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SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND U.S. MILITARY PERSONNEL POLICY

An Update of RAND's 1993 Study

National Defense Research Institute

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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Summary

In his January 27, 2010, State of the Union address, President Barack Obama announced that he would work with Congress to repeal the law commonly known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT). Secretary of Defense Robert Gates established the Comprehensive Review Working Group within DoD to review the issues associated with properly implementing 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*. The committee requested RAND to supplement or modify the report with current information and data that would be useful to them in considering any change to DADT.

RAND’s update addressed four key issues:

- How has the environment changed within and outside the military over the 17 years since the inception of DADT?
- How might repeal of DADT affect military readiness and effectiveness, such as recruitment and retention, unit cohesion, and force health?
- 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

We examined the way in which DADT was implemented; changes in U.S. 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

The military now has 17 years of experience working with the DADT policy. The ambiguity in the initial DoD directives implementing the policy provided space for different interpretations of how it should be implemented, including the government's ability to recoup funds from gay service members who were separated after making a statement concerning their sexual orientation and the intent of such a statement; the quality and extent of training; and standards for investigations and guidelines for addressing issues of harassment.

The issues in the DADT debate have shifted over time. In 1993, the arguments for DADT focused on how excluding gay individuals from serving in the military would preserve unit cohesion and performance, as well as privacy. In 2010, those who oppose repeal continue to use these arguments. Individuals favoring repeal initially focused their attention on how DADT was being administered by DoD. When debate about DADT resumed in 2004, the pro-repeal group refocused on Congress and legal challenges to the constitutionality of the DADT ban. In addition, they argue that DADT itself has a negative effect on readiness and cohesion.

Implementation of DADT has also changed. Since 2001, discharges of service members based on sexual orientation have declined sharply. There has been considerable disagreement about how the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq might be affecting the implementation of DADT.

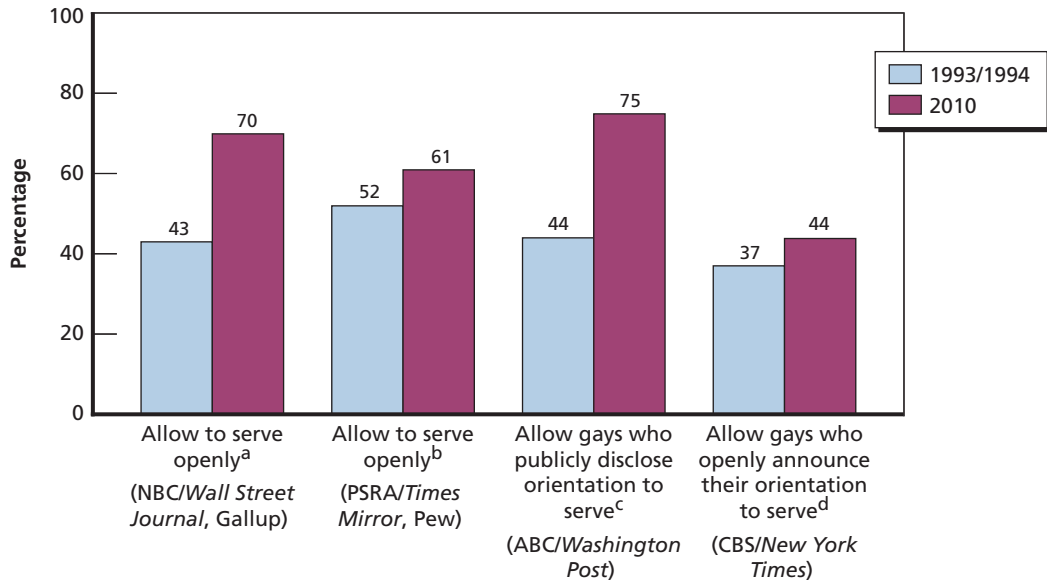
Changes in U.S. Society

Since 1993, gay people have become more visible in the workplace and in the everyday lives of Americans. Public opinion about gay men and lesbians has become substantially more positive. Polls now show that 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, as shown in Figure S.1. This pattern of increased acceptance is consistent across polling organizations using differently worded questions.

New surveys have helped us estimate the numbers of gay men and lesbians in the general population and serving today. Based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, RAND estimated that the percentage of gay men in the military (2.2 percent) is slightly less than the percentage of gay men in the civilian population in the same age group (3.2 percent). 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 gay people disclose their sexual orientation selectively to those who they think will be accepting. Overall, research has shown that people make reasoned judgments about whether to disclose their sexual orientation in a given situation, based in part on their assessment of the likelihood of a positive versus negative response.

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



SOURCE: Roper Center iPOLL Databank.

^a 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.

^b 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?"

^c 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.

^d 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?"

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Studies have also 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, eroding unit cohesion, and posing threats to the health of the force.

Recruitment

To estimate how repeal of DADT might affect recruitment, we used data from a DoD tracking survey at two points in time—spring (April–June) and summer (July–September) of 2010. The survey asked youth and young adults about their intentions to join the military and how they thought repeal of DADT would change those intentions. We applied the historic enlistment rates for respondents in each intention category and then used the result to project the number of enlistments per 100 young adults.

The projected impact of repealing DADT is very uncertain. Based on responses from the spring 2010 survey, we estimate that repeal might cause a 7-percent drop in enlistment. Based on responses from the summer 2010 survey, we estimate a 4-percent increase in enlistment. Despite this uncertainty, we can be reasonably confident that any effect would 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 members did not in fact occur.

Retention

To estimate how repeal of DADT might affect retention, we examined the responses to the retention-related questions in the 2010 DoD survey of military personnel. The DoD survey asked respondents if they planned to stay in the military and how their retention plans would change if DADT were repealed. About 10 percent of active-duty personnel said that they were not planning to leave when their obligation ends but would leave sooner if DADT were repealed, but under 6 percent also said that DADT repeal was more important than any of their top three reasons for staying. We do not know how many of the latter group will actually leave sooner, but we can assume that they are the group most likely to leave because of repeal.

The percentage of personnel identified as most likely to leave ranged from 2 percent among those in Coast Guard nonoperational occupations to over 12 percent among Marines in combat arms occupations. If repealing DADT does in fact result in lower retention, the drop could be offset by increases in reenlistment bonuses, military pay, and allowances, just as many of the negative effects of frequent long and hostile deployments in the Army in 2005 and 2006 were offset.

Unit Cohesion and Performance

Research since 1993 continues to support RAND's earlier finding that the performance of a group influences its cohesion more than cohesion influences its performance. Studies also suggest that interpersonal liking is not essential to effective unit performance; what is important is shared commitment to the unit's task-related goals. Personal trust in one's comrades is distinct from personal liking, and professionals can develop this kind of trust rapidly in intense performance situations. Cohesion in combat stems not from shared values and attitudes but from the shared danger of combat.

Our research suggests little reason to expect that ending DADT would produce any notable deterioration in unit performance. This conclusion is borne out by the experiences of military and other organizations that have adopted nondiscrimination policies.

Health of the Force

Due to improved testing and treatment and DoD's testing policy, rates of HIV infection in the military are unlikely to show a significant increase if currently serving gay men and lesbians were able to disclose their sexual orientation—even if the number of gay military members were to increase. Depression, anxiety, binge drinking, and substance abuse are more common among gay individuals but are unlikely to substantially affect readiness, given the overall prevalence of behavioral health problems in the military and the small percentages of gay service members.

Opinions of Military Personnel

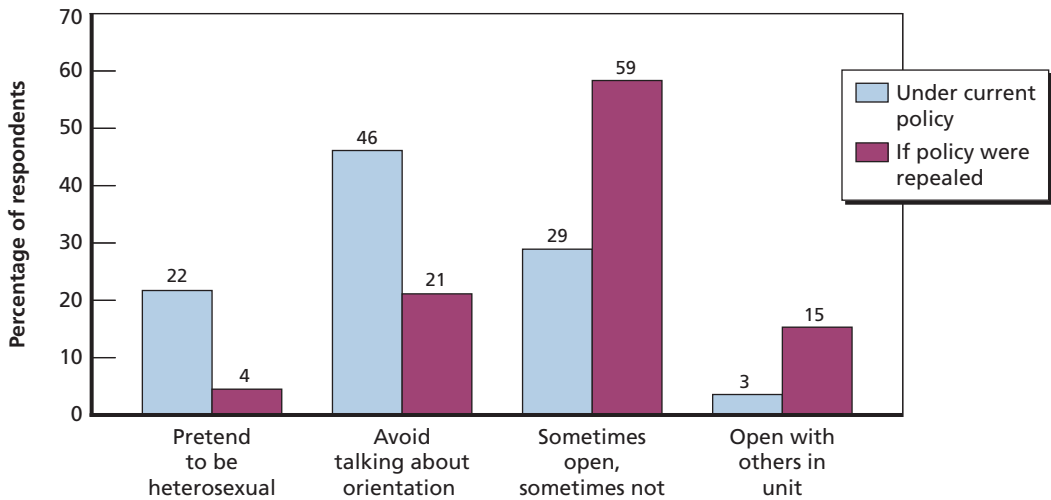
To understand the perspectives of military personnel about potential repeal of DADT, we conducted 22 focus groups at ten military installations. We also surveyed serving gay personnel using a peer-to-peer survey technique. Neither the focus groups nor the survey of serving gay personnel is statistically representative of the force; however, they do provide valuable information that can help guide implementation if DoD decides to remove restrictions on known gay individuals serving in the military.

Focus group members displayed virtually no hostility toward gay service members. Many participants said that they knew gay men and lesbians who were serving and respected their contributions to the unit. Focus group members had diverse opinions about allowing gay personnel to serve without restriction but agreed that the military could rise to the challenge.

The majority of gay men and lesbians who responded to our survey reported that they do not talk about their sexual orientation. However, they also reported that many unit members already knew that there was a gay service member in the unit.

The respondents expect their own behavior to change noticeably if DADT were repealed (Figure S.2). About half of those now hiding their orientation would disclose

Figure S.2
Disclosure of Sexual Orientation Under DADT and Repeal



SOURCE: RAND survey of gay, lesbian, and bisexual military personnel.

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it selectively, depending on circumstances, but three-fourths of respondents indicated that they would take a “wait and see” attitude before adjusting to DADT repeal.

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 that repeal would be a change for the better with respect to 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, we visited a number of foreign militaries that have years of experience with gay service members serving in their forces without any restrictions. The militaries we visited have all recently engaged in combat operations, many alongside the U.S. military.

Our major allies, including Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, have allowed gay individuals to serve without restriction for a number of years. They report no effect on unit performance or on their ability to

meet recruitment goals. No country provides special accommodations for privacy or special training on sexual orientation.

We also conducted interviews with the following types of domestic organizations to understand their experiences:

- police and fire departments, including several in cities judged to be politically conservative and where religious organizations not favorable to gay people are relatively strong
- federal agencies with which the military often operates at home and abroad; the Office of Personnel Management in Washington, D.C.; and the office that sets civilian personnel policy for DoD
- private-sector companies, experts from the Society for Human Resources, 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 we visited, as well as federal agencies, major corporations, and colleges, all report that they have integrated gay individuals without serious problems, without negative effects on performance—and without making specific accommodations—by applying a strict policy of antidiscrimination.

In terms of successfully implementing change, the relevant literature and the experience of the foreign militaries and domestic organizations we visited suggest that change must be motivated, clearly communicated, and sustained through monitoring and reinforcement.