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U.S. Army Journal Publishes Professor's Critique of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Policy on Gay Soldiers

By Elizabeth Crawford

HE ASKED, THEN TOLD: Ten years after Bill Clinton went head-to-head with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and prominent members of Congress to allow openly homosexual soldiers to serve in the military, Aaron C. Belkin wondered if the nation should revisit the resulting "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

"In many ways, it was a politically expedient policy that pleased no one," writes the assistant professor of political science at the University of California at Santa Barbara, in a journal article, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Is the Gay Ban Based on Military Necessity?" The article culminates two and a half years of research and four projects that Mr. Belkin has worked on as director of the university's Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military. Now, based on his findings, Mr. Belkin believes the policy should be jettisoned.

While the policy doesn't allow the military to ask enlistees if they are homosexual, it also doesn't stop them from being dismissed because, opponents of gay enlistment argue, military performance would suffer if known gay and lesbian soldiers served in uniform.

But are gay and lesbian soldiers really a risk to "unit cohesion," or is that claim, as Mr. Belkin wondered, "snake oil"?

To find out, he and fellow researchers used militaries in Australia, Britain, Canada, and Israel, which have lifted such bans, as "labs for testing" the effects of homosexuals in the military.

"There have been several anecdotal studies done on this topic, but we wanted to do a very in-depth study where we were methodical," Mr. Belkin says. So the researchers turned to commanders in the armed forces, service members, and military scholars on both sides of the debate, and asked them, "Have there been any problems with the lifting of the ban in your countries?"

The answer? No.

"Not a single one of the 104 experts inter-viewed believed that the Australian, Canadian, Israeli, or British decisions to lift their gay bans undermined military performance, readiness, or cohesion,"

Mr. Belkin writes. The new policies didn't even make recruiting or retention more difficult or increase the rate of HIV infection among the troops, as those in favor of the ban had suspected would happen.

The article appears in an unlikely place: the summer issue of *Parameters*, a U.S. Army quarterly that caters to senior military officers, U.S. Army War College graduates, and members of government and academe who work on national security.

This is the first time a journal affiliated with the Department of Defense or the military has published an article criticizing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, says Steve E. Ralls, director of communication for the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a watchdog group dedicated to ending discrimination against non-heterosexuals.

Mr. Belkin says he was shocked that *Parameters* published the article. He had argued against the military's policy in a fall debate at the U.S. Army War College, where he had also talked to the journal's editor about submitting his manuscript. Still, he says, "I just couldn't believe that they would publish a piece addressing gays in the military, even though it was based on factual research."

An editor explains that the journal decided to publish the article because, even though Mr. Belkin is a gay-rights advocate, he presented his argument in an unbiased manner, with facts backing up his statements in an unemotional tone.

Still, the article is unlikely to have any immediate effect on the military's policy.

"The gay ban is going to be with us for 5, 10, 15, 20 years," Mr. Belkin says. "But maybe there will be debates inside of the military that we don't see, and this will give them ammunition. The best-case scenario is that someone will read this study, will change their mind, and someday make a difference."