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Scuttle ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’

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A prime opportunity is at hand for Congress to repeal the repressive “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that has drummed out more than 13,000 capable members of the military simply because they are gay men and lesbians.

President Obama and the top Pentagon brass have called for repeal, and House strategists plan a floor fight to attach repeal to the big defense budget bill that comes up this week. Election-year nervousness is evident among some supporters, but Speaker Nancy Pelosi braced them last week with a flat prediction that don’t-ask “will be a memory by the end of this year.”

The speaker did not detail the process, but an amended defense bill generated by the House would be a good start. Senate opponents would have to come up with a supermajority to delete repeal from the measure.

Some lawmakers who favor repeal want to wait for a Pentagon study due in December about how — not whether — to carry out the change. The obvious legislative solution is to make repeal effective after the study is in the hands of Defense Secretary Robert Gates. He has already ordered the end of such abuses as third-party accusations that are not made under oath, or that are made with malice and intent to harm a good soldier’s career.

The Pentagon study reportedly will survey more than 300,000 people, including service members and families. Possible changes focus on whether the military code will have to be amended to ban discrimination against gays and lesbians, and whether their partners will receive family benefits. These questions are subsidiary to Congress’s obligation to enact repeal, which opinion polls indicate the public clearly favors.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” is a culture war scar on military honor that finds the nation alone among the major Western allies in denying qualified gay men and lesbians the chance to defend their country. Military generals from Britain, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands and Israel were in Washington last week offering assurances that ending the gay ban became a nonissue once their services were justly integrated.

“There were concerns in the late ’90s of gay men walking across the gangplank in feather boas and high heels,” retired Lt. Cmdr. Craig Jones of the British Navy related. “That just did not happen.”

Congress has the chance to strike down similar absurdities in the American mind and military by enacting repeal to end a shameful injustice.