Secretary of Defense Speech

Remarks at LGBT Pride Month Ceremony

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, Pentagon Auditorium, June 9, 2015

General Taylor, thank you.  Thank you for that wonderful, warm introduction.  And to Lucas, your husband, and all the other spouses and partners of servicemembers and DoD civilians here today – thank you for joining us, and above all, for supporting your loved ones in their service to us.

Ladies and gentlemen; leaders of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community; Defense Department leaders, family, friends:  It’s a privilege to stand with you at this fourth annual DoD Pentagon Pride Month event.  Four years after the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” – following years and years of gay and lesbian servicemembers having to hide who they are – today we take pride in how they’re free to serve their country openly.  Because we believe in getting to a place where no one serves in silence, and where we treat all our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines with the dignity, and the respect, that they deserve.

Looking back, gays and lesbians have long defended our country in uniform – and there are thousands of stories that illustrate their willingness to serve, and to sacrifice.

There’s the story, for example, of Army Corporal Lloyd Darling, a twenty-year-old Green Beret who was killed in Vietnam in 1968.  Amid heavy fighting near the Mekong Delta, his unit overrun, Corporal Darling stayed back to cover its retreat to safety.  His fellow soldiers knew he was gay, and they never forgot his courage under fire.  Years later, one of his battle buddies said, and I quote, “he died for us.”

There’s also the story of Marine Corps veteran Staff Sergeant Eric Alva, the first American wounded in the Iraq War.  He’d been serving for 13 years with tours in Japan and Somalia when, just hours after the invasion began, a land mine exploded beneath him.  Staff Sergeant Alva gave his right leg serving our country – even as he was required to hide his sexual orientation.

And there’s the story of Staff Sergeant Tracy Dice Johnson from the North Carolina National Guard, whose wife, Staff Sergeant Donna Johnson, was killed by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan in 2012.  As a war widow, Tracy continues to serve our country in uniform, and she’s now receiving the same survivor benefits as every other family of America’s fallen patriots.

Tracy’s story is emblematic of a deep and abiding commitment in recent years – both in this department, and across the country – to recognizing gay and lesbian marriages and families in full accordance with the law.  And here at the Pentagon, we have been, and remain,  strongly committed to making sure that all our military families and spouses can fully and equally receive the benefits their loved ones have earned – from TRICARE coverage to housing allowances to side-by-side burial at Arlington.  Even in times of resistance – like when some states wouldn’t issue DoD ID cards to same-sex spouses at National Guard facilities – we pushed back.  Not just because our servicemembers and families deserved it, but because everyone’s rights had to be protected.

The Department of Defense has made a lasting commitment to living the values we defend – to treating everyone equally – because we need to be a meritocracy.  We have to focus relentlessly on our mission, which means the thing that matters most about a person is what they can contribute to national defense.

This is a commitment we must continually renew.  And that’s why, today, I’m proud to announce that the Department of Defense has completed the process for updating its Military Equal Opportunity policy to include sexual orientation – ensuring that the department, like the rest of the federal government, treats sexual-orientation-based discrimination the same way it treats discrimination based on race, religion, color, sex, age, and national origin.  And I’m very proud of the work that the military services have put into this over the last several months.  Because discrimination of any kind has no place in America’s armed forces.

Recognizing that our openness to diversity is one of the things that have allowed us to be the best in the world, we must ensure that everyone who’s able and willing to serve has the full and equal opportunity to do so.  And we must start from a position of inclusivity, not exclusivity.  Anything less is not just plain wrong; it’s bad defense policy, and puts our future strength at risk.

Embracing diversity and inclusion is critical to recruiting and retaining the force of the future.  Young Americans today are more diverse, open, and tolerant than past generations, and if we’re going to attract the best and brightest among them to contribute to our mission of national defense, we have to ourselves be more open, diverse, and tolerant, too.  It’s the only way to compete in the 21st century.

And it’s also vital for developing our military’s future leaders, innovators, and strategists.  While we don’t know where – who they’ll be, or what they’ll look like, we do know they could come from anywhere.  It takes decades to grow our senior military leaders, and today, we can’t afford to close ourselves off to anyone.

Moreover, taking active steps towards a military that reflects the rich diversity of America won’t just make us stronger.  It’ll also help us build bridges to our country and to our communities that otherwise aren’t connected enough to those who serve and sacrifice on their behalf – on behalf of this country we all love.

As we remind ourselves how diversity and inclusion help make us stronger, we must also remember another reason why they’re important – because they’re part of our national character.

In the years past, gay and lesbian servicemembers who desired to serve openly were not aberrant or counter to the ideals that our military has always defended.  They’re the same ideals enshrined in our founding documents – the belief that we’re all created equal, endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

These words are more than a pinnacle to strive for.  They are real.  And the men and women of this department prove that every day.

Indeed, the sacrifices made by Corporal Darling, Staff Sergeant Alva, and Staff Sergeant Johnson – sacrifices of life, limb, and love – are no different from sacrifices that have long been made by Americans in uniform… both men and women, gay and straight alike, each willing to defend this country and its ideals and help make a better world.  And whether they fall in combat, or go on to live a long life, in the end the earth makes no distinction in its embraces of our honored patriots.  And neither should we.

So as we celebrate LGBT Pride Month, let us take pride in all who step forward to serve our country – past, present, and future.  As fellow citizens, we honor them.  We thank them.  We cherish them.  Today, and always.

Thank you.