

10th anniversary of DADT repeal a good time to reflect on victory of facts over fear

By Aaron Belkin
September 20, 2021

Today marks the 10-year anniversary of the end of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy banning openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans from serving in uniform. With our nation so focused on current social justice and national security crises, including absorbing the impact of our departure from Afghanistan, it can seem of fading relevance that, until just a decade ago, federal law explicitly discriminated against a group of people based on characteristics with no bearing on ability.

But while "don't ask, don't tell" is now history, our country is currently in the throes of a consequential battle over the use of information and misinformation, and the anniversary of the "don't ask, don't tell" milestone offers valuable insight into what role hard evidence can play in shaping public policy. Indeed, it offers cause for optimism that facts can still inform policy and successfully contest a culture of deception.

It is easy to forget the weight of emotional, aggressive misinformation that had to be overcome. In 2010, Gen. James Amos, then the Commandant of the Marine Corps, cautioned that "assimilating openly homosexual" troops could "cost Marines' lives." A former Reagan defense official argued that tolerating homosexuality in the military would end up "leading inevitably to the destruction and/or corruption of individuals, community, and eventually even nations." My colleague, Nathaniel Frank, assembled 60 examples of these dire forecasts in a 2011 report published just prior to repeal. None of the doomsday forecasts came to be. No serious expert today argues that inclusive policy has harmed readiness. But how did we get over the hump of misinformation and get to a place where no one even talks about it anymore?

Throughout the debate over "don't ask, don't tell," those who opposed inclusive policy warned that grave consequences would befall the military and the nation if gays, lesbians, and bisexuals were allowed to serve. Yet the facts have always told a different story. Copious research — including studies by the military itself — had for decades concluded that letting gay, lesbian, and bisexual troops serve did not truly threaten military effectiveness. Our think tank spent over a decade carefully marshaling that evidence and adding our own research, including research on allied militaries that had successfully ended their bans. We published studies and books designed to share data widely and hold defenders of discrimination accountable for their arguments—claims we showed were rooted in fear and bias rather than factual reality.

In conjunction with service members who bravely shared their stories and allies who pursued a range of advocacy tactics including litigation, lobbying, and grassroots organizing, we deployed facts, figures, and faces to move public opinion toward inclusive service and to make it intellectually, socially, and politically untenable to defend a policy based on deception and delusion. Two of the most powerful forces in the country — the Pentagon and the religious right — were forced to trade fiction for fact. Then, after "don't ask, don't tell" was repealed, research based on experience with open military service confirmed that repealing the ban actually improved military effectiveness by expanding the pool of qualified recruits, enhancing trust and peer bonding, and enabling service members to focus on their jobs instead of navigating a discriminatory policy of forced dishonesty.

We launched our campaign to repeal "don't ask, don't tell" well before American leaders referred to mainstream publications and networks as "fake news," but the culture of deliberate misinformation that we faced — and ultimately defeated — was robust. President Biden's recent decision to lift the military's transgender ban, following an advocacy campaign that again leveraged research to combat misinformation, suggests that the strategies we deployed to dismantle "don't ask, don't tell" can still work, and be applied to other issues.

Again and again, opponents of equality have exploited prejudice and misinformation to block expanding equal treatment in both military and civilian contexts, such as recent attacks against transgender student athletes. They must be held accountable, as again and again, their fearmongering has been proven unfounded by facts on the ground. Too often these days, however, fear wins out, and heated debate paralyzes action. But “don’t ask, don’t tell” repeal is an example of changing the ground underneath a toxic combination of emotional issues, and the story of successful LGBT service reminds us that facts still matter, and have the power to make life better and safer for us all.