Major Conflict: One Gay Mans Life in the Dont-Ask-Dont-Tell Military by Jeffrey McGowan Maj USA

Best Book On The Subject

A book that will move hearts and open minds, Jeffrey McGowan’s memoir is the first personal account of a gay man’s silent struggle in the don’t-ask-don’t-tell military, from a cadet who rose to the rank of major, left as a decorated Persian Gulf hero, and whose same-sex marriage was the first on the East Coast.

Love of country and personal love combine in this groundbreaking memoir of one gay man’s life in the military—and beyond. In Major Conflict, Queens-born Jeffrey McGowan tells how he enlisted in the army in the late 1980s and served with distinction for ten years. But McGowan had a secret: he was gay. In the don’t-ask-don’t-tell world of the Clinton-era army, being gay meant automatic expulsion. So, at the expense of his personal life and dignity, he hid his sexual identity and continued to serve the army well.

Major Conflict is a moving account of his years in the military, the homophobia he encountered there, and his life afterward. McGowan presents a vivid portrait of his experience as a soldier in the Persian Gulf, where he commanded U.S. troops in Operation Desert Storm, eventually rising to the rank of major. Ultimately, however, he realized that the army held no future for gay men—even closeted ones. Desiring more of a personal life and tired of hiding his true identity, McGowan resigned from the Army he loved in 1998. In February 2004, he married his partner of six years in New Paltz, New York, making front-page news in the New York Times.

Well-written, engaging memoir of a dedicated soldier torn between love and service to country and the enormous obstacle to that service, known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT). Mcgowan's inner turmoil over his commitment to military service and his awareness of homosexual desire is wrenching. Such existential dilemmas are often difficult to imagine, because sexual identity so easily trumps professional ones. But Mcgowan
saw his military identity just as vividly as he saw his gay one to the point of suppressing the latter for the former. I think many of us perceive one's sexual persona as paramount, that it's often difficult to empathize with those who would compromise it for any reason, much less for a military career in which others' hostility to that persona can be virulent. That a dilemma could arise seems challenging enough, but clearly it did for McGowan, and the conflict is palpable throughout the book. (I have a new appreciation for gays in the priesthood.)

Faced with the same situation, it's easy to dismiss this conflict as exaggerated. E.g., when I was in the Navy, I refused to compromise, told all, and pleasantly served until honorably discharged. But that was over thirty years ago. Clearly, DADT has placed a pall over military service that has become significantly more hostile and intense, and while my commitment to military service was always a waystation, clearly it was literally a way of life for McGowan. His service and sexuality tore equally at his dual core identities, and because of DADT, it became increasingly more painful year after year, grade increase after grade, love after love, until something had to give. The reader can't help but feel his pain. (cf., Sarte's "No Exit.")

Most of us know the disastrous consequences of such a policy (e.g., terminations at Monterey of Arabic-speaking gays), but here we see vividly the human agony of such nonsense. And perhaps the most disturbing feature of McGowan's experience is why one's sexual orientation matters at all. Many scream "homophobia," but he endured it. I experienced nothing of the kind. My "loss" to the military didn't amount to a hill of beans, but here is a career officer with an exemplary skills and stellar performance in the upper echelons of the military hierarchy, and the only issue is over his same-sex attraction? We have retrogressed and become amazingly petty!

Everyone will benefit from this book. Polity is often a prescription for unintended consequences, and DADT's consequences have been of an inordinate magnitude. Here's a perfect example of it. Conservatives, military personnel, moderates, liberals, policy-makers, and (maybe) the far-left can learn from McGowan's experience and his consequences. May his new life and this expose give him consolation. He's earned it!

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