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FROM: Walter L. Williams, 2319 Portland St. Los Angeles CA 90007
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RE: Op-Ed essay submission to THE ADVOCATE
for a "Commentary," "My Perspective," or "Last Word" column.
This essay is about 1,200 words, but can be reduced in length if necessary.

AUTHOR BYLINE: Professor Walter L. Williams teaches GLBT Studies at the University of Southern California, and is Editor of the INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN REVIEW. His most recent book is OVERCOMING HETEROSEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA, and his forthcoming book is on GAY AND LESBIAN RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES.

TERRORISM AND RELIGIOUS FANATICISM

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, for all their horror, represent an opportunity for the GLBT community to challenge prejudice and discrimination. In sharp contrast to Jerry Falwell's sordid attempt to blame the ACLU and gay people for the deaths, most Americans reject such ludicrous ranting. The bravery of gay San Franciscan Mark Bingham, in evidently helping to thwart the hijackers' attempt to crash United Airlines flight 93 into the White House, along with the dedication of gay firefighters and police who gave their lives to save others in the World Trade Center, clearly demonstrate the patriotism of gay Americans.

If it is not accurate to label gays and lesbians, neither is it accurate to stigmatize Arabs as the enemies of America. Despite having legitimate grips against U. S. policy in the Mideast, Yasser Arafat and many other Arabs have severely condemned the attacks on the civilian World Trade Center as an outrage against humanity. We cannot define America's enemies in racial terms, and we should be careful to avoid making war against Arabs in general. The real enemy is religious fanaticism. Having lived in a Muslim

country myself, I know that the vast majority of Muslims are not terrorists. But the extreme fundamentalist Muslims are as rabid, and consequently as anti-gay, as extreme fundamentalist Christians.

Gay and lesbian Americans can be united in support of an American war effort against such religious fanaticism. Muslim terrorists believe they will be rewarded in heaven for killing infidels, and are thus persuaded to give up their own life in a kamikazi hijacking that would make no sense without its religious justification.

We should follow the approach of NGLTF director Lorri Jean, who condemned this terrible tragedy as “the sad byproduct of fanaticism. It has its roots in the same fanaticism that enables people like Jerry Falwell to preach hate against those who do not think, live, or love in the exact same way he does.”

Lesbian and gay Americans can help to make the upcoming war against terrorism into a war against religious fanaticism, just as abolitionists helped to make the American Civil War into a crusade against slavery. Though most Northerners went to war in 1861 solely to prevent Southern secession, black abolitionist Frederick Douglass clearly saw the potential to use the war to end slavery. He encouraged African Americans to volunteer for the Union war effort. Just as with GLBT troops today, in 1861 the U. S. Army did not allow non-whites to be enlisted. Rebuffed by the Lincoln administration, Douglass did not give up but convinced the governor of Massachusetts to allow black men to be enlisted into that State’s militia. Meanwhile, in speeches and letters to newspapers and government officials, Douglass tirelessly made the argument for African Americans to be able to fight. “Why fight with one hand tied behind your back,” he

asked President Lincoln. Encouraging black slaves to escape and join the Union Army, he reasoned, would critically weaken the Southern rebels on a number of levels.

The position of GLBT people in the U. S. military in 2001 is precisely the same as African Americans in 1861. Enlisting black men would, conservatives argued, damage morale among white troops. We must ask President Bush why, if patriotic gay men and lesbians have a special motivation to serve their country to fight against religious fanaticism, they should be kept out of the military. Why, indeed, should America fight with one hand tied behind its back, when it could take advantage of the talents and skills of thousands of GLBT Americans?

Just as Frederick Douglass did not let the army's refusal to admit black troops defeat him, so we should not let the military's exclusionist policy today defeat us. Organizations like the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network should locate sympathetic State governors to recruit openly GLBT people into their State reserves. If that is not successful, then GLBT non-enlisted military support units should be organized, and offer to help the war effort. We will shame the military, the politicians, and the American people into recognizing the patriotism of GLBT Americans.

If we accept President Bush's characterization of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as an act of war, then we need to be loud and clear that GLBT Americans want to be part of the war effort. Though the outbreak of war is a horrible tragedy, war mobilization provides an opportunity for great social change. Stigmatized minorities have made great strides for inclusion during past wars in American history.

Frederick Douglass' campaign was so successful that by August 1862 President Lincoln had changed his policy and came out in favor of enlisting black troops. By 1864, after African Americans had made a major impact in helping to defeat the Southern rebellion, Lincoln threw his weight solidly behind the passage of the 13th Amendment to abolish slavery. Lincoln's stance represented a drastic change from his position in 1861. The brave service of over 100,000 black troops in the Union Army was a major motivator for him and other white Northerners to support black freedom and citizenship.

We can see similar trends in later wars. During World War I, volunteering by American Indians helped to overcome the image of Indians as enemies of the United States, and led directly to a law passed by Congress in 1924 that granted citizenship to all Native Americans. During World War II, the service of Navajo code talkers was widely lauded as a significant contribution to American victory. By making radio transmissions in their own native languages, Navajo troops prevented Axis codebreakers from understanding our military secrets. America's diversity helped win the war, and as a result any lingering opposition to Native American participation in the U. S. armed forces melted away.

Likewise, during World War II the bravery exhibited by Japanese American troops (even including many U. S. soldiers whose families were still incarcerated in internment camps), helped to decrease anti-Japanese prejudice after 1945.

Though it is too early to know what kind of military response will be required in the upcoming war against terrorism, we have a golden opportunity to distinguish ourselves and prove our patriotism. GLBT organizations can raise money to help support our troops, and volunteers can join GLBT war-support units. We can genuinely

and enthusiastically lend our talents to fight against religious fanaticism. We can thereby make fundamentalist bigots into the enemy of freedom and liberty, which we are fighting to protect.

Just as entrenched anti-Semitism was reduced by Americans' horror of Nazi extremism after 1945, so today those Muslim extremists who publicly advocate the execution of homosexuals can be demonized into the enemy of freedom and liberty. By focusing America's fight against fundamentalist extremists, we can show the parallels between Islamic terrorists who kill innocent civilians and Christian fundamentalists like Rev. Fred Phelps. The danger is not Islam or Christianity in general, but the alarming notion that fanatics could teach that god condones the killing of innocent lives. Execution of homosexuals by Muslim extremists in Iran in the 1980s is no different from the execution of sodomites by the Catholic Church in medieval Europe, or the calls by Phelps for the death of homosexuals today. If we make the effort, the approaching war against terrorism has great potential to become a war against religious fanaticism. That is surely something to inspire our community.