

A New Push to Roll Back 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 29 — Marking the 14th anniversary of legislation that allowed gay men and lesbians to serve in the military but only if they kept their orientation secret, 28 retired generals and admirals plan to release a letter on Friday urging Congress to repeal the law.

The retired officers offer data showing that 65,000 gay men and lesbians now serve in the American armed forces and that there are more than one million gay veterans.

“They have served our nation honorably,” the letter states.

The letter’s release comes as rallies are scheduled on the Mall by groups calling for a change in the law, which is known as “don’t ask, don’t tell” because it bars the military from investigating soldiers’ sexual orientation if they keep it to themselves.

Although the signers of the letter are high-ranking, none are of the stature of Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when the policy was adopted and who now argues for its repeal. General Shalikashvili refocused attention on the issue earlier this year when he wrote that conversations with military personnel had prompted him to change his position.

The current generation of Americans entering the armed services have proved to him “that gays and lesbians can be accepted by their peers,” the general wrote in an Op-Ed article published in The New York Times on Jan. 2.

“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. “Our military has been stretched thin by our deployments in the Middle East, and we must welcome the service of any American who is willing and able to do the job.”

Few issues have split the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates this year as clearly as whether to repeal “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

At a debate in June, all of the Democratic candidates said they favored rescinding the policy. The Republican candidates, meanwhile, have favored continuing it, saying that it is a sensible approach or that it would be a distraction to integrate openly gay service members into the armed forces at a time of war.

Efforts to prompt the House and Senate to repeal the legislation have gained little traction. Senior leaders at the Pentagon are on the record as saying the Department of Defense will follow the lead of Congress.

“Personal opinion really doesn’t have a place here,” Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said in March. “What’s important is that we have a law.”

Mr. Gates was responding to comments by Gen. Peter Pace, who was serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and had reignited controversy over the issue when he said homosexuality was immoral, similar to adultery.

Before the policy was put into place, gay men and lesbians were barred from serving in the military. When he ran for president in 1992, Bill Clinton pledged to change that, but after he was elected, Mr. Clinton had to compromise on “don’t ask, don’t tell,” under which gay soldiers could serve as long as they did not disclose their sexual orientation.

From the time the policy became law through 2006, just over 10,000 members of the armed forces have been forced from the military under the policy, according to government statistics.

According to the Pentagon, the number of service members discharged under the policy has declined noticeably since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, dropping to 612 in the 2006 fiscal year from 1,227 in the 2001 fiscal year.

Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman, said Thursday that there were no efforts at the Pentagon or across the military to alter the policy.

“There are no changes being contemplated in the department,” Mr. Whitman said. “It is the law, and we are following the law carefully.”

Activities planned on Friday to mark the anniversary of the legislation are to center on a rally on the Mall in tribute to the service members discharged under the policy. Sponsors of the rally include organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, Servicemembers United, Log Cabin Republicans, Servicemembers Legal Defense Network and Liberty Education.

Among Democrats seeking their party's presidential nomination, John Edwards has sometimes tweaked Mr. Clinton — and by extension, Mr. Edwards's rival Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York — for bowing to military brass and going along with the “don't ask, don't tell” compromise.

Mrs. Clinton has been a steady critic of the policy, though she is careful not to rebuke her husband for his actions in 1993. She has said he did the best he could, as a new president, maneuvering around a political land mine.

Senator Barack Obama, Democrat of Illinois, has taken a strong stand against “don't ask, don't tell,” at times comparing it to the integration of blacks in the armed forces as both a moral issue and an achievable goal.

At a debate on Wednesday night, several Republican presidential candidates repeated their support for keeping the policy, among them Senator John McCain of Arizona, a Vietnam veteran and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Mr. McCain said senior generals had told him “almost unanimously” that the policy was working.

Former Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas said that while “people have a right to have whatever feelings, whatever attitudes they wish,” morale and unit cohesion were paramount in the military, and that the current policy helped protect both.