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# Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy Revisited

The law commonly known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT), passed by Congress in September 1993, allowed gay individuals to serve in the U.S. military as long as they did not reveal their sexual orientation. In exchange, the policy stipulated that the military would not ask about their sexual orientation and would not pursue information about their orientation unless it was credible. However, administration of DADT proved problematic, and in his January 27, 2010, State of the Union address, President Barack Obama announced that he would work with Congress to repeal it. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates appointed a high-level working group within the Department of Defense (DoD) to review the issues associated with repeal. He also announced that, in response to a request from the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator Carl Levin, and the ranking member, Senator John McCain, he would ask the RAND Corporation to update its 1993 report *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment*.

To conduct the update, RAND researchers addressed four key issues:

- How has the environment changed within and outside the military since the inception of DADT?
- How might repealing DADT affect military readiness and effectiveness, including recruitment and retention and unit cohesion and performance?
- What do military personnel, including currently serving gay men and lesbians, think about repeal?
- What has been the experience of other institutions in which gay people currently serve, work, and study?

## The Environment Within and Outside the Military in 2010

The RAND team examined the way in which DADT was implemented; changes in U.S.

### Abstract

In response to a request from the Senate Armed Services Committee, the RAND Corporation updated its 1993 report *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment* in order to provide the committee with current information as it considered repeal of the policy known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” RAND researchers reviewed changes in the military and social environment since 1993; assessed potential effects of repeal on aspects of military readiness, such as recruitment and unit cohesion; elicited the opinion of military personnel, including currently serving gay men and lesbians; and examined the experience of other institutions in which gay people currently serve, work, and study. The RAND team also synthesized the implementation experience of these organizations, putting it in the broader context of the scientific literature on implementing change in large organizations.

society; and trends in U.S. public opinion about allowing gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals to serve in the military without restriction.

### Implementation of DADT

Ambiguity in DoD directives issued in 1993 and 1994 implementing DADT allowed for different interpretations of how the policy should be implemented. These conflicting interpretations have influenced both how the policy has been implemented and associated debate in support of and against the policy.

### Changes in U.S. Society

Society’s views of gay individuals have changed substantially since 1993. Gay people have become more visible in the workplace and in the everyday lives of many Americans. Polls show that

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more than half of Americans are accepting of gay people, and nearly 90 percent agree that gay individuals should have equal rights in job opportunities. Polling data also show an increase in those who favor allowing gay people to serve in the military without restriction (Figure 1). This pattern of increased acceptance is consistent across polling organizations using differently worded questions.

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health has made possible sounder estimates of the numbers of gay men and lesbians in the general population and serving in the military today. Drawing on these data, the RAND team estimated that the percentage of gay men in the military (2.2 percent) is close to the percentage of gay men in the civilian population in the same age group (3.2 percent) and that lesbians serve in the military at disproportionately high rates (10.7 percent in the military compared with 4.2 percent in the civilian population).

Newer studies also show that most gay people disclose their sexual orientation selectively, to those who they think will be accepting. Other research has shown that disclosure

of personal information leads to trust and to better interpersonal relationships; not disclosing can interfere with mental health. Thus, gay people who are free to disclose their sexual orientation are likely to have better psychosocial well-being and more trusting relationships with their peers.

### Issues of Concern

Concerns have been expressed that allowing gay men and lesbians to serve in the military without restriction would affect military readiness and effectiveness by making recruitment and retention more difficult and eroding unit cohesion and performance.

### Recruitment

To estimate how repeal of DADT might affect recruitment, RAND researchers used data from two DoD surveys administered in the spring and summer of 2010. The surveys asked youth and young adults ages 15 to 24 about their intentions to join the military and how they thought repeal of DADT might affect those intentions.

Data from these surveys show that estimates of the effect of repeal are uncertain. Based on responses from the May 2010 survey, the RAND team estimated that repeal might cause a 7-percent drop in enlistment. Based on responses from the August 2010 survey, the RAND team estimated a 4-percent increase in enlistment. Given these results, the team concluded that the potential effect, although uncertain, is likely to be small. In addition, other countries report that the sizable decline in recruitment predicted in surveys of military personnel prior to removing restrictions on service of gay individuals did not in fact occur.

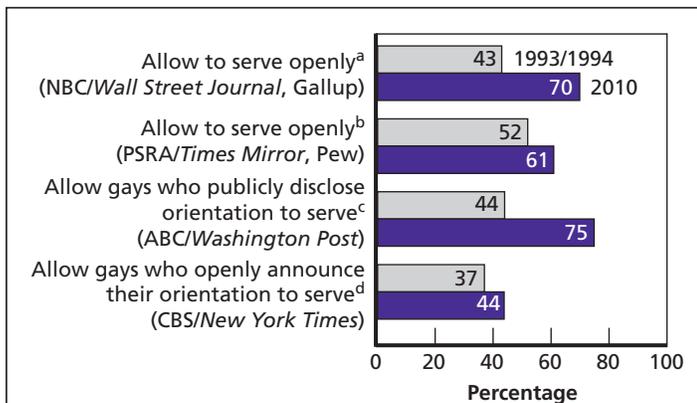
### Retention

Data from a summer DoD survey of military personnel provided to RAND included questions about respondents' plans to stay in the military and how their plans would change if DADT were repealed. These data did not allow the RAND team to directly estimate how repeal might affect retention. However, the data made it possible to identify the group most likely to leave if repeal were to take place. These are the respondents who said that they would leave if DADT were repealed and who also said that DADT was more important than any other factor in this decision. This group numbers slightly less than 6 percent across all the services; the percentage is higher among Marines and lower in the Navy and Air Force.

### Unit Cohesion and Performance

Most studies, including recent work in the military, sports, social psychology, and industrial-organizational behavior literatures, distinguish between task cohesion (commitment

**Figure 1**  
**Change in Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians**  
**Serving Without Restriction in the Military**



SOURCE: Roper Center iPOLL Databank.

<sup>a</sup> The wording used by NBC News/Wall Street Journal in April 1993 was, "Do you favor or oppose allowing openly gay men and lesbian women to serve in the military?" The wording used by Gallup in May 2010 was identical.

<sup>b</sup> The wording used by PSRA/Times Mirror in July 1994 was, "(I'd like your opinion of some programs and proposals being discussed in this country today. Please tell me if you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose each one.) . . . Allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military." The wording used by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press/Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in July 2010 was, "All in all, do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose . . . allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military?"

<sup>c</sup> The wording used by ABC News/Washington Post in May 1993 was, "Do you think homosexuals who do publicly disclose their sexual orientation should be allowed to serve in the military or not?" The wording used by ABC News/Washington Post in February 2010 was identical.

<sup>d</sup> The wording used by CBS News/New York Times in February 1993 was, "What if they openly announce their sexual orientation? In that case would you favor or oppose permitting homosexuals to serve in the military?" The wording used by CBS News/New York Times in February 2010 was, "What if they openly announce their sexual orientation? In that case would you favor or oppose permitting gay men and lesbians to serve in the military?"

to mission) and social cohesion (interpersonal liking). Post-World War II military analysts argued that social cohesion within a soldier's primary group was essential to military effectiveness. However, post-Vietnam-era military analysts began articulating a view of cohesion that emphasized the importance of task cohesion. A substantial body of research has shown that successful performance is a stronger predictor of cohesion in a unit than cohesion is a predictor of performance. The research further shows that task cohesion is a stronger predictor of successful unit performance than is social cohesion.

Based on the World War II experience, some military analysts pointed to a special relationship that developed within military units—a “warrior bond” said to stem from shared values and attitudes. However other analysts who examined the World War II experience have suggested that the warrior bond stems not from shared values but from shared danger, noting that divergences of background and outlook in civilian life have little meaning in combat. Emotional bonds clearly play a role in combat motivation, but the nature of the bonds matters; the key is trust, not liking or affection. Both the literature and experience highlight the power of “swift trust,” which can be formed in high-stakes settings: Professionals can work together effectively without a prolonged personal history.

Studies also show that military leadership and training are essential ingredients for building cohesion and improving unit performance; individual differences among unit members because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors are not strongly related to cohesion or performance. These findings are further borne out by the experiences of military and other organizations that have adopted nondiscrimination policies. They report no change in unit cohesion or performance subsequent to adoption of a nondiscrimination policy regarding gay men and lesbians.

### Opinions of Military Personnel

To understand the perspectives of military personnel about potential repeal of DADT, RAND researchers conducted 22 focus groups at ten military installations and talked with more than 200 serving military personnel. The RAND team also conducted a peer-to-peer survey of currently serving gay personnel. Although neither the focus groups nor the survey is statistically representative of the force, each provides valuable information that can help guide implementation should repeal occur.

### Focus Groups

The majority of focus group participants said they knew gay men and lesbians who were serving and respected their contributions to the unit. Group members had diverse opinions

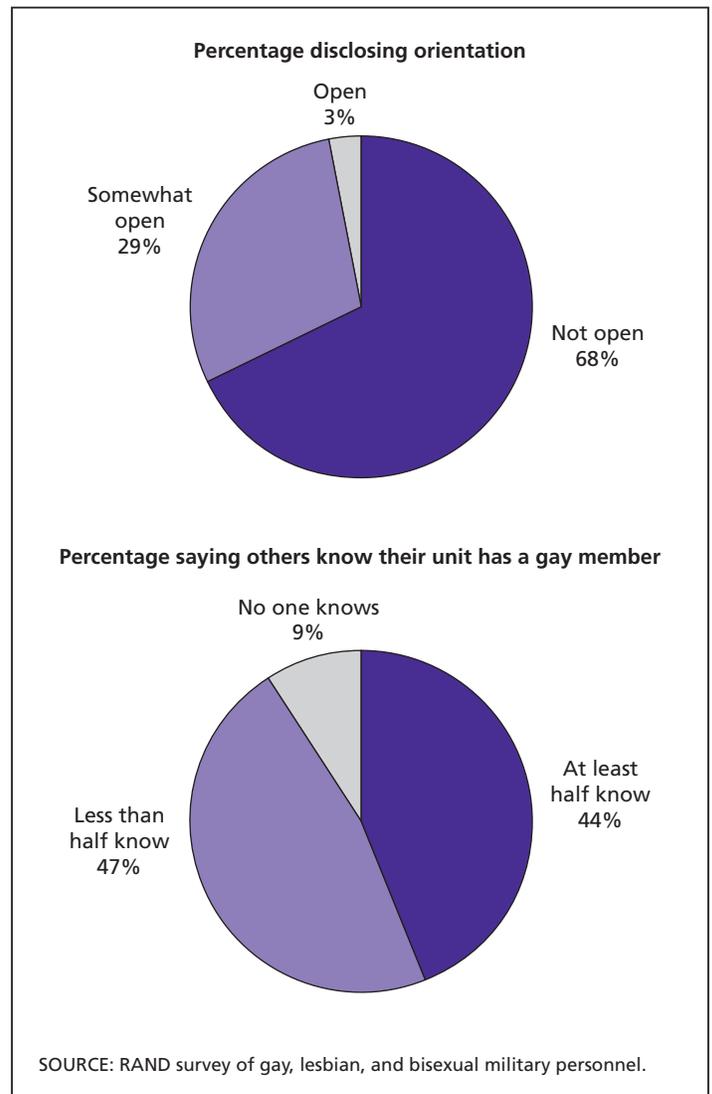
about allowing gay personnel to serve without restriction but agreed that the military could meet the challenge.

### RAND Survey of Gay Military Personnel

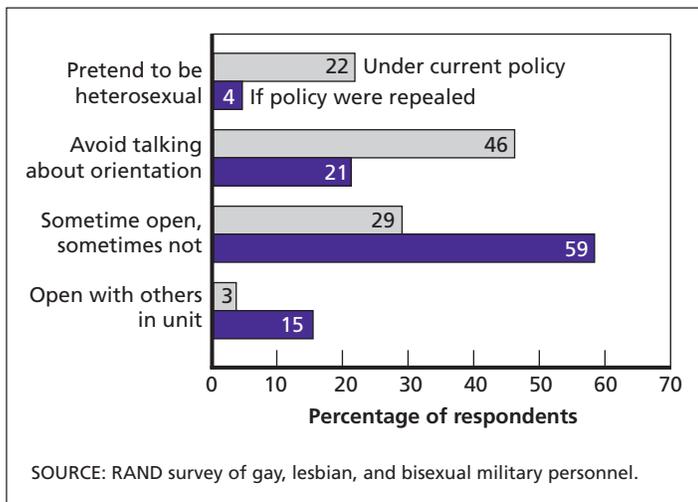
The majority of the 208 gay men and lesbians who responded to RAND's online survey reported that they do not talk about their sexual orientation. However, they also reported that many members of their units know that there is a gay service member in the unit (Figure 2).

The respondents expect their own behavior to change if DADT were repealed (Figure 3). About half of those now hiding their orientation would disclose it selectively, depending on circumstances, but three-fourths of respondents indicated that they would take a “wait and see” attitude before changing their behavior because of DADT repeal.

**Figure 2**  
**Disclosure and Awareness of Sexual Orientation Under DADT**



**Figure 3**  
**Disclosure of Sexual Orientation Under DADT and Repeal**



Survey respondents attributed a range of personal problems to DADT, including risk of blackmail, damage to personal relationships, stress and anxiety, and mental health problems. About two-thirds thought repeal would improve unit performance; the rest thought that there would be little or no effect. Respondents viewed clear leadership commitment, clear conduct standards for everyone, and zero tolerance for harassment as critical for successful policy change.

**Experience of Other Institutions**

Understanding the experiences of other institutions that have removed restrictions on gay individuals can be instructive for assessing proposed changes in U.S. military personnel policy. To that end, RAND researchers visited a number of foreign militaries—Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom—all of which now have years of experience with gay personnel serving in their forces without any restrictions.

All of the militaries that were visited had recently engaged in combat operations, many alongside the U.S.

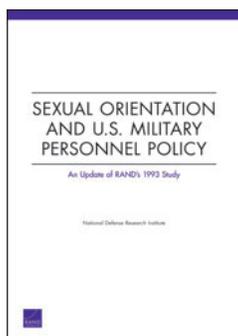
military. None of them reported that having gay service members had affected unit performance or their ability to meet recruitment goals. No country provides special accommodations for privacy or special training on sexual orientation.

The RAND team also conducted interviews with officials at domestic organizations, including police and fire departments in Charlotte, North Carolina; Chicago, Illinois; Houston, Texas; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Orange County, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and San Diego, California. These locations include cities that were rated as politically conservative based on the last presidential election, as well as those that were not, and cities in which religious organizations not favorable to gay people are relatively strong, as well as cities in which they are not strong. The RAND team visited federal agencies with which the military often operates at home and abroad, including the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the State Department, among others; the Office of Personnel Management in Washington, D.C.; the office that sets civilian personnel policy for DoD; major private sector companies; and American colleges and universities (because students are in the same age groups that make up the vast majority of individuals recruited by the military).

The police and fire departments that were visited, as well as federal agencies, major corporations, and colleges, all reported that they had integrated gay individuals—without serious problems, without negative effects on performance, and without making specific accommodations—by applying a strict policy of antidiscrimination.

**Implementing Change**

The RAND team reviewed the extensive literature on implementing change in large organizations and synthesized the experience of the foreign militaries, domestic organizations, and federal agencies that were visited. Both the literature and the wide range of real-world experience suggest that successful change must be motivated, clearly communicated, and sustained through monitoring and reinforcement. The role of leaders at all levels in the organization is critical. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: An Update of RAND's 1993 Study*, by the National Defense Research Institute, MG-1056-OSD [available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1056/>], 2010, 444 pp., \$28.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-5129-5. This research brief was written by Mary E. Vaiana. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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