

U.S. military more open to gays serving openly
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from the December 4, 2007 edition

Reporter Brad Knickerbocker talks about the US military possibly repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy towards gays and lesbians. Is the US ready to join Britain, Israel, most NATO nations, and other countries in allowing gay men and lesbians to openly serve in the armed forces?

Most likely not any time soon. But the US military's longstanding aversion to having such service members among the ranks seems to be shifting, reflecting public opinion.

A group of 28 retired generals and admirals issued a letter calling on Congress to repeal the 1993 "don't ask, don't tell" act. The controversial law was passed early in the Clinton administration, prohibiting anyone who "demonstrate(s) a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts" from military service because it "would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability."

Retired Army Gen. John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says he's changed his mind on the subject and now favors opening up the military based on sexual orientation.

"Conversations [with the troops] showed me just how much the military has changed.... I now believe that if gay men and lesbians served openly in the United States military, they would not undermine the efficacy of the armed forces," General Shalikashvili wrote in a column in The New York Times earlier this year.

Current Joint Chiefs chairman Adm. Mike Mullen told Military Times last week, "If the American people want to change this policy and change this law, bringing it up through [Congress] and changing that policy and changing the law is the right answer."

Seventy-nine percent of the public approves repealing "don't ask, don't tell," according to a May 2007 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll, including a plurality of Republicans.

A Zogby survey of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan found that 73 percent reported being "personally comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians," and only 37 percent want to keep the current policy.

A bill to replace "don't ask, don't tell" with a policy of "nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation" has 136 cosponsors in the House, mostly Democrats. Among the presidential candidates, Republicans say they want to keep "don't ask, don't tell" while Democrats support repealing it.

According to a 2004 Urban Institute report, some 65,000 gay men and lesbians serve in the military, including National Guard and reserve forces. Meanwhile, an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 service personnel have been dismissed under the law, including hundreds of linguists, medical personnel, and intelligence analysts, according to the Government Accountability Office.

While the rate of dismissals has dropped since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, these still number in the hundreds each year.

Several federal court cases are challenging "don't ask, don't tell."

Maj. Margaret Witt, a US Air Force flight nurse and 18-year veteran who was decorated for her service in the Persian Gulf, is fighting her involuntary dismissal. "Wounded people never asked me about my sexual orientation," she said recently. "They were just glad to see me there."

Meanwhile, the presence of gays in other countries' militaries appears not to have been as traumatic as critics had warned.

As reported in *Parameters*, the US Army War College quarterly, in 2003, researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara, found that, "Not a single one of the 104 experts interviewed [which included military personnel] believed that the Australian, Canadian, Israeli, or British decisions to lift their gay bans undermined military performance, readiness, or cohesion, led to increased difficulties in recruiting or retention, or increased the rate of HIV infection among the troops."

In December 2006, Zogby International polled 545 troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among the findings: "Of the 20 percent who said they are uncomfortable around gays and lesbians, only 5 percent are 'very' uncomfortable...."

Such findings among military personnel, most of whom are relatively young, parallel similar attitudes in which a generational difference is noteworthy. The Pew Research Center found last year that "Among those 65 and older, 73 percent oppose legalizing gay marriage, while 53 percent of adults under the age of 30 favor this position."

Seventy-eight of the respondents in the Zogby survey of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans "noted that they would join the military regardless of [homosexuals'] open inclusion."

This attitude is gaining ground among older, more senior military members.

In their letter to Congress, the retired generals and admirals' wrote: "As is the case in Britain, Israel, and other nations which allow gays and lesbians to serve openly, our service members are professionals who are able to work together effectively despite differences in race, gender, religion, and sexuality. Such collaboration reflects the strength and the best traditions of our democracy."