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The crude videos the Navy needed

By Bruce Fleming
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The military's mission is to exert force and possibly kill people. It cannot work within the rules of civilian office culture.

The aircraft carrier USS Enterprise spent six months deployed in 2006, loading ordnance and flying sorties for two bloody wars. During that period and in 2007, the ship's second-in-command made and showed to his troops a series of goof videos about the challenges of carrying out the mission in a confined, deprived, inescapable space. Capt. Owen Honors made jokes about masturbation, sex in the showers and over-reliance on the f-bomb. He used coarse words for gay people. The videos came to light last weekend, and on Tuesday, amid escalating news coverage and outcry, the Navy [removed Honors from his command](#).

Military responsiveness to civilian outrage is a good thing, since the military works for the civilian world rather than the reverse: It is the hammer to the civilian hand. And if someone wearing the uniform embarrasses the military, he or she takes the hit, regardless of the merits of the case - and again, this is a good thing. The individual has become distracting to the mission of the military. Members of the Navy learn the scale of importance from greatest to least: ship, shipmate, self. Here the individual has been sacrificed to the mission. And that's a good thing, too.

However, [the videos](#), at least as I (and almost everyone else) viewed them in the fragmentary, edited form made available by the Virginian-Pilot, which broke the story, suggest not a bad leader but a good one, doing not the wrong thing but in fact the right one. Honors aired uncomfortable facts of life at sea that the military leadership often ignores. The captain as an individual is toast, but the part of the civilian world that celebrated his ouster was wrong to do so. Such outrage will end up harming the civilians whom the military is designed to serve.

There are serious problems in today's military that it did not create but must address to the satisfaction of its civilian masters. Human beings are created with a sex drive, and the civilian world has demanded that first women, [and now openly gay people](#), be integrated into largely closed-quarters situations that have historically operated by the rules of straight males. It's not Neanderthal to note that men and women socialize differently - men by aggressing one another and women by supporting one another (see the work of Georgetown linguist Deborah Tannen). It's not homophobic to point out that most people are more comfortable being naked around strangers whom they think (perhaps wrongly) have no sexual interest in them. That's why we have single-sex bathrooms in public places.

It's the tenor of our times to go ballistic on anyone who notes these elemental facts. But noting them is just what we should be doing, as a way of defusing tensions and persuading people to accept difficult situations. I think Honors realized that problems everybody talks about privately become worse if the command structure pretends they don't exist. He's like a parent who decided to make clear to his kids that he knew they were thinking about sex and drugs, and to take control of the topic. He should get a medal for being

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Among those problems: the fact that on a tight-quarters ship, masturbation (frowned upon in the 19th century but now generally accepted) becomes difficult. The fact that plenty of straight servicemen and women fear showering with people of the same sex but a different sexual orientation. The fact that profanity is overused. The executive officer frankly referenced those facts with his insider videos on the ship's closed-circuit TV. They were meant for one audience; now they're being seen by another.

There's no question that the humor is "male." It's aggressive, name-calling and ribald. But then again, most of the viewers were male and military. Should a leader who wants to connect with his troops channel the garden club? Shouldn't he borrow, as Honors did, from ["Caddyshack"](#)?

The videos *are* funny, at least to the right audience, the one that they were made for and that was, until now, the only one to see them. (They're also clever, including "casting" ripped men as women for a shower scene and pasting Honors's face on his "alter egos.") And the increasingly conservative military *does* feel put-upon by civilian standards of political correctness - the captain tries to defuse objections at the beginning by announcing that "bleeding hearts" will disapprove. (How right he was!)

And why are we shocked, shocked, at someone publicly using profanity to blunt its power and prod us to ask why we're addicted to it? Remember Lenny Bruce? Remember George Carlin's "seven words you can never say on television"?

On camera, Honors says he's heard rumors that some sailors were upset by his earlier videos but adds that nobody objected directly to him. This bugs him, and while it's impossible to know what point he's trying to make with this scene, it is true that the military discourages anonymous, secondhand complaints. People are taught to say what they have to say. But in today's military, from the earlier tyranny of the majority, we've gone to the other extreme: the tyranny of the minority, in which the most sensitive sailor or soldier has the power to hold the majority hostage. Meanwhile, the service still has to harness male aggression to get its job done.

Do we really think that sexually mature (and largely frustrated) young men and women on deployment and charged with killing enemies cannot bear to hear the words used in these videos? Do we think they're unaware of the problems of same-sex or mixed-sex or mixed-sexual-orientation intimacy that the closed quarters of ships, submarines, showers or sleeping quarters can create? They deal with these issues by joking about masturbation, gay sex, having things shoved up their rectums - all the subjects that their executive officer was showing them they could joke about and move on.

The worst offense to many viewers of the videos seems to be Honors's use of a word usually meant as a gay slur. He's not referring to someone believed to be gay, but to one of his "alter egos" and to the video's audience, Surface Warfare Officers, who (the self-deprecating inside joke has it) are not as cool as pilots. It's an inclusive joke, not an exclusive one, with the captain referring to the SWO "alter ego" sitting to his left (but who has his face) as "the kid in the 'swoveralls.'" ("Swoveralls" is a joke, too. Get it?)

Yes, the captain uses a slur, but not to make fun of gay people. Everything depends on context - in this case, the insular confines of a ship at sea.

My understanding of Honors's frustration comes from 23 years as a civilian professor at the Naval Academy, living daily the increasing divide between military and civilian culture. I think you have to take a stand about coarse stuff such as this, and mine is not the captain's. I had a gay brother who died of AIDS, so I start each semester by telling the midshipmen they may not, in my classroom, criticize something as weak or unconvincing by calling it "gay." Their whole generation does so, so it's spitting in the ocean, but

you have to start somewhere.

Similarly, I forbid "retard" (I have a daughter with Asperger's syndrome) and "suck" (which is not only sexual in nature but linked to anti-gay taunts). And then I explain why these terms are hurtful.

What I do not do is punish them for saying these words or explode when I hear them, as some civilian viewers and television commentators did when they saw the Enterprise videos. First I gain their trust, and then we talk about the issue. I'm not Honors, and I think my way works better. But at least he was trying to do something, and not just pretend that there are no issues.

The Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a military gay rights group, did a victory dance when the Navy declared the videos "clearly inappropriate" and promised an investigation. This was unwise, as it seemed to affirm the military's belief that now it is going to be held hostage to the most sensitive members of a huge community. There are times when I have been told to teach to the most easily shockable student I can imagine, to say nothing that could give offense. This cheats and demeans midshipmen, and it's very destructive of morale and effectiveness in the fleet.

Military 101 for viewers of these videos: The military is not like an office. It requires bonding far beyond what someone who goes home at 5 p.m. can imagine. It involves a lack of privacy foreign to the civilian world. It demands, in combat situations, self-sacrifice that most civilians have no idea of. It also requires aggression and force, two things typically associated with men. In short, the military is to a large degree more like a football team in a locker room (and out) than it is like a civilian workforce.

These things have a sexual side: Marines, for instance, can use the f-bomb as every part of speech. It helps the "devil dogs" focus and provides a common language. So putting women on board ships may be what the civilian world requires, and it may have a net positive effect (opening service to 51 percent of the population, say), but it also creates new tensions. Women and openly gay people can be integrated into the military, and should be, if the tenor of the civilian world for which the military works demands it. But they must adapt to military reality. The armed forces will be decimated if we allow any of these groups to always call the tune.

The results of the Defense Department's recent survey of attitudes toward "don't ask, don't tell" showed that there is still significant concern about lifting the ban. These concerns can be handled by addressing them directly, explaining, for example, that the gay guy in the next shower probably just wants to go to bed, and not with you. But discussion starts with acknowledging the problem - joking about it at first, if need be, but not dismissing the anxiety.

Honors could have pretended that these issues don't exist. Instead, he used the medium and vernacular of his sailors to let them know that he understands their struggles with life at sea, and to encourage people to talk about them openly rather than let them fester. He's gone, but let's hope his willingness to discuss real problems will stay. The purpose of repealing "don't ask, don't tell" was to allow people to say things, after all. It's counter to the spirit of that repeal to demand silence.

Not to mention destructive to the military and to the civilians it defends.

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