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## THE MILITARY GAY BAN: WHY ‘DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL’ DON’T WORK

In the months of controversy since President Bill Clinton pledged to end the military’s ban against homosexuals, this ill-considered idea has been widely rejected. It is clear that the campaign to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the armed forces is failing. Last week, following an exhaustive study, the Pentagon once again concluded that “homosexuality is incompatible with military service.”

The same study nevertheless proposes a policy that allows homosexuals to serve if they keep their lifestyle private. Dubbed “don’t ask, don’t tell,” it is unclear if the policy has the support of Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn, who is holding hearings to determine whether the current ban should be upheld, altered, or abolished. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” is a compromise that would prevent recruiters from screening homosexuals at the point of enlistment, and might restrict the services’ ability to investigate evidence of homosexuality. Either way, the armed services would be disrupted as commanders scrambled to deal with a fundamental contradiction: a policy that claims that “homosexuality is incompatible with military service,” yet tacitly allows homosexuals to serve so long as their sexual activity is private. This is a politically expedient solution that will almost certainly subject future presidential candidates to pressure for further compromise from activists who are unhappy with “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

A policy based on contradictions is bound to fail. Congress should resolve this issue by passing a law affirming that homosexuality is incompatible with military service, and giving military commanders authority to screen and discharge homosexuals under any circumstances.

**Sound Reasons.** There are three detrimental effects of homosexuals in the armed services that form the basis for the ban. They are:

- 1) **Unit cohesion is weakened.** Unit cohesion is the social bond that gives rise to that intangible feeling which causes a man to dive on a grenade to save his buddies, or to risk his life simply because his leader tells him to. It requires the soldier to place the needs of the unit ahead of his self-interest and individual identity. He will do this, however, only if he trusts that his comrades and commanders are doing likewise. While cohesion requires a strong degree of mutual affection, sexual emotions are rooted strongly in self-interest. They can be distracting and even disruptive, and often lie beneath the surface, not indicated by any overt action or statement.
- 2) **Professionalism is undermined.** The presence of homosexuals in the armed services threatens the military’s highly regarded merit-based system. Sexual attraction encourages special relationships without regard to rank and increases the risk of favoritism. Political activism elsewhere in society suggests that weakening the ban would be followed by quotas and lawsuits if homosexuals were not promoted in representative numbers. This would destroy the cohesion of a military unit, and erode the military’s successful merit-based promotion system.

3) **The risk of AIDS in the services is increased.** Homosexuals contract HIV, the human immuno-deficiency virus, at thousands of times the rate of heterosexuals and, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control, two-thirds of U.S. AIDS cases are found among homosexual men. Testing is imperfect, and may not reveal the presence of HIV for months. During combat, individuals are exposed routinely to the blood of others, and frequently require battlefield transfusions from their fellow soldiers. If the “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise allows off-base, off-duty homosexual sex, will a soldier hesitate to help a wounded homosexual soldier who may have contracted HIV since his last test? Should battlefield medical personnel proceed directly to a heterosexual soldier after treating a homosexual’s open wound? Military men and women willingly accept risks not found anywhere else in society, but should they be needlessly exposed to a disease that is 100 percent fatal and has no known cure? Even the Red Cross does not allow homosexuals to donate blood.

These sound reasons against allowing homosexuals in the armed services are easily understood by the American people. Indeed, most Americans hold the sensible view that the purpose of the military is to win wars, not to conduct liberal social experiments. In a recent Gallup poll, Americans supported the ban by 53 percent, compared to 35 percent opposed.

As most Americans understand, the issue is not one of fairness, but of military effectiveness. The armed forces exist to wage war. War is fought by units, not by individuals. Units function best when differences among individuals are kept to a minimum. When units function well, fewer Americans die. It is not fair to risk the lives of American soldiers and sailors merely to accommodate the sexual lifestyles of certain individuals.

Life in the military is indeed unique. Soldiers and sailors have little choice about whom they work with or where they live. They are part of a chain of command 24 hours a day. The commander’s responsibility for everything the unit does or fails to do never ends; the now-infamous Tailhook scandal, in which dozens of officers were disciplined for sexual misconduct during an off-duty event, proves that military people are never off duty enough to escape the consequences of their actions. This kind of accountability is rare in society, but it is absolutely essential to military effectiveness.

**Ask the Question.** Behind the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is a misguided assumption: that homosexual military personnel will abstain from sexual activity. Proponents of this policy argue that what matters is not whether someone is homosexual, but whether he or she engages in homosexual behavior. But this is a distinction without a difference. Is it reasonable to assume that homosexuals will not engage in homosexual behavior? Do proponents of this proposal really expect homosexuals to become celibate for the duration of their stay in the armed services—an expectation no one would reasonably have for heterosexual recruits?

If it is reasonable to assume that homosexuals engage in behavior which is “incompatible with military service,” why not screen recruits in advance in an attempt to limit that behavior? Acknowledging one’s homosexuality prior to induction does not result in criminal prosecution or any infringement of rights; it simply denies the homosexual the opportunity to be a soldier. Other behavior that harms military effectiveness, such as drug abuse and sexual harassment, is not tolerated in private; there is no reason why homosexuality should be dealt with differently.

If homosexuality is incompatible with military service, it should be prohibited outright. Looking the other way when homosexuals seek to join the armed forces sends the message that they are welcome so long as they remain celibate—or do not get caught. Such a policy is disingenuous and unrealistic.

Endangering American troops just to placate those who promote a homosexual lifestyle is irresponsible. Allowing homosexuals to serve under any conditions would jeopardize U.S. troops, military readiness, and the nation’s security and prosperity. Congress should heed the sound arguments for excluding homosexual Americans from the military. It should end the use of this issue as a political football by passing a strict version of the ban into law.

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