



Los Angeles Times

Military's Self-Inflicted Wound The ban on gays drains crucial skills in wartime

As the Pentagon begins its open-ended review of U.S. strategy in Iraq, military leaders face withering attacks for having insufficient boots on the ground, for making National Guard troops into regular soldiers and for involuntary recalls of thousands of former service members who returned to civilian life long ago, most believing they would never again wear a uniform.

But at the same time that the U.S. armed forces are hurting for qualified soldiers, they're also firing qualified soldiers just because they're gay. According to Pentagon statistics, three to four gays and lesbians, on average, have been sacked every day for the last decade.

Worse, many of those discharged include badly needed infantrymen, nuclear power engineers, missile guidance and control operators and nuclear, biological and chemical warfare specialists. Another category in short supply, translators, was highlighted last week with the publication of data I obtained from the Pentagon that reveal that since 1998, 26 Arabic and Farsi language speakers have been fired from the military for homosexuality.

Military officials respond to the disconnect between discharging willing competent gay soldiers and forcing unwilling civilians back to the front lines by claiming that they are simply following the law. And they have a point. What Pentagon leaders fail to acknowledge, however, is that the military is in large part responsible for that law.

Back in 1993, when the Clinton administration tried to end the ban against gays and lesbians in the military, the Joint Chiefs of Staff insisted that allowing homosexuals to serve openly would undermine "unit cohesion" in other words, if straight soldiers know that one of their comrades is gay, they won't be able to fight and work with him.

Based in large part on the Joint Chiefs' testimony, Congress passed "don't ask, don't tell," which prevents the military from asking recruits about their sexual orientation but at the same time requires the discharge of service members who say they are gay.

The policy was crafted as a compromise, but reports of anti-gay harassment have skyrocketed under "don't ask, don't tell," and more people have been fired than under the previous version of the gay ban. According to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a watchdog group in Washington, gay discharges jumped 92% in the first five years after the 1994 passage of the law.

The Joint Chiefs' opposition to lifting the ban may have been based on genuine concerns about military effectiveness, not anti-gay sentiment. It is certainly true that military surveys at the time showed that heterosexuals did not want the ban to be lifted. In February 1993, for example, a Los Angeles Times poll of more than 2,300 enlistees found only 18% in favor of lifting the gay ban.

But dislike is not the same as unit cohesion falling apart. Numerous studies show that as long as members of a team remain committed to the same goals, whether or not they like each other has no effect on group performance. Indeed, the armed forces had already commissioned three studies, in 1957, 1988 and 1993, all of which concluded that gays and lesbians did not undermine the military.

Since the passage of "don't ask, don't tell," evidence against the Joint Chiefs' argument has continued to accumulate. Studies of Britain, Israel, Canada and Australia of which I was a co-author show that these nations' militaries lifted their bans without problems and that the vast majority of service members in these forces adjusted successfully to integration.

In the United States, attitudes in the military have shifted as well. The Annenberg National Election Survey reported in October 2004 that a majority of junior enlisted service members believed that gays and lesbians should serve openly.

Some ask why gays and lesbians don't just remain silent about who they are and let "don't ask, don't tell" work to their benefit. (Conversely, some gays have used the ban as a "get out of Iraq free" card. Eliminating the policy would close the loophole.) For those who attempt to serve in silence, the personal and professional costs can be high. A recent study commissioned by my institute and based on interviews with 30 gays and lesbians who served in Iraq and Afghanistan found that maintaining silence about one's personal life in order to avoid crossing the "don't ask, don't tell" line is where real harm can be done to unit cohesion. The gay troops said the policy inhibited the formation of bonds of trust with straight personnel and impaired gay troops' capacity to minimize stress, prepare for deployment, focus on their mission and advance professionally.

Imagine that it is possible to go back to Sept. 10, 2001, when intercepted cables warning of the impending terrorist attacks sat unread, in part because of our shortage of capable translators. Now pose a question to those who endorse "don't ask, don't tell" or a flat-out ban on gays in the military: Are your objections to homosexuality so strong that you support the discharge of all those linguists who lost their jobs for being gay, or are you willing to back-burner your concerns to do what is best for the military and the country?

With our armed forces stretched thin, our leaders should consider whether we can afford to place outdated ideas about homosexuality above military effectiveness. Isn't it time to face facts?

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