

DADT, R.I.P.

Why the anti-gay policy vanished without ill effects

BY JAMES E. PARCO AND DAVID A. LEVY

It has now been a year since the long-standing U.S. policy banning homosexuals from openly serving in the U.S. military known as “don’t ask, don’t tell” was repealed. The negative effects predicted by the measure’s supporters — mass resignations, declines in recruiting, degraded unit cohesion, impaired military effectiveness, decreased morale and disciplinary problems — have yet to materialize.

What has been observed since Sept. 20 is what was predicted by scholarly research: a strong similarity between the U.S. experience and those of allied militaries that had repealed their gay exclusion policies over the previous two decades, including Australia, Britain, Canada, Israel and South Africa. As the latest empirical evidence is now beginning to show, the repeal of DADT has been nothing but a positive story, largely because it has been no story at all.

CULTURAL CHANGE

Until the late 1980s, U.S. society believed good reasons existed for excluding gays from the military, and consequently, during the Cold War, the U.S. government expressed little interest in re-examining its exclusionary gay policy. Public attitudes toward homosexuality placed minimal external pressure on the military to change because it was merely assumed that the exclusion policy was in the military’s best interests, and by extension, in the best interest of the public.

But away from the public eye, the military was suppressing evidence that the presence of gays in its ranks likely had no impact on its ability to go about its business. The 1957 Crittenden Report, named for the senior officer who chaired a Navy study board, was the result of a year of inquiry into the military-security risks posed by gay sailors. Published internally, it concluded that no evidence existed to “support the contention that homosexuals are a greater risk than heterosexuals.” The Navy’s leaders moved swiftly to classify the report.

The Crittenden Report remained secret until 1989, when a federal court ordered the military to release it to the public. In the following years, the situation changed dramatically. Researchers and governmental agencies began to formally

study both domestic societal attitudes and the experiences of allied foreign militaries that had repealed gay ban policies of their own. In 1993, the Government Accountability Office reported that, in analyzing the experiences of Canada, Germany, Israel and Sweden, “military officials in all four countries said that the presence of homosexuals in the military is not an issue and has not created problems in the functioning of military units.” Simultaneously, a Rand study commissioned by the Defense Department reviewed empirical evidence on unit cohesion from six foreign militaries reporting “none of the militaries studied for this report believe their effectiveness as an organization has been impaired or reduced as a result of the inclusion of homosexuals.” Moreover, the Rand study found “no resignations (despite previous threats to quit), no problems with recruitment and no diminution of cohesion, morale or organizational effectiveness” even though “in none of these societies is homosexuality widely accepted by a majority of the population.”

When the British government finally lifted its military gay ban in 2000, both advocates and opponents of DADT repeal in the U.S. paid very close attention. Great Britain provided a direct test of the claims on which the U.S. policy had been built, regarding the effects on unit cohesion, morale and military effectiveness. Nine months after the repeal took effect, the U.K. Ministry of Defence published a report that found policy implementation to be better than anticipated and “with fewer problems than might have been expected.” There were “no reported difficulties of note concerning homophobic behavior amongst Service Personnel.” The report concluded that “there has been a marked lack of reaction” to the change. British societal attitudes toward homosexuality may have differed from attitudes in the U.S. at the time, but it would only be a matter of time before the demise of DADT.

Some of the most important research over the past decade specifically addressing gays in the military emerged from the Palm Center. Led by director Aaron Belkin, the center commissioned studies of sexual minorities in the military. Its studies of the experience of foreign militaries consistently concluded that there were few notable negative effects of repeal in other countries and there was little reason to believe anything would be different in the United States.

Framing the argument from the opposing perspective was Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness. CMR advocated “defending elements of military culture that are essential for morale and readiness in the All-

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Volunteer Force” and offered many arguments in favor of barring homosexuals from service. But it produced little scholarly research and frequently challenged its detractors to prove that repealing DADT wouldn't hurt the military.

The basic disagreement between the constituencies represented by Belkin and Donnelly rested principally on values.

Those in the Belkin camp argued that the U.S. military should be open to all capable individuals who wish to serve, whereas the Donnelly camp held that military service was not a right but a privilege and that it was up to Congress to determine the qualifications of those eligible to serve. Despite the main arguments over unit cohesion, military effectiveness, morale and discipline, the more fundamental argument centered on latent discrimination toward lesbian, gay and bisexual service members in the status quo of military culture.

Remaining quietly behind the public discourse, many political and senior military leaders refused to acknowledge the evidence that ran contrary to the fundamental arguments set forth in the current policy. Between 2006 and 2008, two studies commissioned by the Palm Center strived to understand the full complexity of the impacts of DADT, including one that captured attitudes across the spectrum of opinions and studied all empirical evidence to date. Separately, a report by four retired flag and general officers attempted to capture senior-leader perspectives across the services on the issue. The conclusions were consistent and clear: Repealing DADT was “unlikely to pose any significant risk to morale, good order, discipline or cohesion”; moreover, continuance of the policy would come at a continued cost to the American taxpayer.

Subsequent studies came to similar conclusions: No scientific evidence suggested that: 1) unit cohesion would be hurt if gays serve openly, 2) there was any association between knowing a lesbian or gay unit member and perceived unit



SANDY HUFFAKER/GETTY IMAGES

Service members and veterans participate in a gay pride parade in San Diego shortly before the repeal of the “don't ask, don't tell” policy took effect.

cohesion or readiness, or 3) sexual orientation disclosure was related to unit cohesion. Furthermore, studies found that the relationship between concealment and harassment meant DADT was likely to foster a decline in unit cohesion.

END OF AN ERA

Opponents of DADT repeal were

unswayed by the growing evidence that the arguments upon which the law had been constructed were empirically unsupported. In 2007, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Marine Gen. Peter Pace described his perspective on gays in the military. He remarked that: “I do not believe that the armed forces are well served by saying through our policies that it's OK to be immoral in any way, not just with regards to homosexual acts. ... So from that standpoint, saying that gays should serve openly in the military to me says that we, by policy, would be condoning what I believe is immoral activity.”

Two years later, in a thinly veiled affront to civil-military relations, more than 1,000 retired generals and admirals published an open letter to Congress and the president declaring that “homosexuality is incompatible with military service.” In their March 2009 letter, they insisted that repealing DADT would “undermine recruiting and retention, impact leadership at all echelons and have adverse impacts on the willingness of parents who lend their sons and daughters to military service, and eventually break the All-Volunteer Force.”

Although the prevailing attitudes among America's top-ranking generals toward gays in the military had remained largely unchanged during the period governed by DADT, society's had not. In 1992, after Rep. Patricia Schroeder, D-Colo., compared homosexuality to race in terms of discrimination, Gen. Colin Powell had been able to halt a discussion of open homosexuality in the military realm with his reply in testimony. Pace was much less successful in his argument, and

indeed, his stance was commonly seen as leading to the termination of his tenure as the JCS chairman several months later. Clearly, societal norms toward homosexuals had changed and begun to diverge from those in control of the military.

Pace's successor, Adm. Mike Mullen, marked the beginning of the end for DADT when he said in 2009 that "it is my personal belief that allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would be the right thing to do." Within weeks, DoD embarked on one of largest studies conducted by the U.S. government. When the Comprehensive Review Working Group delivered its report and recommendation to Congress in November 2010, it characterized the risk of DADT repeal as "low." The following month, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010" was passed, and on July 20, 2011, it was certified by the president, the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff as ready for implementation. The repeal went into effect Sept. 20.

As it turns out, the working group was right — the risk was very low indeed.

COMING UP

Early next year, the most recent series of studies on the impacts of DADT will be published in a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* on the "Evolution of Government Policy Towards Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military." As the co-editors of this project, we are privy to what these studies are beginning to reveal: that the most recent empirical data gathered suggests no causal relationship between DADT and the rhetoric on which it had been built. Rather, the policy represented yet another attempt for a privileged class to preserve a version of military culture, free from the "meddling influences" of a society that pays its way. The integration of women had threatened this culture decades earlier, and despite the full generation that women have served, the evidence remains clear that they have yet to achieve equal status to their male counterparts. Worse than women, gays — and more specifically, gay men — threaten an idealized view of a martial masculine military culture.

DADT repeal wasn't a moment that created dramatic cultural change. Military culture was far closer to American civilian culture than many cared to admit. In fact, the military culture changed nearly a decade before for the newest

generation of service members, who were far more open and tolerant to openly gay soldiers. What hadn't changed were the leadership attitudes toward those changes. Despite the fact that the vast majority of service members saw sexual identity as uniquely private, leadership continued to advocate keeping gays out of the military as a rhetorical battle cry. Many military leaders had simply lost touch with their institutions.

The other resilient finding of a key study came as no surprise, and that was the efficacy of the military chain of command. Under DADT, the policy was challenged by very few military personnel until the very end. At the moment of repeal, it vanished without notice or consequence. DADT worked because military leaders made it work before repeal, and repeal worked immediately thereafter for the same reason. The military knows how to enforce rules better than any other organization, and DADT was a rule. It was just a bad rule.

There has yet to emerge any evidence, to our knowledge, that supports any pre-repeal

claims of negative effects toward changing levels of retention or recruitment. In fact, we found no support for any of the originally levied contentions of 10 USC 654, the law upon which DADT was based.

In the end, we found evidence that DADT created five irreconcilable contradictions. Chief among these was the creation of a policy of where the most esteemed value — integrity — was compromised daily. As Mullen put it, the repeal marked a return to integrity throughout every level of military service.

More study is needed to evaluate the ongoing cultural evolution within the military and the persistent gap between the military and society. Although DADT repeal has been treated as a policy issue, the reality is that until leaders and policy-makers see it for what it is — a call for cultural change — equity between the demographics of our armed forces will lag. Looking ahead, leaders at all levels must go further than before to recast a military culture on the fundamental values of trust, respect and inclusion with an underlying leadership philosophy that every service member in the U.S. armed forces is as worthy as every other. Herein lies the fundamental leadership challenge as America soldiers on.

DADT, rest in peace. **AFJ**

DADT worked because military leaders made it work, and repeal worked for the same reason.