

# POLITICO



Members of the military stand outside of the White House in Washington D.C. to protest 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell.'

## Get over gay fear, U.S. allies advise

By LEIF OHLSON , LT. COM. CRAIG JONES and MAJ. PETER KEES HAMSTRA | 05/26/10 05:10 AM EDT

As openly gay officers with decades of combined service experience in the British, Dutch and Swedish armed forces, we are closely watching U.S. developments around the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell."

We were just in Washington at a Brookings Institution/Palm Center conference, where representatives from the world's militaries discussed this matter.

Though we maintain a respect for the American people, their military and their political process, we share a sense of puzzlement — and a sort of shock — at the rhetoric we heard surrounding "Don't ask, don't tell."

As Congress prepares to vote on this, we hope our international perspective can be of some value.

The U.S. armed forces are the world's most formidable, with an unrivaled might and a readiness to accept worldwide deployments to engage in a range of military conflicts that no other nation views with the same sort of international responsibility.

Yet it is also true that U.S. military power depends, in most cases, on an international coalition of partners. Members of Congress don't always seem to appreciate that America's allies are put off in serious ways by the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.

For example, units of our own or other armed forces have refused to deploy in some joint operations with U.S. forces because gay service members would not work with the Americans — for fear of hostile reactions.

In addition to protecting our men and women from enemy combatants, we must also protect them from anti-gay and anti-lesbian discrimination.

Increasingly, this is not a situation we and our personnel will tolerate. So we are less able to help accomplish our collective missions.

We are aware of colleagues in our own militaries who don't like it that gays and lesbians serve openly. However, despite considerable fears before we enacted these policies, such attitudes are rare.

In no cases, in fact, have negative private opinions about gay people undermined our ability to work with one another. Our service members are professionals who care, first and foremost, about the ability to do the job.

Moral opposition to homosexuality, while real, is just not allowed to undercut our militaries' missions.

Nor do we think it will have any impact on yours after you repeal "Don't ask, don't tell."

This is an important point because many Americans seem to believe that ending anti-gay discrimination in European and Israeli militaries faced no resistance because our cultures are more tolerant.

In fact, our polls, rhetoric and even threats of mass resignations were quite similar to the continuing resistance in America. Yet none of the doomsday scenarios came true.

According to research and assessments of our transitions, the new policies had no negative impact on military readiness.

Another dimension missing from the congressional debate is how the closet harms gay troops. We know this from personal experience.

Unit cohesion is paramount, and that's why the public debate about "Don't ask, don't tell" has focused on this topic.

But the impact of discrimination on gay troops matters as well — and we have not heard members of Congress discuss this.

Each of us has experienced what it means to have to live a lie. Enforced silence has undermined our well-being, readiness and ability to do our job. If you want your gay and lesbian troops operating at 100 percent, you cannot force them into isolation and dishonesty on a daily basis.

We are also puzzled about repeated claims we heard in Washington about the need for more research on "Don't ask, don't tell." There is more than enough on-the-ground experience, as well as serious social science research, showing what will happen when the U.S. military allow gays and lesbians to utter the words "I am gay" without getting fired.

We are confident that, despite the unique nature of each culture and military, you will have a similar experience to ours — which is that ending discrimination against gay troops was a giant nothing.

Washington must project force like no other nation. But the military is also about projecting values — and the discriminatory "Don't ask, don't tell" policy undercuts America's commitment to the democratic values of fairness and equality under the law.

The policy puts you in the company of Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, China and Yemen. Is that the kind of company you want to keep?

Maj. Peter Kees Hamstra is in the Royal Dutch Army. Leif Ohlson is in the Swedish Armed Forces. Lt. Com. Craig Jones is retired from the Royal Navy of Britain.