

DifferentTakes

Ten Reasons Why Militarism is Bad for Queer People

by Ryn Gluckman

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (lgbtq) people cut across race, class, gender, and nationality lines and represent a full spectrum of political opinions. There are queer people in the military and a visible queer presence at almost every recent peace rally. Queer organizations, listserves, and communities have been rife with debates about what position to take on a war with Iraq. Meanwhile, lgbtq people remain under attack by military and fundamentalist governments around the world, including the U.S. While some might argue that war is not a queer issue, the fact of the matter is that state violence has been a central theme in the history and lives of

lgbtq people for centuries. No matter what your politics, here are some basic facts to keep in mind about war's effect on queer people's lives:

1. War decreases civil liberties, freedom of expression, and dissent.

In times of crisis, already marginalized groups and under-resourced populations are blamed and attacked. Jerry Falwell, Religious Right figurehead, accused queer people and feminists for the 9.11 terrorists attacks two days after they took place: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way — all of them who have tried to secularize America — I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"

In the wake of 9.11, progressive social justice organizations who speak out against military action are often criticized for being un-American or paving the way for more terrorist attacks. In addition lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender anti-war activists are frequently targeted by the police at protests, marches, and rallies and face harassment and physical violence if put in prison.

2. Hate crimes increase during periods of militarism.

Since the attacks of 9.11, the number of hate crimes has risen dramatically across the board in the U.S. Attacks against Muslims, South Asians, and those of Middle Eastern descent skyrocketed, and hate crimes based on sexual orientation rose 7.2% from 2000. Hate crimes committed on the basis of sexual orientation ranked fourth highest category in 2001. The rise in hate crimes since 9.11

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suggests that queer people are among the first to be victimized in a climate of militarism, violence, and fear. Queer people of color are doubly impacted, facing harassment and violence not only on the basis of their racial identity, but also because of their sexual orientation. In the name of national security, the Bush administration has turned a blind eye to violence against queer people and people of color since 9.11.

3. LGBTQ people suffer human rights abuses at the hands of the military.

Sexual orientation is often used as a way to criminalize social justice activists who are working for peace. Bolan Aleksov, a gay man from Yugoslavia, was arrested by the State Secret Service in 2000 because of his involvement with the anti-war group, Women in Black. During the course of his interrogation he was beaten and endured anti-gay epithets by the police. In Uganda in 1999, five gay, human rights activists were held and tortured in military detention centers and forced to flee the country.

4. The military discriminates against lgbtq service people.

The military has always been hostile to queer people. As a result of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, set in place by the Clinton administration, queer service people are required to keep their sexuality a secret or face discharge. In this atmosphere of secrecy, discrimination and harassment are state-sanctioned. In 2001, as attention and spending on the military increased and the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan was at its height, 1250 service people were discharged for being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, the highest number of discharges since 1987. The Conduct Unbecoming report, issued by the Service Members Legal Defense Network, also found 1075

cases of harassment and intimidation of lgbtq servicepeople, up from 871 in 2000.

Discrimination against queer people seems to be one of the military's top priorities. At a time when the ability to communicate with a wide range of people across the world is extremely important, the U.S. military has fired service people with valuable translation and language skills because of their sexual orientation. In the fall of 2002, as an extensive military build-up was taking place in the Middle East, the Army discharged nine student linguists, including students of Arabic and Korean, for violating the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

5. Militarism threatens lgbtq immigrants.

Queer immigrants and asylum seekers face significant challenges to immigrating even in peacetime. Because homosexuality is considered a crime and/or disease in many countries, lgbtq immigrants are often fleeing state-sanctioned torture, forced psychiatric treatment, persecution, rape, and imprisonment on the basis of their sexual orientation. Few immigration officers are trained to solicit information about past abuses in ways that are sensitive, and queer asylum-seekers are often reluctant to tell officials about their sexual orientation for fear of further persecution. While one partner of a heterosexual married couple can sponsor the other partner for immigration, because same-sex couples are not legally recognized as family in most of the world, couples often have to immigrate alone, cannot sponsor their partners, and cannot receive the rights that immigrating families receive.

Since 9.11 many countries, including the U.S. and several European countries, have used national security and the threat of terrorism to justify restrictive immigration policies and the crackdown on illegal immigration. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people who have fled persecution in their own countries now risk being arrested as illegal immigrants and deported back to those countries.

6. War is divisive for the lgbtq community.

As the government wages war on Iraq, heated debates have broken out in lgbtq communities about whether to publically oppose the war. Large organizations fear being labeled as unpatriotic and losing funding if they speak out against the war. There have been widespread accusations of racism in the lgbtq community, and even calls to boycott or withdraw membership from lgbtq advocacy and support groups who have not made public statements in opposition to the war.

7. Militarism and war diverts support for lgbtq people.

The focus of the U.S. government on the "War On Terrorism" has come at the expense of basic support services for lgbtq people. Community organizations that provide support for queer youth, HIV/AIDS counseling, and referrals have experienced extreme budget cutbacks, while government spending on the military has skyrocketed. In February 2002, President Bush proposed a national budget for FY 2003 that would raise defense spending by nearly 13%, the greatest increase since the Reagan Administration's Cold War era budget. In 2004, President Bush hopes to increase the US military budget to \$399.1 billion, while funding to social services would be sacrificed in order to support this increase in military spending. Recently, Illinois cut \$2.5 million designated for AIDS/HIV support services and Massachusetts cut funding for its Safe Schools Program that provides support for lgbtq students and youth.

8. Militarism encourages a climate of fundamentalism.

In the past months, the fundamentalist government of Egypt has made mass arrests of anti-war activists and queer people. Egypt has long been criticized for its human rights abuses against its lgbtq citizens, and is currently notorious for the arrest of 52 gay men charged with "debauchery." Two days before international anti-war demonstrations in February 2003, Egyptian State Security Police also arrested 11 antiwar activists in Cairo. The Bush Administration considers Egypt a major ally in the Middle East. Not only has the U.S. not spoken out against the Egyptian government's human rights abuses, in 2002 it pledged \$10.3 billion in aid along with the European Union and

World Bank. The heightening tension in the Middle East and U.S. military action in Iraq have allowed the recent arrests of gay men and antiwar activists in Egypt to go unchallenged.

Five months after the 9.11 attacks, as the U.S. was engaged in bombing Afghanistan, Pat Robertson, a religious fundamentalist leader notorious for his anti-gay agenda, attacked Islam and Muslims. "[Islam] is not a peaceful religion that wants to coexist," Robertson said. "They want to coexist until they can control, dominate and then if need be destroy." It seems that many fundamentalists make no distinctions in their hatred of peace activists, queers, or people of different ethnicities and religions.

9. Militarism perpetuates rigid gender norms.

At its most basic level, militarism is rooted in traditional, heterosexist ideas of gender that define masculinity as physically powerful and aggressive and femininity as meek and passive. This was made clear in debates about whether or not to allow women to fight in front-line combat during the first Gulf War. These gender norms have historically been used to marginalize and criminalize queer people who often challenge the legitimacy of these norms. Increasing our dependence on the military and making war a priority strengthens the heterosexist, patriarchal culture that promotes war, intensifying the stigmatization of those who defy that culture.

10. War kills queer people.

There is no question that war kills innocent people. It is estimated that 1 in every 10 people is queer. This means that out of the 1.5 million Iraqis who have died in the last decade because of sanctions and bombings, 150,000 were queer. 15,000 queer people were sent to concentration camps during the Holocaust, the global North's most famous example of genocide and militarism. It is estimated that over 300 lgbtq people died in the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. From queer servicemen to civilians, to political prisoners and prisoners of war, war threatens everyone's life.

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