that the grey areas left in military policy exemplified by the Crittenden report and the suspicion that men were feigning homosexuality to dodge the draft were significant factors that allowed gay men into military service regardless of the policies prohibiting gays in the military.

But the embedded distaste for homosexuals present in the Crittenden Report and the common understanding of homosexuality as a symptom of corruptibility and moral failure in one’s life still affected the way gay men were treated once in the military. Though homosexuals were not often kept from entering the service, some were made examples of and were accused of sexual misconduct and treason during the war. Because the Vietnam War was also at the height of the Cold War, gays were scapegoated and identified as communists in spite of official documentation stating that they were not more prone to spying and security breaches than straight men. Jerry Rosanbalm, an Army Captain, was dishonorably discharged after a grueling court martial case in 1969. He had been caught with a male refugee from Czechoslovakia, and because of his role as an intelligence officer in

¹⁸ Perry Watkins quoted in Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming: Lesbians and Gays in the U.S. Military, Vietnam to the Persian Gulf* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Jerry Rosenbalm quoted in Shilts, 63.

Germany, his actions confirmed the fears of many in the government that homosexuals posed very real security threats to the military.²⁰ In this case, the Army directly contradicted the findings of psychological studies on homosexuality, demonstrating that there was more at play during the Vietnam war than whether homosexuals actually posed a threat to the country or not.

The back-and-forth nature of the military's attitudes towards homosexuality mirrors attitudes held by the American public. It is important to examine the inconsistencies present in the government's policies on homosexuality, as the research and knowledge that informed the Crittenden Report was also influencing the way the civilian public was viewing, and worrying about, homosexuality. Alfred Kinsey's work changed the way that people conceptualized homosexuality, as well as sparked new fears about homosexuals in society. Kinsey showed that homosexuals were not only more common than once thought, but also by and large looked like everyone else, and could not be identified by appearance alone. These fears, in the 1950s, influenced the government's renewed interest in military policy regarding homosexuals. Samuel M. Steward, an openly gay professor, tattoo artist, erotic writer, and contemporary of Kinsey says of Kinsey's work: "[it] upset the heterosexual population like it'd never been upset before...even the dumbest guy on the street had heard of Kinsey...he was our liberator."²¹ Kinsey's groundbreaking work was common knowledge, and it greatly disrupted American sexual norms. Though it gave credibility to an emerging

²⁰ Shilts, 104.

²¹ Samuel M. Steward interviewed by Terence Kissack, "Alfred Kinsey and Homosexuality in the '50s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (October 2000): 474.

gay community, it also created more fears for a Christian, heterosexual population. What was beginning to unify the gay community was also unifying their opposition.

Homosexuality was widely reported on in the 1960s, increasing as a news topic in the *New York Times* from 264 articles related to homosexuality between 1950 and 1959 to 1,055 articles mentioning homosexuality between 1960 and 1969.²² This averaged roughly 2 articles related to homosexuality a week in the 1960s. *The Los Angeles Times*, too, saw an increase from only 56 mentions in the 50s to 330 mentions in the 60s.²³ This suggests that homosexuality and its place in American society were a relatively popular topic of debate. But why were people so concerned with homosexuality? One answer may be related to that which threatened the US government: homosexuality's perceived threat to national security scared the heterosexual public, and thus led to the increase in interest regarding homosexuality. But another convincing answer is voyeurism and fascination with the taboo. It is generally accepted that violations of social norms are undesirable as they usually result in punishment of some form. However, a study by Whitaker et. al. suggest that this may not, in fact, be the case. A common result of being unable to fulfill a desirable goal is the frustration-aggression theory, which suggests that in the event that the path towards a rewarding, usually normative goal is blocked, individuals are likely to get frustrated and aggressive.²⁴ However, the study demonstrated that the frustration-aggression model of

²² Based on keyword searches from the ProQuest New York Times database current file containing all issues of the newspaper from 1923 to the present.

²³ Based on keyword searches from the ProQuest Los Angeles Times database current file containing all issues of the newspaper from 1923 to the present.

²⁴ Jodi L. Whitaker et al., "The Allure of the Forbidden: Breaking Taboos, Frustration, and Attraction." *Psychological Science* 24, no. 4 (April 1, 2013): 507–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612457397>.

behavior occurs for socially taboo goals as well, and that when a goal is made taboo and therefore inaccessible, it results in the same frustration.²⁵ This suggests that the impetus for engaging in discourse on homosexuality may be a result of homosexuality's marginality and abjection, and that the social unattainability of homosexuality frustrated people in a manner that perpetuated discussions on gays and gay rights.

The voyeurism aspect, then, may be an answer to the frustration with the unattainable. Voyeurism, as this paper employs the term, isn't necessarily sexual in nature. It is simply the "urge to gaze at the alien and the intimate,"²⁶ the desire to see things that break social norms, and the attraction to witnessing the taboo. Voyeurism is perhaps a result of frustration-aggression behavior, a product of seeking the socially unattainable, a sort of pressing one's nose to the glass that separates normal from abnormal. But whatever the reason for the attraction to witnessing intimacy from the outside-in, voyeurism played a large role in the Vietnam War era. After all, the Vietnam War is "the first living room war," highlighting the importance of the rise of television during the 1960s. To return to Paul Coates and *Confidential File*, television shows began to capitalize on the desire for show-and-tell programming.

Though television studies during the war concluded that biased broadcasting was not the major issue some believed it to be and major news stations were more often than not committed to presenting facts over sensationalism,²⁷ the role of actively seeing the news still had an effect on Americans. Snapshots of war, such as those presented in the newsreel

²⁵ Whitaker et. al., 511.

²⁶ Clay Calvert, *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, And Peering in Modern Culture* (Basic Books, 2009), 23.

²⁷ Russo, 539–43.

excerpt “US Troops in Combat During the Vietnam War 1965,” showed US soldiers engaged in combat with the guerilla fighters of the Viet Cong.²⁸ Though the Viet Cong is clearly named the enemy of the United States and their ruthlessness highlighted in the footage, it is the grueling nature of the war that stands out. Morale, the news reel asserts, was down among US Troops, and casualties were high. No political blame was placed on the US government and no anti-war sentiment was pushed by the footage, but anti-war proponents could draw on the mass suffering that the video illuminates as reason to protest US involvement in Vietnam. On the other hand, pro-war advocates could argue that the footage instead demonstrated the need to continue to send more troops overseas to rotate tired and desperate men out of combat. But however the news reels and images of the war were put to use by either side, the visibility of combat indulged a growing culture of voyeurism. Seeing pain, suffering, desperation and death, even in a sanitized fashion, answered the urge to view the intimate and alien. And this culture of voyeurism also informed how homosexuality was presented in print and televised media, and subsequently, how the gay rights movement was popularized and disseminated.

People who lived in cities were more neutral towards homosexuality than the rest of the population, and many newspaper articles of the 1960s on both the east and west coasts reported more amicable views on homosexuals. This is not to suggest that the dominant attitude was pro-homosexuality, simply that there was a growing emphasis on the fair treatment of homosexuals and the lifting of homosexual bans in public spaces. John Grigg’s “Is Homosexuality a Crime?” published in *The New York Times* in 1965 notes that “even

²⁸ “U.S. Troops in Combat During the Vietnam War 1965,” accessed April 11, 2018, <http://fod.infobase.com/pViewVideo.aspx?xtid=37870>.

among those who still consider homosexuality a sin, there is now a readiness to show more compassion towards individual homosexuals.”²⁹ And as psychiatry was evolving, emphasis on the treatment of homosexuality as a psychological symptom was touted as a positive way to show kindness to gays. An article titled “Therapy is Found Curing Deviates,” also from 1965, suggested that people ought to adopt a more “positive attitude on treatment,” and that by not subjecting homosexuals to hostility, they could be reformed.³⁰ Though still inherently suggesting that homosexuality was symptomatic of psychological unrest, the attitude expressed in the unattributed article was still one of charity rather than demonization. The same sentiment is true of letters to the editor of *The New York Times*. An anonymous letter from 1967 expresses concern for homosexuals losing their jobs over their sexuality, saying “if I was a homosexual, my career would be ruined. All this because of what I do in my own home after work, which affects no one.”³¹ Even though attitudes towards homosexuality still remained largely influenced by its conceptualization as an abnormal practice, many saw the mistreatment and hostility towards homosexuals as unjust.

But negative attitudes towards homosexuality also appeared in print media of the time. Many of the concerns surrounding homosexuality came from the top-down, much along the same lines as the government’s fear that homosexuals were morally corruptible and a security risk. An interesting article by Robert Doty in *The New York Times* in 1963 suggested that homosexuality was, in the eyes of the police, “...one of the many problems

²⁹ John Grigg, “Is Homosexuality A Crime?,” *New York Times*, 1965.

³⁰ “Therapy is Found Curing Deviates: Psychiatrist Urges Positive Attitude on Treatment,” *New York Times*, 1965.

³¹ “Letters: Homosexual Rights and Wrongs,” *New York Times*, 1967, sec. *The New York Times Magazine*.

confronting law enforcement” in New York, and even identified perceived links between gay bars and the mafia.³² The article, like Coates’ article that opens this paper, was at once somewhat charitable to the plight of the gay man, but condemning of homosexuality. In the article’s attempt to synthesize all facets of the research on homosexuality, it also embodied the complexities of the attitudes towards homosexuality during the 1960s. From identifying law enforcement’s concern that homosexuals were aligned with, or at least in some way supported by, a crime syndicate; to the acknowledgement that homosexuals live and work in every part of society, Doty’s article is internally contradictory. It criminalizes homosexuals, but suggests grey areas where homosexuality is only vaguely despicable. Doty also employs language that downplays the legitimacy of the gay community, referring to homosexuals’ desires for lifelong partnerships as an “impossible dream,” and blaming bad parenting for the creation of gay men. This kind of subtle, embedded hostility towards homosexuals is present in other newspaper articles as well, such as the 1969 article “Parents Create Homosexual Sons, Psychiatrist Says.”³³ Though it condemns parents for the acts of the homosexual, it also does not redeem homosexual men as products of their circumstances. In this way, the article only succeeds in furthering the stigma against homosexuality, and makes two enemies out of homosexuality: the parents, and the homosexual himself.

Television media, like print media, also utilized the growing public fascination with and fear regarding gay men to make programming in warning of the dangers of homosexuality,

³² Robert Doty, “Growth of Overt Homosexuality In City Provokes Wide Concern: Growth of Overt Homosexuality Provoking Rising Concern,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*; *New York, N.Y.*, December 17, 1963.

³³ Harry Nelson, “Parents Create Homosexual Sons, Psychiatrist Says” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*; *Los Angeles, Calif.*, October 26, 1969, sec. C.

as well as making sensationalized documentaries of what it was like to be a homosexual. One particularly famous 1961 televised ephemeral documentary entitled *Boys Beware!* by Sid Davis depicts homosexual men as mentally ill sexual predators who molest and kill young boys. The short film, made with the Inglewood Police Department in California, says of the gay character, “Ralph was sick—a sickness that was not visible like smallpox, but no less dangerous and contagious—a sickness of the mind. You see, Ralph was a homosexual...”³⁴ The fact that the police department contributed to the making of this documentary suggests again a kind of fear of homosexuals as unsafe, as security risks. *Boys Beware!* and other documentaries like it represent a harshly negative attitude towards homosexuality, while other documentaries, like the documentary *The Homosexuals*, broadcast in 1967 by CBS, adopt a more clinical view of gayness. The CBS documentary advocates for tolerance instead of outright demonization, even though it still depicts homosexuality as a mental illness.³⁵ In this way, it serves like many of the articles published in newspapers and magazines like *The New York Times* to contribute to a changing attitude towards homosexuality that was not so much black or white, but grey.

However, neither pro-gay nor anti-gay attitudes were monolithic, and both sides struggled with solidifying a unifying argument. The anti-gay side had a much stronger basis in tradition, societal norms and religion than the pro-gay position, and had an easier garnering support early on than the gay rights movement simply because the anti-gay

³⁴ *Boys Beware*, dir. Sid Davis, prod. Sid Davis (United States: Sid Davis Productions, 1961), accessed March 28, 2018, https://archive.org/details/boys_beware.

³⁵ *CBS Reports: The Homosexuals*, by William Peters, Harry Morgan, and Mike Wallace, prod. Fred Friendly, perf. Mike Wallace (CBS News, 1967), accessed March 28, 2018, <https://archive.org/details/MikeWallaceTheHomosexuals1967RecapVersion>.

argument was appealed to what was considered the social norm.³⁶ In other words, there was little need to construct an argument on the anti-gay side because it was already the default. This left a bigger task for the pro-gay side, and provides a convincing answer for why the generation of gay men coming out of the Second World War were more content to create organizations of aggressively polite gay advocacy. They did not seek to disrupt the normative culture, only make the lives of others in the gay community who had experienced a coming out during the war better. The attitude towards homosexuality in the era immediately post-World War II was simple: “*Don’t talk about it.*”³⁷

But the gay rights movement of the 1960s, did succeed in finding a unifying argument in spite of the discomfort that surrounded the mere existence of homosexuals. The climate of the Vietnam War Era strengthened the gay rights initiative in two ways. First, the issue of homosexuals being excluded from the military worked to unify queer and questioning men both serving in the military and excluded from service. The military provided a kind of “official” definition of homosexuality that had not existed before. By this, I mean to suggest that the military, in its attempt to determine a course of action for identifying and eliminating homosexuals, also unintentionally defined what homosexuality was as an identity and a category of being. Kinsey’s work was integral in helping to create a psychological definition of homosexuality, but the United States government, via military policy, made it official. Secondly, for gay rights activists and the public, the rise in new media like television fostered a culture of voyeurism and watching, and the increased desire to see the strange and

³⁶ Ralph Smith and Russel Windes, *Progay/Antigay: The Rhetorical War over Sexuality* (Thousand Oaks, California, 2000)127-8, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233970>.

³⁷ Shilts, 94.

the other resulted in more discourse on homosexuality. As we shall see, this increase in interest in the gay community, both negatively and positively, helped normalize homosexuality over time.

The military's ban on homosexuals had the unintended effect of changing the way queer and questioning men saw themselves by defining homosexuality in a more official sense. Queer men, like university student Danny Flaherty, always knew they were different. But in 1965, many homosexuals did not have access to queer community resources outside of big cities where organizations like San Francisco's Mattachine Society, one of those 'old guard,' post-WWII groups for gay men, were operating.³⁸ Flaherty, though he began to seek out gay fellowship through the drama club, was not confronted with the dangers of being homosexual until he saw "four sailors from the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in nearby Waukegan [who] had been found out as gay and were being housed in a special barracks while they were being processed out."³⁹ Flaherty looked at the gay sailors and "saw the emptiness of their future in their eyes,"⁴⁰ suggesting that he not only was suddenly made aware that his identity posed a risk to him, but also that being outed could dramatically change the course of his life. Though homosexuals knew their existence was looked down upon, most did not face active discrimination or criminalization if they lived in relative secrecy. However, as Danny Flaherty's story suggests, the military and the draft changed this. The military psychiatric evaluation was likely the first time that any man was asked

³⁸ Justin David Suran, "Coming Out Against the War: Antimilitarism and the Politicization of Homosexuality in the Era of Vietnam," *American Quarterly* 53, no.3 (2001) 463-4.

³⁹ Danny Flaherty in Shilts, 39.

⁴⁰ Flaherty in Shilts, 38.

outright if he was gay, and even if the military was inconsistent in punishing homosexuality in its ranks, stories of men facing criminal charges for homosexuality suddenly made being gay seem all the more dangerous.

A result of this, however, was that homosexuality now had a more defined place in government discourse. It became “official,” a feature it lacked in the years before the Vietnam War. What was started by the concern that homosexuality posed a threat to national security immediately post-WWII had, by the 1960s, turned an amorphous questioning of identity among queer young men into a more solidified homosexual subgroup. As Gary Lehring suggests of homosexuals in the service, “in no other area [was] the hostility toward them as absolute or as codified as in the armed forces.”⁴¹ This concentration on homosexuality as a flaw and a psychological condition in the military made the voices of opposition louder, but also made the gay community more visible and brought gay men together in fear and in solidarity. Even those who were not actively excluded from the military and did find themselves deployed overseas were also affected by the officialization of homosexuality, and much like during the Second World War, deployment was a catalyst for many men to question their sexuality. Ironically, while the official policy barred gay men from serving in the military, those who passed screenings and served in spite of the ban found themselves with other like-minded men overseas.

Though the military’s ban on homosexuals bred fear and distrust of gay men, it also served to strengthen the gay community internally. This coincides with the findings of a study by Reid and Hogg that suggests that ingroup identification is motivated by uncertainty

⁴¹ Gary L. Lehring, *Officially Gay: The Political Construction of Sexuality by the U.S. Military*, Queer Politics, Queer Theories (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) 73.

reduction. The study demonstrates that individuals with high uncertainty about their identity, such as homosexual individuals who are fearful of the social backlash of being discovered as gay, have increased motivation to alleviate their aversive uncertainty by aligning with an in-group for which they fit a certain prototype.⁴² To put this in terms of the gay community in the 1960s, those who are uncertain about their identities in various ways (such as their sexual identity), strive to reduce their uncertainty, and identification with an in-group of like-minded individuals offers some uncertainty reduction. The prototype, in the case of the homosexual community, was provided by the officialization of gayness by the military as discussed previously in this paper. Interestingly, Reid and Hogg's study also suggests that the status of the in-group also has some effect on identification - individuals with low uncertainty were more likely to join groups of high status, suggesting a desire for image improvement over a desire for uncertainty reduction. Low status groups, by contrast, were more populated by individuals of high identity uncertainty, where the motivation was to belong and therefore reduce uncertainty instead of improving one's own status.⁴³ This offers an explanation too for why the ostracized and publicly scrutinized gay community continued to come together during the 1960s - since it appealed to a highly uncertain group of men, it did not need to possess high social status to grow.

The second way that the climate of the Vietnam War era helped solidify the gay community in the 1960s is more indirect. Voyeurism, as I have demonstrated, was a key part of the way that the Vietnam War was visualized. Televised images of war answered the

⁴² Scott Reid and Michael Hogg, "Uncertainty Reduction, Self-Enhancement, and Ingroup Identification." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31, no. 6 (June 2005): 815.

⁴³ Reid and Hogg, 815-816.

desire to see the unnatural, the exotic, and the intimate. So, too, did images of homosexuality. Beyond the gay community, voyeurism and increased interest in homosexuality, positive or negative, contributed to the proliferation of gay rights via its ability to change the baseline through exposure. Homosexuality, partly because it was inherently abnormal and therefore piqued America's voyeuristic curiosities, and partly due to the US military's ban on homosexual individuals, was, by the end of the 1960s, a kind of spectacle. As previously demonstrated, print media showed an increase in discussions of and reactions to homosexuality in the years between 1960 and 1969. The budding television industry was also contributing to how the public was viewing homosexuality. These new views on homosexuality would contribute to the rise of gay activism, but also to a greater public acceptance of homosexuality. A study by Paluck and Green concluded that simply exposing a population to a radio program expressing different views in war-torn Rwanda, didn't change any given individual's beliefs on the views expressed in the radio show, but instead changed their perception of the norm.⁴⁴ In other words, the exposure to dissenting opinions, after several months, did not make people change their personal views, but *did* change what they saw as normal. The dissenting opinions in the radio show were effectively normalized by being talked about. The voyeurism of the Vietnam War era that brought images of the taboo homosexual into American homes in effect did the same with homosexuality. Homosexuality began to be normalized by being brought into the public eye. This is not to suggest that there was no dissent, as Paluck and Green concluded in Rwanda as

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Levy Paluck and Donald P. Green, "Deference, Dissent, and Dispute Resolution: An Experimental Intervention Using Mass Media to Change Norms and Behavior in Rwanda," *American Political Science Review* 103, no. 04 (2009): , doi:10.1017/s0003055409990128.

well, only that as a whole, the baseline of normalcy was caused to shift by the growing discourse on homosexuality catalyzed by the climate of the Vietnam War era.

This is particularly evident in the article by Paul V. Coates that this paper began with. The wording of the article alone suggests that Coates struggles to reconcile attitudes of amusement, distaste, and pity towards the gay men gathering to protest the military's exclusion of homosexuals. The demonstration is called "curious," and Coates suggests that the argument for the right to privately engage in homosexual relations is one "of merit," but he also infantilizes the protesters, calling them "unrealistic," and even "tragic."⁴⁵ This conclusion begs the question, if the protest is unrealistic and ineffective, why is it newsworthy? The odd combination of attitudes, both curious about and repulsed by homosexuality, exemplifies the voyeuristic desire to peer into the shadows, and demonstrates how homosexuality, despite the common belief that it was an illness, existed in a grey area of society. Homosexuality was an affliction, but as it became normalized by increased visibility in the way that Paluck and Green suggest, it was more widely tolerated and even pitied. In this way, sympathy for the homosexual grew even though beliefs about homosexuality did not necessarily change. Coates' confused opinions expressed in the "Problem for Army" article can be seen as an expression of the changing baseline, acknowledging both the belief that homosexuality was socially unacceptable and the notion that homosexuals were consenting adults who deserved the right not to be ostracized by society.

Come the 1970s and 1980s, sensational tell-alls came out about serving in the Vietnam War while gay, and homosexual organizations published stories of sex and

⁴⁵ Coates, "Problem for Army"

experimentation as a gay serviceman for gay and straight audiences. Inflammatory, taboo, and on the margins of social acceptability, gay rights ephemera post-Stonewall looked back on the Vietnam war as a source of inspiration. ‘The Living Room War’ that played off of society’s voyeuristic tendencies still acted as the subject of voyeurism, now with the express cause of gay rights as a focus. For example, controversial gay news publications like Boyd McDonald’s *Straight to Hell* and Charles Ortleb’s *New York Native* were instrumental in bringing AIDS issues to the forefront of the community. A specific article in the *Native* entitled “Deep Dish Seafood” focused on anonymous tell-all letters from US sailors who fought in Vietnam - section headers such as “caught with hand in sailor’s pants” and “it’s ‘normal’ to get sucked off” not only suggests that sex was remarkably common among sailors, but poses these encounters in a way that maximizes their voyeuristic value in normalizing ‘deviant’ sex.⁴⁶ Both the *Native* and *Straight to Hell* were accused of touting conspiracy theories, but in spite of their potential misinformation, they utilized sensationalism and national curiosity about the scandalous lives of gay individuals to gain support, or at least publicity, for gay rights issues. By expressing extreme opinions in favor of homosexuality, they were able to foster a new normal in the way Paluck and Green did in Rwanda. In this way, reporting on homosexuality, even in a sensationalized fashion, and gaining support for the gay rights movement were two sides of the same coin.

Alan Berube’s work for *Alternate* in the 1980s is a similar example of how explorations of homosexuality among G.I.s in Vietnam served to continue to promote unity

⁴⁶ Boyd McDonald, “Deep Dish Seafood,” *New York Native*, October 14, 1985. The Allan Berube Papers, Series IV: Research Subject Files Box 118, Folder 37. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender.

in the gay community. Whether these publications angered people or excited them, they succeeded in creating public discourse. In this way, homosexual exclusion from the military during the Vietnam War and the resulting fear, outrage, protest, voyeuristic pleasure and unity influenced gay rights into the late 20th century.

The gay rights movement of the 1960s, in spite of the misconceptions and demonization of the homosexual community and the contribution of the military ban on homosexuality to the anger and outrage within the community, was strengthened by the climate of the Vietnam War era. I find that this is embodied in the metaphor Coates uses in “Problem for Army,” calling the protesters “an invading army of Rockettes.”⁴⁷ Coates’ description trivializes the gay community by suggesting that they are performing, drawing attention to homosexuality as some kind of spectacle to entertain an audience of eager viewers. But what was meant to cast aside the homosexual rights advocates as ineffective and unrealistic, like a line of flashy, yet insubstantial dancers, actually paints a picture of a movement that was taking to the stage to be seen and normalized through exposure thanks to the Vietnam war. Indeed, they were also an army, both figuratively and literally.

Ultimately, as this paper has explored, the war and the culture of voyeurism created by the rise of new media outlets had a twofold impact on the gay rights movement. First, the military’s secret work on homosexuality exemplified in the Crittenden report helped to shape an official gay identity, and for queer and questioning servicemen, the Vietnam draft was a forced confrontation with their sexuality. For those excluded by the ban, the injustice of the military’s treatment of gay men was a source of protest that brought gay men together in a

⁴⁷ Coates, “Problem for Army.”

different way than the homosexual organizations of the immediate post-WWII years had done. Secondly, the television media culture that brought the war into American living rooms also brought the desire to witness the intimate and the taboo, and homosexuality's marginalization made it the object of the public's voyeuristic urges. The widespread reporting on homosexuality likely did not immediately change the minds of television and newspaper audiences, but as Paluck and Green suggest, the exposure alone changed the baseline of normalcy. If it were not in part for homosexual experiences in Vietnam and the way that the war itself was constructed from a voyeuristic point of view, the public conception of homosexuality would likely not have changed as rapidly over the last nearly 50 years.

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