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## Why We Need Gays in the Military

By Nathaniel Frank

Ten years ago Sunday, President Bill Clinton signed into law the "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military. The law, which has resulted in nearly 10,000 discharges to date, bans openly gay people from serving in the armed forces, requires those who do serve to conceal their sexual orientation and avoid homosexual conduct, and prohibits military personnel from being asked about their sexual orientation. With American soldiers, gay and straight, fighting for their country in Iraq, the wisdom of this policy is increasingly suspect.

The last time Americans seriously debated gays in the military, after Mr. Clinton's broken campaign promise to lift the ban outright, political and military leaders framed the discussion as a choice between the civil rights of gays and the requirements of national security. Few argued that national security might require letting gays serve. Many believed that homosexuality was incompatible with military service. In the language of the law, letting gays serve openly in the military would threaten the "high morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion" of the American forces.

In the decade since the policy was put into place, however, and particularly since 9/11, it has become clear that it is not the presence of gay soldiers that undermines security. It is the ban itself which does so. Indeed, the policy may be weakening what it was intended to protect: military readiness.

The ban was supposed to safeguard unit cohesion, the watchword of military analysts who oppose letting gays serve. The law states that the presence of openly gay people in the services would create an "unacceptable risk" to unit cohesion, which is generally defined as the bonds of trust among service members that make the combat effectiveness of a unit greater than the sum of its parts.

Yet soldiers I have interviewed about their experience serving in the Middle East say the policy has had the opposite effect. One soldier told me that when he was in a unit where he couldn't tell people that he was gay, it was more difficult for him to form close personal relationships within his unit. Serving under the gay ban, he said, erodes the mutual trust that is essential not only to effective bonding but also to effective fighting.

The gay ban was also said to protect military readiness. Most Americans agree, especially after

9/11, that national security should be paramount in any debate over who can serve. That's why the nation was dismayed to learn, last fall, that the Army fired nine gay Arabic-language translators at a time when national security experts were worrying about a dire shortage of intelligence personnel capable of translating Arabic.

Just last month, the Pentagon acknowledged that the military has hired many translators since 9/11 without full background checks. The result? At least three translators now face espionage charges, and the military faces yet another intelligence imbroglio. In short, the government is drastically lowering its standards for critical intelligence agents while throwing out highly competent ones just because they are gay.

The growing understanding that the gay ban is bad for national security may explain why even those who once supported the ban now support letting gays serve. The former judge advocate general for the Navy, Rear Adm. John D. Hutson, who was involved in the development and enforcement of the policy, recently said that the ban is a failed policy whose elimination would strengthen the military. A Fox News poll conducted in August shows that 64 percent of Americans now favor allowing gays to serve openly in the military, up from 56 percent in a similar poll taken in 2001.

Even within the military, anti-gay sentiment has declined over the past decade. One study conducted at the Naval Postgraduate School in California found that between 1994 and 1999, the percentage of Navy officers who feel uncomfortable in the presence of gay people decreased to 36 percent from 58 percent.

The debate over gays in the military was never really about balancing civil rights with national security. Britain, Israel, Canada and Australia are among 24 militaries that lifted bans on gay soldiers without undermining unit cohesion or combat readiness. These experiences show that the choice is not between gay rights and military readiness. It is between prejudice that compromises national security and equality that enhances it. And that's no choice at all.

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