

How *The Real World*  
Ended “Don’t Ask  
Don’t Tell”

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# HOW *THE REAL WORLD* ENDED “DON’T ASK DON’T TELL”

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In 1992, Bill Clinton, then a candidate for president, proposed the idea of allowing gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans to serve openly in the U.S. military. Within a year, the new commander in chief’s idea had instead mutated into the policy known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

That same year, MTV famously launched the story of “seven strangers, picked to live in a loft, and have their lives taped, to find out what happens when people stop being polite...and start getting real.” In contrast to Clinton’s policy, MTV’s new show thrived.

So what does the *The Real World*, now in its 20th season of production, have to do with the Pentagon’s current ban on anyone who “demonstrate(s) a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts” from serving in the U.S. military? History will likely look at the show, or to be more specific the genre of reality television it helped launch, as one of the key factors that ultimately ended “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

## A SHORT HISTORY OF GAYS IN THE MILITARY

The U.S. military has long served as a cauldron for some of the most divisive issues in American society. In some cases, the military has been decades ahead of the broader civilian society. For example, the force racially integrated in 1948, well before almost all of the American education system. When it comes to minorities and women, it is still generally ahead of American society and industry in having a diverse leadership corps.

The issue of gay or bisexual men and women in the military, though, stands in opposition to this trend

and, as a result is perhaps the most controversial social issue playing out within the military environment today. The odd thing is that it is only recently in the history of war that sexuality became as prominent an issue. Alexander the Great, Phillip of Macedon, and even the Spartan King Leonidas of *The 300* fame are all recorded by history as being homosexual, while many other leaders such as Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Alcibiades, were rumored to be homosexual. This also extended to great military leaders from beyond the West, such as Salah al-Din Yusuf Ibn Ayyub (“Saladin”), the 12th century Arab leader who chased the Crusaders out of the Holy Land, or Tokugawa Ieyasu, who founded the shogunate that ruled Japan from 1603 to 1868 keeping Westerners out for several centuries.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the core of the Theban army was a unit called the “Sacred Band” that was exclusively gay (and was the first unit ever to beat the feared Spartans in battle). Some, such as Plato, argued that “an army made of lovers” is the bravest kind of army, with the thinking was that they would be closer bonded and less likely to abandon mates on the field of battle.<sup>2</sup>

In American military history, homosexuality was certainly shunned, but from 1776 to 1945 there was no formal policy that prohibited gays from serving in the U.S. military. Indeed, a few well-known figures, such as Baron Frederick von Steuben, who helped create and train America’s Continental Army at Valley Forge, were generally known to be gay (von Steuben even brought his lover over with him from Prussia).

After World War II ended and social conservatism and the Red Scare subsequently arose, this changed. The Pentagon issued a policy statement that declared homosexuals to be “in the same category as

psychopaths, vagabonds, drug addicts and alcoholics.” However, it also described how gay soldiers could be “reclaimed.”<sup>3</sup> The policies then veered back and forth between mandating immediate discharge if a soldier was found to be homosexual (from 1945-54, 1959-1972, and 1981 to present) or leaving the matter to the discretion of their commander (from 1955-58 and 1972-1981), meaning that a gay or lesbian soldier could stay in the force if they were found not to be disruptive.

In 1993, the new President Clinton’s idea of allowing gay and lesbian Americans to openly serve in the military was instead eviscerated in an opening round of the culture wars. After great controversy, the so-called compromise of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” became the policy. By removing a question about sexual orientation on military induction questionnaires and precluding personnel from revealing their sexual orientation, it effectively mandated that any gay, lesbian, or bisexual citizen serving in the U.S. military was not to openly disclose their sexual orientation. In turn, the military was not supposed to witch-hunt for any gay, lesbian, or bisexual service member already inside the force. However, if any servicemembers were found to be such, they must be discharged and their various benefits taken back.

The compromise proved an unhappy one to both sides. It also effectively scuttled the new administration’s hope at proper civil-military relations; after winning its way on this issue, the uniformed leadership at the Pentagon tended to view the president and his civilian advisors as weak and easy to resist. This policy was maintained throughout the rest of the Clinton administration and continued on in the presidency of George W. Bush (who described with his signature eloquence at the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary debate, “I’m a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ man.”).

Since the enactment of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, over 12,300 service members have been discharged under this policy, a rate of about 2 being booted out of the force a day. It has been estimated by the Urban Institute that as many as 65,000 gay and lesbians are presently within the armed forces, either serving on

active duty, in the reserves, or the National Guard. For each of these individuals, they must effectively hide an important part of their identity from fellow troops, or risk discovery and the subsequent end of their military career.

## WHY NOT ASK AND TELL?

Unlike the argument about women in combat units, the debate over gays in the military has never been about their effectiveness as soldiers, that is whether they could physically do the job. Indeed, the biggest study that the Pentagon did on the question of gays and lesbians in the military did not even address the issue of their performance as soldiers. In its own words, “it was deemed insignificant.”<sup>4</sup> As conservative Senator Barry Goldwater once put it, “You don’t need to be straight to fight for your country. You just need to shoot straight.”<sup>5</sup>

Nor is the policy today standing on the idea, sometimes expressed in decades past, that gay Americans might be more prone to be a security risk. The idea that gays are more likely to “kiss and tell” or be blackmailed by foreign agents, who might use their fear of exposure and shame to get them to reveal state secrets, no longer holds much water. Pentagon studies going back to 1957 debunk this idea, while Vice President Cheney, when he was serving as Secretary of Defense in 1992, stated that it was no longer a valid rationale for any ban.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it can even be argued that the current policy makes blackmail of those hiding in the closet more rather than less likely, as it creates an actual, definable cost to any public outing.

Finally, the policy’s legal pillars are weakening. In 2003, the Supreme Court declared Texas’s sodomy laws as unconstitutional, thus striking down all remaining civilian sodomy laws. This ruling notably overturned an older Supreme Court decision that was often used to uphold the military’s ban on open homosexuality, thus casting serious doubt on the continued validity of sodomy laws inside the military.

Instead, the policy of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell remains standing because of perceptions, or rather perceived perceptions. That is, the rationale for the ban has

always been built around two factors. The first was the belief that allowing gays to serve would harm the public's view of the military as an institution. As a 1994 Defense Department directive put it, the belief existed that allowing gays to serve publicly would risk "the public acceptability of military service." The second was the belief that allowing gays would harm the cohesion of military units, as the Pentagon put it, risking "mutual trust and confidence among service members."<sup>7</sup>

### "...AND START GETTING REAL"

This is where the *Real World* comes in. Perceptions are not fixed into stone, and no area of social mores has arguably changed more in the last few decades than public attitudes towards gay and lesbian Americans. It is easy to forget how quickly these attitudes have shifted; it wasn't until 1973, for example, that the American Psychiatric Association voted to stop classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder. Since America had last had a national discussion about Don't Ask, Don't Tell in the early 1990s, the debate around the acceptability of homosexuality has certainly and irreparably changed. And television just may be the reason.

I first pondered this issue a few years ago at my youngest brother's college graduation at Tulane University in New Orleans. It being less than a year after Hurricane Katrina had hit the area, the opening speakers at the event were some heavy hitters, former Presidents George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton. The "surprise" speaker that followed them, though, was the comedienne and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres.

If it had been the 1990s, it would have been a divisive and newsworthy event. In 1997, DeGeneres had controversially come out as gay on national television. She then riled up a media storm by kissing a female on her TV show, decisions which many believe short-circuited her popular sit-com and movie career at the time (the sharer of that kiss, straight actress Laura Dern, also reportedly did not work for a year after the episode).

But a mere decade later, here was the same actress now sharing the stage with two former U.S. presidents.

Even more importantly, no one cared a bit. Indeed, as compared to the two former most powerful men in the world (one of whom was also at the time a would-be next first husband), the students and families of this decidedly conservative upper-crust university were far more excited about seeing Ellen (the sign of true power in pop-culture is when you are known by your first name).

The reason is that, to this generation, the fact that Ellen is gay is simply not a big deal, or at least nowhere near the matter of public debate and concern that it was just a decade past. That Ellen was gay was secondary to the fact that she's the host of one of the highest-viewed daytime shows out there (averaging 3 million viewers a day) and a winner of the popularity contest "People's Choice Awards" for the last 4 years. Perhaps even more important to this generation's perceptions, she also played one of their most beloved characters in the movie *Finding Nemo*, for which she won a "Kid's Choice Award."

The average youth of the generation joining the military today will have spent some 20,000 hours watching TV. Importantly, the content of these shows they were watching has changed, and with it the public acceptability of gays. Gone is the period in which homosexuality wasn't mentioned on TV, or if so, only mocked. In the time since *The Real World* began in 1992, launching the genre of reality television in full force, viewers increasingly have been able to watch and learn about gay and lesbian Americans in a whole new light. For example, the casts of every single one of *The Real World* shows have involved at least one young gay person, including a gay cast member in the 2000 season who dated a closeted Army captain, who also later outed himself in an MTV special. What is notable is that these individuals not only turned out to look and act just like the viewers at home, but they often were among the more sensible and beloved characters on the shows (some believe that this casting was a bit of intentional social engineering on the part of MTV).

The inclusion of gays in MTV's show proved especially powerful in the third season (1994), ironically just as Don't Ask, Don't Tell began to be implemented

in full force within the military. The show introduced Pedro Zamora, a gay man, who was subsequently revealed to be HIV-positive. The charming, sympathetic Zamora became simultaneously a fan favorite as well as helped to effectively end the practice, which had previously been publicly viable, of blaming gay Americans for AIDS. By the end of the show, he had “married” his boyfriend Sean, and the overwhelming majority of viewers were pleased that he had found genuine happiness so close to dying. One day after the last episode of the season aired, Pedro died. The event resonated across American popular culture (as well as politics, with the same President Clinton who had authorized Don’t Ask Don’t Tell calling Zamora’s family to express condolences). Years later, for example, Pedro’s story would even influence plotlines in children’s comics like the *Green Lantern* and *Green Arrow*, which dealt with gay or AIDS-related themes.

Popular fiction over the ensuing years certainly played a part, with gay characters popping up in everything from *The Simpsons* to *Will and Grace* since the time Don’t Ask Don’t Tell was initiated. But reality television is arguably what mattered most. Rather than being fictionalized, arguably fake, Hollywood creations, the gays that began to populate nearly every reality TV show couldn’t be written off and weren’t there solely for laughs. They were instead wrestling with many of the same issues as the viewers at home. By “getting real,” they are what most personalized and humanized homosexuality to mainstream, straight America.

This change came rapidly. By 2004, a mere decade after Pedro had first appeared on TV, matters had shifted so much that the gay reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* not only became a television hit and won an Emmy, but even helped “makeover” the World Series-winning Boston Red Sox.

Today, the presence of gays and lesbians on reality television covers the gambit, so much that it escapes much notice or comment. They are regularly cast as members of such popular shows as *American Idol*, *Survivor*, and *Top Chef*. Indeed on CBS’s *Amazing Race*, a gay male couple, one of whom was a former Air Force Academy graduate, won in 2004 and a team of married lesbian

ministers just lost out last year. Their inclusion has done little to keep the reality show from being a red-state, heartland favorite. As *Entertainment Weekly* magazine recently described, “When a record-setting 6.2 million people tune in to the finale of the MTV reality series *A Shot at Love With Tila Tequila*, to see whether the bisexual vixen picks a guy or a girl for a showmantic relationship, it’s clear the world has changed.”<sup>8</sup>

## YOU ARE WHAT YOU WATCH

These shows would matter little if they only reflected the ideals of morally depraved Hollywood, as some would paint it. But the hard data shows that attitudes towards gays are changing along with the folks who now enter our home via TV.

While Don’t Ask Don’t Tell once met with reasonably broad levels of acceptance, today it is fairly out of the mainstream. CNN in 2007 found that 79 percent of Americans think people who are openly homosexual should be allowed to serve in the U.S. military.<sup>9</sup> Even when you break the numbers down into various demographics, there is also a fairly wide agreement on the issue. The Pew Research Center found in 2006 that majorities of both Catholics and Protestants, both college graduates and high school graduates, etc. now support open service. Only in the demographic of those 65 or older did a majority not support the policy change (and even here it was close, with 47% supporting and 39% opposing).<sup>10</sup>

A similar change has been seen in what Americans think causes one to be gay. In 1977, only 13 percent of Americans thought people were born gay, as opposed to making a lifestyle choice. These numbers stayed below 20 percent throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Then, attitudes started to change; they were at 56% in 2007.<sup>11</sup> This aspect of causality is something that is frequently discussed in reality shows like *The Real World*. It is important, explains Christine Robinson, professor of sociology at James Madison University, because “Those who believe homosexuality is innate tend to be more accepting of homosexuality. Those who believe that homosexuality is chosen tend to believe that homosexually identified people can and should change their sexuality.”<sup>12</sup>

These figures are indicative of a changing acceptance of homosexuals in America. And it is a trend that will continue. In each of these various polls, those in the younger age brackets were well past the averages (and thus also growing in percentage and significance, as Gen Y—those born from 1980 to 2005—is just larger in raw numbers than the Baby Boomers and three times the size of Gen X). The mainstream, and even those more socially conservative, may not exactly agree with all aspects of being gay, but a generation which grew up with Pedro and Ellen in their lives is much less likely to vehemently object to it. Take the issue of gay marriage, for example. It was once a hot button social issue that could reliably be used to get out the vote. In the nomination process for 2008, however, it didn't much matter.

Such attitudinal changes and their impact will only continue as today's youth grow up. Indeed, when a poll was taken of 271,441 college freshmen at 393 schools nationwide in 2006, 61% actually approved of allowing gay marriage.<sup>13</sup> As a report on Generation Y attitudes towards homosexuals summed up, "Greater exposure to media images of gay people also has increased homosexuality's awareness and acceptance."<sup>14</sup>

The same trend in attitudes is playing out at even younger levels. Ritch Savin-Williams, a professor at Cornell University, found in his research for the book *The New Gay Teenager* that, over the last two decades, the average age that homosexuals come out has shifted from the mid-twenties to the mid-teens. And the environment in which they come out into has shifted as well. Over 3,000 high schools today have "Gay Straight Alliance" chapters. These are school clubs registered with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network that promote tolerance and acceptance of all students.<sup>15</sup> As one high school teacher estimated to the *Boston Globe*, 90 percent of students reported hearing anti-gay epithets in the halls every day back in 1993, and 75 percent back then believed that any student who was openly gay would be in danger of physical harassment. "Now, no kid I know who is in the closet or has come out thinks they'll be beat up. They think they might lose friends, and they aren't sure how their parents will handle it, but they aren't worried about getting beat up."<sup>16</sup>

This trend is even playing out within groups traditionally considered opposed to homosexuality, such as the Christian evangelical community (which is important, as this group has a heightened presence within the military). Less than half of Christian evangelicals under the age of 30 support a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. Instead, this generation of born-again is less likely than their forebears to condemn those of a different sexual orientation. "I've been to so many churches where a preacher will say something about homosexuality, and all these young people will get upset about it," tells Brandon Rhodes, a 22-year-old evangelical from Portland, Oregon. "We have a much more nuanced and compassionate view."<sup>17</sup>

In no way does this mean that prejudice doesn't still exist in American society, including even among those in powerful positions. For example, among the very first acts in office of current Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings was not to start helping those children 'left behind' in our schools, but to attack the *Buster Baxter* show on PBS. Her reason was that its main character, an animated rabbit, had gone on a trip to Vermont, where he learned about farm life, maple sugaring, as well as met a lesbian couple (Vermont is known for its same-sex-friendly marriage laws). More seriously, nor does the various changes in societal attitudes mean that some gays aren't put in danger for the sole fact of being gay; crimes against homosexuals still make up about 15% of all hate crimes according to FBI data.<sup>18</sup>

But the point here is that the notions of what is tolerated in our post-*Real World* existence have completely changed, even within these prejudices. Spellings couldn't openly go after *Buster* because being gay was somehow evil or not publicly acceptable; she could only target it on the point that gay marriage was not a proper discussion topic for kid viewers on a government funded show. By comparison, when MSNBC talkshow host Michael Savage made directly anti-gay comments on in 2003, he was immediately fired.

The same change is underway within the military. Just last year, for example, General Peter Pace, the then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, weighed

in that he found homosexual conduct to be an “immoral activity.” As opposed to the open and easy way that far more controversial statements were said back during the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell debates of the early 1990s, a firestorm ensued. Demands for an apology came from groups that ranged from the usual suspects, like gay advocacy organizations, to more notable and significant powers in military issues, like Senator John Warner, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Pace had to subsequently apologize. He sheepishly tried to explain that his statement reflected only his own personal views and admitted that he would do better to stick to policy instead (not that this worked out that well for him either; a defender of Rumsfeld’s policies, Pace was forced out by current Secretary of Defense Robert Gates a few months later, becoming the only Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the history of the position to serve just one term).

## A MATTER OF COHESION

With the first perceived issue, open public attitudes, now effectively off the table as factor to point to, the only remaining pillar of the ban then is that of unit cohesion. Or, as General Collin Powell argued back in 1993, “We cannot allow anything to happen which would disrupt that feeling of cohesion with the force.”<sup>19</sup>

This argument appears a lot less weighty now in retrospect than it did over 15 years ago. Many have since pointed out that using unit cohesion as a barrier actually parallels the same arguments made against racial integration of the military in the 1940s, a time during which there was far less mixing of races in broader society than gays’ broad integration today. Schools, housing, workplaces, and healthcare are not today segregated along lines of sexual orientation, as opposed to the way they were largely segregated by races back then, when the military was successfully integrated with no serious harm to cohesion.

More importantly, research began to show that people frequently misunderstand what this elusive concept of “unit cohesion” is all about. For instance, as two Army officers, Kim Field and John Nagl, explained in 2001, “Some feel that male bonding forged by

sleeping, bathing, and eating together—and just plain ‘letting boys be boys together’—is the key to unit cohesion and hence the ability to perform as a warrior in battle.”<sup>20</sup>

The reality, they argued instead, is that this idea of a locker-room atmosphere somehow breeding great warriors appears to be as truthful as most of the tall tales told in the locker rooms. The Army officers’ study instead found that a difference has to be made “between *social* and *task* cohesion.” Social, locker-room type friendships were actually found to “have deleterious effects on performance outcomes.” Rather, policymakers who care about cohesion should focus on whether the people in the unit have a shared sense of importance about the mission.

There is also the fact that, despite Powell’s saying about preventing “anything” from affecting unit cohesion, modern technologies have already begun to disrupt those old ideals of unit cohesion in a major way, regardless of who is gay or not. An ever small percentage of the military actually lives together or even fights together in close quarters. Indeed, the growing experience for vast numbers of troops, not just at base but even those at war, is deployment to an office cubicle. And this is changing in stunning new ways. During research for my book on unmanned technologies, for example, I came across numerous operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan that were actually conducted solely via an Internet chatroom, with the various soldiers and air crew sitting at desks in places like Nevada or California. Not only did they never meet face to face, but their entire communications were done via text messages, such that they never even spoke. This is obviously not the experience for all units at war or on deployment. But it is hard to argue that cohesion is both the same as it has always been and not already under threat by “anything” other than homosexuality.

Any misunderstandings of unit cohesion aside, the issue would be moot if allowing gays in the military would cause some sort of deep disturbance to the force. As then Army Chief of Staff General Gordon Sullivan testified to Congress in 1993, “The introduction into any small unit of a person whose open

orientation and self-definition is diametrically opposed to the rest of the group will cause tension and disruption.”<sup>21</sup>

Over time, it has become clear that this claim of mass tension and disruption is less true today, again going back to changing perceptions. Attitudes within the military are harder to track than broader public surveys, but the same change that has taken place in the wider public’s attitudes towards gays also appears under way inside the military that is recruited from that public. In a Zogby poll of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan at the end of 2006, 73% said that they were “personally comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians,” and only 37% want to keep the current policy.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, a number of added facts have come to the table, which potentially appear to undermine the argument that prevailed 15 years past. Notably, 23% of those service men and women polled in 2006 knew for certain that someone in their unit was gay, including 21% of those in combat units. This meant that a good number of troops are asking and telling already, without deleterious effects on cohesion or combat effectiveness. Indeed, scores of veterans have come out after their service, from former Marine S/Sgt. Eric F. Alva, the very first American wounded in Operation Iraqi Freedom, all the way up to retired Generals Keith Kerr and Virgil Richard and retired Admiral Alan Steinman. This new evidence creates a sort of perceptual ‘lose-lose’ for the old-school opponents of the ban. Given these numbers, it is difficult to believe that the U.S. military is the best, most professional force in the world today and yet simultaneously believe that having such gays in it has deeply undermined its effectiveness.

Broader facts also come from the experience of key U.S. allies. Over 20 members of NATO now allow gays and lesbians to openly serve. In the time since the policy was initiated, U.S. troops have served along soldiers from such countries as Britain, Poland, and Canada, not only in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, but in active combat in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, to no ill effect, despite the fact that these forces allow openly gay troops to serve.

Indeed, Britain’s transition to allowing homosexuals to serve during the interim went by with none of the expected disruptions predicted in the congressional hearings that led to Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (it also may have helped that a score of Britain’s great historic military leaders, such as Richard the Lion-Hearted, T.E. Lawrence, and Lord Kitchener were thought to be gay). The Israeli Defense Force had a similar experience in allowing gays to serve, with it being a military that has heightened respect in both U.S. military and social conservative circles. Besides allied forces, in the increasingly complex fights in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. soldiers also frequently serve alongside civilian government and non-governmental employees, which also allow openly gay members.

In the decade since Don’t Ask Don’t Tell was implemented, many are now finding that the policy may not be preventing tension, but is actually having the opposite effect. By breeding suspicion and distrust internal to the group, the policy can potentially weaken unit cohesion. It also gives any unscrupulous soldier or officer a scarily effective tool with which to threaten individuals that they don’t like, by threatening to out them, sometimes whether they are gay or not. Rear Admiral John D. Hutson, former Navy Judge Advocate General, has observed, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell is virtually unworkable in the military—legally, administratively, and socially. Rather than preserving cohesion, it fosters divisiveness.”<sup>23</sup>

In short, the change in internal attitudes has reached the point that last year a heterosexual cadet at West Point openly argued in their equivalent of a senior thesis that the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy should be scrapped. They argued that the policy itself had created a double standard, by asking gay soldiers to hide their orientation, which not only violates professional military values but was harmful to overall morale. What is notable is not merely that the cadet (now an Army officer) felt they could write such an argument in public, in their thesis for graduation. Rather, it is that they won West Point’s “best thesis” award for making such an argument.

Army Lt. Colonel and military historian Robert Bateman explains how these changing attitudes have-

given a new, almost utilitarian rationale for ending the ban. “In 1992 the guys in an infantry battalion were all children of the 80s. “Gay” was still a slur that could be (and was) thrown around without a second thought.”<sup>24</sup>

Bateman explains how he supported the ban back then, not so much as he was opposed to having openly gay soldiers in service, but because the prevailing attitudes of suspicion and open scorn would have burdened such a policy with too many added costs. “Combat arms culture in particular would have meant that many of my soldiers would have taken it upon themselves [to deal with gay soldiers] and gotten into trouble in the process. Therefore, you would have had the following additional costs: Cost of “sensitivity” training, in time and money; Cost of lost labor, lost sunk-cost training of men who are prosecuted for abusing a homosexual; Cost of command time and effort distracted from Army work in trying to both protect homosexuals and prosecute those who would persecute them. All of that would have come out of the military’s “Operations and Maintenance” funds...which would also mean you’d lose the money for things like firing your tank main guns on the range.”

Today, however, he describes that these cost factors are shifting, and largely because of the *Real World* effect on the troops that have come in over the last two decades. “Because of the increasing sociological shift towards a live-and-let-live situation in the younger generation which makes up the majority of our force, now the costs for having gay/lesbian soldiers has gotten smaller and smaller. Soon, in my opinion, they will hit the cross-over point at which we lose less money (in lost value of training/education) by keeping gays in than we lose in kicking them out. At that point, it becomes a moral issue, because for the military-utilitarian, funds are a moral issue.”

Bateman’s postings have included training in the Army Rangers, commanding a unit in the historic 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, service in Iraq under General Petraeus, and being designated as one of about 150 official “Army Strategists.” So, he is no softie activist, pushing a social agenda. Rather, the soldier sums up

the issue by explaining, in an almost mathematical equation, how the cross between military demands and changing youth attitudes means that Don’t Ask Don’t Tell is on its way out, due to utilitarian reasons. “If I have \$1 million and 1 year to train my men for war, and know that more training equals less death, then I must morally do whatever it takes to maximize my use of that \$1 million and 1 year. If, in 1992, I calculated that I would have to spend half of that on prosecuting people, then I’m likely to see it as having lost half. If in 2010 I can see that I am losing 1/4 of my assets in kicking gay men and lesbian women out and training new replacements, but could cut that to 1/8 by keeping gays in and only prosecuting the smaller number of people who harass them, then regardless, I must do that, because that means fewer lives will be lost in combat. See? Combat is the judge.”

## TIMES CHANGE, AND SO DO MILITARY NEEDS

Importantly, these perceptions of and attitudes towards gays are changing at the same time that internal concerns about the health of the U.S. military itself are changing. This underscores the perceptual effect, making it all the more powerful. In short, another aspect of the real world has weighed in against the policy. The peacetime military that joined in the “culture wars” of the early 90s now has bigger, more serious wars to wage.

Since the start of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, over 12,000 service men and women have been discharged under the policy, solely for being gay, lesbian or bisexual. Almost 1,000 of those discharged were in skills sectors that are now referred to as “high demand/low density,” such as pilots, combat engineers, and, most especially, over 60 Arab linguists.<sup>25</sup> Some estimate that as many as another 4,000 a year resign or choose not to re-enlist because of the policy.<sup>26</sup> Not that the folks who brought you the \$640 toilet seat or the \$10 billion in missing Iraq contracting care so much now (though they might when the war supplemental budgets run dry), but the financial costs of the policy are also rather high. One study in 2006 estimated that \$364 million was sucked out of the Pentagon’s budget due to the policy.<sup>27</sup>

These difficulties did not matter much back when Don't Ask Don't Tell was decided. The U.S. of 1992 was at peace and its military was going through a historic shrinkage in size, shedding almost 400,000 troops in the Army alone. The focus in the defense establishment was not on finding more troops, but rather on how to get rid of them.

Today, an opposite attitude about personnel prevails in defense circles. As wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drag on, the U.S. military can't find enough troops. Problems of recruiting and retention, especially in the Army, have resulted in accepting more recruits who do not meet the service's historic standards and keeping many troops in the force after their enlistment has expired (the infamous "stop-loss" and "backdoor draft" programs). Such gaps extend up the ranks. For instance, the Army is 17% short of the number of majors it needs, even after promoting 20% more officers into these positions than would have been eligible in the past.<sup>28</sup> And, with the force projected to grow in size by adding another 92,000 troops over the next four years, the challenges of staffing the force will only grow.

It is for all these reasons that attitudes have evolved, even among those that originally supported the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy. General John Shalikashvili, for instance, was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when the ban came into effect. He now says it is time for a reappraisal, "I now believe that if gay men and lesbians served openly in the United States military, they would not undermine the efficacy of the armed forces. Our military has been stretched thin by our deployments in the Middle East, and we must welcome the service of any American who is willing and able to do the job."<sup>29</sup>

It is also because of this need that the formal policy is quietly being hollowed out from within. The Service Member Legal Defense Network, an organization that works on behalf of gay and lesbian soldiers, reports that since the start of operations in Afghanistan in 2001, the number of discharges of gays in the military is down by 30%. Since the Iraq invasion in 2003, when the true retention and recruiting issues kicked in, discharges are down by 40%. These figures

also seem to undermine the argument that a change in formal policy should wait until the nation is at peace (leaving aside when such a period would happen in the expected future of "Long War," as well as ignoring the fact that almost all significant personnel policy changes have happened during wartime). The change is already under way, just via the ignoring of policy.

In short, at a time when the services are having a tough time recruiting and retaining troops, it becomes much, much harder to kick out qualified soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, including those with badly needed special skills, who, most importantly, want to continue to serve. Indeed, the official ban becomes even harder to maintain when it is put in comparison to the various stopgaps that are being weighed to deal with the military's recruiting crunch. For example, the Army has already roughly doubled the amount of "moral waivers" it has provided to convicted criminals allowing them to join, and still faces great challenges. As a result, some respected analysts, such as the Council on Foreign Relations' Max Boot and my own Brookings colleague Michael O'Hanlon, are even arguing that the U.S. military should start to open recruiting stations abroad and allow foreign citizens to join the force.<sup>30</sup> Setting aside the viability of such a plan, as well as its implications for democracy, it will be quite an odd and unsustainable outcome for the U.S. military to simultaneously boot out patriotic American citizens, who have already shown competence at their jobs, while experimenting with bringing in untested foreign troops to serve under the flag.

Beyond the numbers issue of troops being dismissed from the forces, the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy has also made it more difficult for the military to recruit in general, even of straight troops. The policy has been used as a rationale for keeping military recruiters and ROTC programs off many campuses and job fairs. The impact is negative to overall efforts, as in the marketing and recruiting world, access is everything.

Excluding openly gay Americans from the recruiting pool also excludes a decently significant portion of

America. The size of the gay and lesbian population is a source of much debate. Estimates range from a 10 percent high figure, derived from Alfred Kinsey's legendary *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* study, to the lower, but likely more accurate, voter exit polls that have found that between 4 and 5 percent of voters in the last five U.S. national elections self-identified as gay or lesbian.<sup>31</sup>

What most people don't realize is that because of various medical and physical limits, issues of drug or alcohol abuse, criminal backgrounds, dependents, and their enrollment in college, only 15% of American youth between the ages of 17-24 are viewed by the Pentagon as "qualified military available," that is targets for recruiting.<sup>32</sup> With the number of openly gay Americans in this age bracket likely growing in our post *Real World* era, this ban makes the already tough job of military recruiting, even tougher.

## THE END IS NEAR

The ban on openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual soldiers may come to an end in a few months, or it may take somewhat longer. Barack Obama has already publicly committed to ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell. By contrast, John McCain supports its continuance, but even he takes a somewhat guarded position. Notably, McCain has not argued for the policy on its own merits, but less comfortably says that it is best just to "leave this issue alone."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, some gay and lesbian advocates even hold out hope that the Senator might change his tune once in executive power. A few even describe how, as a former officer who served back in a time when homosexuals were not automati-

cally kicked out, he would be well equipped to quell any military dissent, akin to Nixon going to China (Coming full circle, both of these would-be commanders in chief have appeared on the *Ellen* show, again to no controversy).

Both of these leaders would do well to help smooth the way by working with Congress on legislation and the military on transition plans that remove policy hurdles, provide protections, and seek to minimize disruption. But regardless of whether the decision happens within the next administration or takes a little longer, it is clear that the days of not asking and telling are numbered. The decision will come. National security concerns will ultimately weigh more than social politics, while the social politics themselves have changed.

Even more, when the decision does come, its after-effects will be surprising to many veteran culture warriors. While there will likely be lots of hysteria on talk radio and the blogs about how the end of Don't Ask Don't Tell will play out, the implementation of the change within the military will be less controversial and difficult than many might expect. This is one hot button issue that has cooled. Yes, there will likely be ugly statements and isolated incidents that will grab headlines. But when one looks at the actual data, it is clear that the fears expressed in the Clinton-era culture wars weigh less in our post-*Real World*, post 9-11 existence. The new generation of troops that is staffing the military of the 21<sup>st</sup> century tends to have a different worldview towards homosexuality. This generation also has far more important wars to fight. To put it another way, they are just waiting for their leadership to start "getting real."

# ENDNOTES

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