

## Abandoning "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Will Decrease Anti-Gay Violence

By Dr. Aaron Belkin

After exchanging gay insults, a British corporal guarding the Kabul, Afghanistan, airport shot one of his peers and then turned the gun on himself.

Many well-intentioned and fair-minded U.S. officers worry that if Congress eliminates the Pentagon's current "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, episodes such as this will become the norm in the U.S. armed forces. A senior Navy lawyer told me that, although he is not personally opposed to lifting the ban, he worries that gays and lesbians would be subjected to harassment or worse. As one of the first to inspect the nearly-unrecognizable corpse of gay Seaman Allen Schindler after Schindler's brutal 1992 murder, this officer has a unique perspective on the potential for violence.

The gay ban will not be eliminated tomorrow, but many polls have indicated that about two-thirds of the public believe that gays should serve openly. Perhaps more shocking, a new Annenberg survey shows that for the first time ever, a majority of junior enlisted service members believe that gays should serve openly. Regardless of the outcome of recently filed lawsuits challenging the policy's constitutionality, the ban inevitably will be eliminated in the future. Thus, it is worth considering whether integration will increase anti-gay violence, and how to minimize problems after the policy transition.

The U.S. military has a serious problem with anti-gay violence. A March 2000 Pentagon study reported that approximately 5% of service members had witnessed a violent, anti-gay beating during the previous year. The question before us, then, is not whether violence will disappear after the elimination of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," but whether it will increase or decrease.

On this count, the record is clear. Lessons from foreign armed forces, as well as U.S. police and fire departments that have lifted their bans, reveal that, in the worst case, lifting the gay ban will have no impact on the level of anti-gay abuse. But in the more likely scenario, lifting the ban should decrease violence, especially if military leaders follow a few simple steps. In Britain, for example, military culture was hostile to gays and lesbians prior to the lifting of the United Kingdom's gay ban in 2000. Indeed, 92% of the letters received by a 1996 Ministry of Defence commission on gays in the military opposed integration; many included comments like those of a senior aircraftsman who warned that, "Homosexuals would definitely get beaten up."

After the British lifted the ban, however, there were few reports of gay-bashing. Professor Gwyn Harries-Jenkins, a leading expert on the British military, reported "a slight decrease in the incidence of harassment." Australia, Israel, and Canada also eliminated bans without experiencing any increase in anti-gay violence. Readers may object to the use of data from foreign forces, but there are parallels among at least two of the militaries that lifted their bans: those of Israel and the United Kingdom. Both forces are combat-tested, and many of the members have been quite anti-gay.

The reason why anti-gay violence does not increase and usually decreases after the lifting of a ban is that victims of abuse are able to report harassment without fearing an investigation into their own sexuality. Perpetrators know that victims are more likely to report them, and are therefore less likely to engage in misbehavior in the first place.

The Pentagon insists that service members can report harassment without fear of retribution under the current "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, but this is simply not true. If evidence of a victim's sexuality emerges during an investigation into alleged harassment, a commander may launch a new investigation that targets the victim's sexual orientation. Eliminating the ban will close this loophole for perpetrators. Lessons from foreign militaries indicate that a few simple steps will minimize violence after the lifting of the ban. An emphasis on equal standards for homosexual and heterosexual service members has been essential in foreign forces, and some minimal anti-harassment training also seems to have been of value. Foreign militaries have not expected service members to accept homosexuality or to relinquish private moral beliefs, but minimal anti-harassment training has helped service members grasp the new policies.

Perhaps most important, effective leadership has been critical. As the RAND Corporation has concluded, "If the military services are eventually ordered to cease excluding homosexuals who engage in homosexual behavior, they will do so quite effectively and without major incidents, provided that the leadership . . . clearly communicate[s] support for the change." All available data indicate that RAND is right on target.

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