

Responding to the Department of Defense Survey on Openly Gay Service

The Palm Center has reviewed the survey provided to 400,000 active-duty and reserve troops regarding the process of repealing “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Our conclusion is that results of this survey should be considered during Pentagon’s decision-making process, but should not be seen as determinative in and of themselves.

The military is unique and unlike civilian government agencies or corporations. As such, its internal processes, while daunting, also allow for exceptional results. We believe that the services can smoothly implement the transition to a fully inclusive “open service” policy in 2011 in a manner that serves as an example to foreign militaries around the world.

1.) The services need to own the new policy.

- Concerns about open service and support for openly gay troops deserve to be heard as part of the Pentagon’s decision-making process. Ignoring these areas limits the openness of the process as well as buy-in from service members. Moreover, given the findings of overwhelming existing research, there is nothing to hide about the service or behavior of openly gay, lesbian and bisexual troops.
- The opportunity to provide feedback to these direct questions will help the services and service members to own the change in policy, whether or not they agree with the direction of upcoming orders on repeal and open service.

2.) A leadership moment is coming.

- The critical responsibility of the Pentagon’s Working Group is to establish non-discrimination regulations as well as a single standard of rules and conduct for all service members. This responsibility is consistent with its charge to “[d]etermine appropriate changes to existing policies and regulations¹.”
- The questions in this survey are important, but these are viewed as separate from the decision about how they are incorporated into the Working Group’s overall recommendations. This final measure is the test of leadership and commitment to implementing truly open service.

3.) There is nothing to hide in this process.

- 74% of combat troops surveyed by Zogby reported being comfortable with gay troops in their unit, (Moradi and Miller, 2009)².
- There is no data that has ever shown that the presence of openly gay troops would harm unit cohesion or military readiness.

4.) Approval data is expected to be low.

- A 2004 Annenberg survey of junior enlisted showed that nearly half supported gay service³.
- When surveys are framed around a distinct group (whether on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation) the questions tend to invite unfavorable responses.

¹ Department of Defense Memorandum March 2, 2010: <http://www.defense.gov/news/crtor.pdf>

² Moradi and Miller, 2009. RAND Press Release: <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2009/11/09/>

³ USA Today, 2005. Lead Editorial: http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2005-04-27-our-view_x.htm

- Despite assurances, gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual allied service members have expressed reticence about answering survey questions for fear of potential repercussions based on the current policy.
- Given that the Pentagon has only just started to educate service members about the post-repeal environment, we would expect lower approval feedback in response to these questions.

5.) Questions such as these are not routinely asked about other groups.

- The nature of these survey questions are unique. Service members are not surveyed on other aspects of who they work, fight or live next to. Other groups have noted the double standard at play in these questions and this should be taken into account when analyzing the results.
- Admiral Roughead, Chief of Naval Operations, said recently, "...it's not our practice to go within our military and poll our force to determine if they like the laws of the land or not...That gets you into a very difficult regime."⁴

In closing, the true question for analysis is whether "open service" will be fully realized for gay, lesbian and bisexual service members. The Department of Defense survey should not obscure the fact that while the opinion of the troops is considered, successful implementation relies on leadership. The Working Group's December 1 report must set a standard for all troops based on a single set of rules.

The implementation of 'don't ask, don't tell' repeal is not difficult and service members in the United States Armed Forces are not delicate. Leadership in the certification of repeal by the President, Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs will provide the pivotal moment for all troops. The final orders from the President as Commander in Chief, along with regulations that hold all service members to the same standards, will set the tone for a new policy of non-discrimination⁵.

⁴ Palm Center Release, Feb. 25: http://www.palmcenter.org/press/dadt/releases/navy_chief_says_polling_troops_has_risks
Note: The Palm Center believes that the issue of individual service members' confidentiality is best handled by the lawyers at Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) www.sldn.org.