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News Analysis: Obama Win Could End ROTC Battle

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When University President Drew G. Faust addressed the Reserve Officers' Training Corps commissioning ceremony in June, she distilled the decades-old tension between Harvard and the military in a quiet but pointed criticism.

"I wish that there were more of you," Faust said to the five cadets and about 100 spectators on the steps of Memorial Church. "I believe that every Harvard student should have the opportunity to serve in the military, as you do, and as those honored in the past have done."

Audience members in the know recognized Faust's words as a veiled swipe at the controversial "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which bars openly gay individuals from serving in the armed forces.

The policy is at the heart of the conflict between Harvard and ROTC, which has been banned from campus since 1969. But if Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama is elected, that tension may be resolved.

While both Obama and his Republican opponent John McCain support ROTC's presence on college campuses, Obama has said that if elected, he would favor repealing "don't ask, don't tell."

In a rare show of agreement, both Obama and McCain expressed steadfast support for ROTC at a joint appearance at Columbia last month.

McCain, a decorated Vietnam veteran, leveled charges at Ivy League institutions like Harvard and Columbia for barring ROTC from their campuses.

"We're here in a wonderful institution," McCain said of Columbia. "But did you know that this school will not allow ROTC on this campus?"

McCain added that he believes students should be "exposed to the attractiveness of serving in the military."

Obama, who received his undergraduate degree from Columbia, echoed McCain's sentiments.

"I recognize that there are students here who have differences in terms of military policy," Obama said at the Columbia forum. "But the notion that young people here at Columbia or anywhere, in any university, aren't offered the choice, the option of participating in military service, I think is a mistake."

But the two candidates have markedly different opinions on “don’t ask, don’t tell,” which was instituted in 1994.

In recent interviews with a variety of publications, Obama has announced that he would favor repealing the policy.

“I think there’s increasing recognition within the Armed Forces that this is a counterproductive strategy,” he said in a interview with *The Advocate*, a gay news magazine, earlier this year. “We’re spending large sums of money to kick highly qualified gays or lesbians out of our military, some of whom possess specialties like Arab-language capabilities that we desperately need. That doesn’t make us more safe.”

McCain, by contrast, has backed “don’t ask, don’t tell,” saying at a forum in New York last year that he believes that the policy is currently “working.”

“Right now we’ve got the best military we’ve ever had—the most professional, best trained, equipped and the bravest,” McCain said in March 2007, according to *The New York Times*. “And so I think it’s logical to leave this issue alone.”

By leaving “don’t ask, don’t tell” in place, a McCain presidency would almost certainly ensure that Harvard’s legal struggle with the military would continue for at least four more years, while if Obama takes office on Jan. 20 and succeeds in rolling back the policy, Harvard would see its main reason for banning ROTC disappear.

Harvard and ROTC have had a frosty relationship since 1969, when ROTC was banned from campus after student protested the Vietnam War. Harvard students who currently participate in ROTC do so at MIT.

Thomas M. Barron ’09, a cadet in Army ROTC, said that he was pleased that the two candidates have found common ground in expressing support for the program.

“I’m glad they’ve both come out in favor of how important ROTC is and stated positively its rightful place on college campuses,” he said.

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