

# The New York Times

## Opinion: Military Tolerance Works

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January 13, 2000

After Bill Bradley and Al Gore said last week that they would expect members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to let gays serve openly in the military, opponents protested yet again that the policy would undermine the ability of military people to work together. This concern for so-called unit cohesion is the official justification for the military's ban on gay people who admit their sexual orientation. The idea is that because many soldiers don't like gay men and lesbians, they will not be able to form the bonds of trust with them that are necessary for effectiveness in combat.

There is no real data, however, to support this notion. What the evidence suggests is that the sexual orientation of members of a military unit is not a factor in its performance. Hundreds of studies, summarized most recently in a 1998 report published in the Harvard University journal *International Security*, show that whether a unit's members like each other has no impact on its performance. What matters is whether they are committed to the same goals in their work. Since the commanding goal of military units is a well-functioning defense, and even the Pentagon acknowledges that gay soldiers are as patriotic as everybody else, the studies conclude that dislike of gays will have no effect on military performance.

Though many Americans may not know it, the military could simply look within for another test of the workability of units with members who are frank about being gay. Because some commanders are tolerant of homosexuality, there are large pockets in the military where gays already serve openly and, over all, these operations function at least as well as any others. The evidence from academic studies is that when commanders insist on tolerance, there are no problems.

And what of the wartime experience? If homosexuals undermined unit cohesion, then discharges of gay soldiers should increase in wartime, when cohesion is most important. Precisely the opposite is true. The Navy discharged only 483 gay men and lesbians (about half its annual average) in 1950, at the height of the Korean war, and 461 (about half its annual average) in 1970, during the Vietnam War. During the Persian Gulf war the Pentagon issued a "stop-loss" order preventing discharges on the basis of gay orientation until after the fighting was over.

Opponents of lifting the ban say that the Pentagon reduces gay discharges during wars to prevent heterosexuals from escaping military service by pretending to be gay. However, if there really were a problem with the functioning of combat units, it is likely that concern over their survival would prevail over the administrative problems of dealing with heterosexuals trying to get away under false pretenses. And in any case, the military and Congress could solve any problem of pretenders to homosexuality by simply lifting the gay ban.

In Canada, senior officers made the same objections to the service of acknowledged homosexuals that we hear today, but when the decision was made in 1992 to allow it, none of the predictions came true. Israel, Australia and Norway had the same experience, and academic studies show similar results in American police and fire departments. Opponents say none of this is relevant because few homosexuals came out of the closet after these organizations lifted their bans. But that in itself is instructive. A preference for discretion is another reason not to fear ending the ban.

No scholars argue that without the ban, every unit would always be cohesive. But isolated cases of conflict are nothing new, and they do not require the discharge of entire classes of people -- racial and religious minorities, for example.

The fears of many military leaders seem to be based on anecdotes and speculation rather than on solid data, and military discrimination appears driven more by prejudice than necessity.