

Dodging A Bullet: On Trump's Trans Ban for the Military

A Meditation on Survival, Treachery, and Betrayal

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Today I wake up to the news that Trump has banned trans people from serving in the military, and I laugh. I cackle, really. I think, "Good!" I wish for a moment that meant more of the people around me were exempted from service. But, I recall, I don't want the government to legislate anyone's life, no matter the circumstances. Having nearly joined the military myself as a baby queer, only to have found myself in a far more welcome struggle, I think there's a more interesting conversation to be had here.

What does it mean that Trump, a man so repulsed by women that he constantly discusses their blood with horrified fascination, who reputedly can think of no better way to defile the bed of his political opponent than to pay women to pee on it, has made this rule?

It is misogyny, of course, as rules and violence against trans people always are—misogyny, and misogyny's little brother, homophobia. It is both hilarious and indicative that Trump justifies the ban in part because of our "tremendous medical costs," a juvenile reference to our mysterious—and therefore disgusting—bodies. Those who cannot imagine that people of different genders, gender presentations, or levels of dysphoria live, work, fight, and die together are only expressing their own failure. Although they have not always understood themselves as "trans" in all places, cultures, and times, gender-divergent people have probably fought in every military on earth—and, more often, died at their hands. The insecurities that go into forming the personality of a dictator, the inability to relate fully or feel empathy with others, very often cause such people to hate or distrust those whose predicates are different than their own. This is nothing new.

Most fundamentally, Trump's decision reflects a fear that we are treacherous; that we cannot be trusted by the state. I hope that this is true; more often, though, we are the betrayed. It is not because Chelsea Manning is trans that she chose to leak the "Collateral Murder" video. She did so because she was a person of good conscience who saw evil being committed and chose to act. By contrast, Adrian Lamo, whose name can only be uttered with the deepest contempt, chose to betray her to the state when she reached out to him for support around her struggle with gender, trusting in him as a fellow queer person. Measured against betrayals like these, Trump's feeble "ban" of our military service cannot possibly matter. Those of us who want to continue to serve in the military will simply go further undercover.

But this is not our only possible choice.

Why do trans people join the military? For some of us, of course, it has to do with our masculinity—our last-ditch attempts to express it in ways the world validates. But there is no need to psychoanalyze ourselves the way our enemies do. Most of our reasons for joining are the same as anyone else's: poverty; racial oppression; feeling unable or unwilling to begin pursuing the American Dream through college or a career; a desire for camaraderie, for a community in which what we are told is wrong with us doesn't matter, where we can feel free, alive, trusted, respected, and loved. Even patriotism, rooted as it is in a desire to believe that our lives are not as bad as we know they are, can be our motivation.

We are not different, really. Our despair, our tendency to kill ourselves, our lack of salvation from a world that does not want us to live—these are not different in content, only in intensity.

We have to fight every day for our physical and emotional survival—some of us more than others, along familiar lines of race, class, gender, and degree of “freedom” from incarceration. In the context of this fight, it is bitter indeed that some trans people choose to embrace the role of our mutual oppressor, whether or not they justify it by a desire to change the system from within.

Mostly, we all wake up in our lives as they have unfolded. But we, too, have agency. We can choose to become treacherous; to leave our political families and so-called communities, if we must; to betray our vows to the system that seeks to destroy us; to strive to exist together in a real community founded in struggle. From that, at least, we cannot be disenfranchised.

In response to Trump's ban, we call for solidarity with the victims of war and imperialist aggression, of all genders. We call for solidarity with war resisters, and with the victims of our systems of repression. We call, finally, for solidarity with those who choose to bite the hand that, sometimes, feeds them.

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