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THE MILITARY SHOULD QUICKLY REPEAL 'DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL'

BY **CHARLES MCLEAN** ON 6/3/10 AT 8:00 PM



From left: Anthony Woods, Stacy Vasquez, and Todd Belok, gay former service members forced to leave the military under the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy

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U.S.

Every gay-pride parade seems to have its share of sailor suits, aviator sunglasses, and camouflage trousers. In the U.S., such costumes are often drawn from the Halloween bin, since gays cannot serve openly in the military, let alone march for pride in their official uniforms. But that’s not the case in Britain, where gay members of the Royal Navy, Air Force, Army, and Marines not only march but also move their partners into the military’s family housing. The armed forces has also embraced the shift—which came following a European Court of Human Rights ruling 1999—placing recruitment ads in gay publications, and, last summer, featuring an openly gay soldier on the cover of the military’s official magazine.

Britain isn’t the only U.S. ally to allow open gays in the military. More than 25 of our allies, including every original NATO signatory other than the U.S. and Turkey, have transitioned to an open military. Most have made the switch since 1993, when Congress passed “don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT), a policy that forbids gay soldiers from coming out of the closet. Last month Congress struck a compromise that could repeal DADT as early as this summer. But no matter when it happens—if it happens—the transition will be a matter of feverish debate. Critics have already warned that openly gay soldiers will sink morale—causing resignations, discord, and infighting—and ultimately damage readiness at a time when the U.S. military is already taxed to the extreme. [▶](#)

If the experience of our allies is any guide, however, the critics are wrong. In Britain, Australia, Canada, Israel, the Netherlands, and Sweden—strategic partners, often with militaries that have served alongside U.S. forces—the big news was, well, no news at all. Their transitions to open service were remarkably boring. “It was a nonevent,” says retired Maj. Gen. Simon Willis, the former head of personnel for the Australian Defence Force, “and it continues to be a nonevent.” Last month the Brookings Institution, in partnership with the Palm Center, a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara, brought Willis and other allied officers and experts together to discuss lessons learned from allowing openly gay service people. What they said should be a welcome source of comfort, mixed with caution, as the U.S. takes its first wobbly steps toward integration.

Above all, Congress and the Pentagon should rest assured that open service is, ironically, easier to implement than it is to study. Our allies had similarly fierce public debates. But once the new policies were in place, the return to normalcy was swift and all-encompassing. It was “really, really dull,” recalls Craig Jones, a retired lieutenant commander in the British Royal Navy.

It helped, of course, that few pre-transition fears ever materialized. Cohesion within the ranks, for one, never faltered, and morale remained high. This shouldn’t have surprised the international brass: for more than 3,000 years militaries have molded very different people into effective fighting units, says retired Capt. Alan Okros, a Canadian naval officer turned military scholar. Open service doesn’t disrupt this foundation, he believes, because the “band of brothers” mythos is based less on heterosexual backslapping than a shared sense of mission, honor, and duty. As a result, none of our allies felt the need to build separate facilities for gay soldiers; and few straight soldiers seemed to notice a change in their personal space (or at least their perception of it). Privacy, it seems, matters more to culture warriors than to genuine warriors, who don’t tend to expect a room of one’s own in the first place.

Another key anxiety—or at least a perennial fear raised by some critics—was that an open military would be awash in rainbow décor, incidents of homosexual rape, and violent clashes between gay and straight soldiers. “There were concerns in the late ’90s of gay men walking across the gangplank in feather boas and high heels,” Jones remembers. “That just did not happen.” On the contrary, gay soldiers were slow to identify themselves; when they did, they certainly didn’t broadcast the news from every steeple and force themselves on their comrades. Equally muted was the response from straight soldiers—no nation recorded any significant rise in incidents—and military chaplains, who saw their role as serving all members regardless of their faith or sexuality. “People didn’t leave the Canadian military,” says Maj. Gen. Walter Semianiw, who commanded Canada’s forces in Afghanistan and is now in charge of military personnel matters. “They just got on with the new policy.”



Gay Rights Around the World

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Perhaps Congress will get on with it as well. DADT has drummed out more than 13,000 soldiers and put thousands of others under incalculable stress. At a time when the mental health of U.S. troops is carefully monitored, its repeal should be seen as a matter of battle readiness, according to our allies. “Forcing [gay servicemen and women] to have to constantly censor themselves, to regulate their behavior, to pretend to be somebody they’re not, is putting people at risk,” says Okros, the retired Canadian captain. It’s also hampering joint appointments, according to Canadian Navy Cmdr. Luc Cassivi, who says that allied soldiers have turned down U.S. postings rather than return to the closet under DADT.

Fortunately, as a benefit of lagging behind our allies, we already know the basics of a successful transition. Most of the steps are obvious (leadership must set the tone; conduct standards and personnel policies must not single out any one minority). But other ideas cut across our instincts. Rather than a deliberative transition, our allies’ experience suggests the shift should be done quickly; rather than surveying soldiers’ attitudes on gay service, the repeal of DADT should be done top-down and authoritatively; above all, our review of the issue should be placed in the context of broader personnel concerns such as diversity and sexual harassment. “One thing I recommend not to do,” says Danny Kaplan, who has studied the acceptance of gay soldiers in the Israeli Defense Forces, is “write a survey on which the title is ‘Homosexuality in the American Military.’” Something for the Pentagon to keep in mind, it seems, as it compiles its report on the steps needed to prepare for the change. It’s due by December 2010—plenty of time to think of a title.

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