Allowing Open Service in the Military

Key Findings from Research and Experience in the United States and Abroad

United States

• Opponents of repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” often cite the specious claim allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would damage unit cohesion and military readiness. But according to Dr. Nathaniel Frank, a senior research fellow at the Palm Center of the University of California-Santa Barbara, “There is actually a vast body of data on homosexuality in the military…existing data show clearly that open gays can and do serve in the military without undermining cohesion, and that the gay ban itself causes more problems in the military than the presence of open gays in a unit.”

• A report commissioned by the Department of Defense in 1988-1989 through its own Personnel Security Research and Education Center found that the assertion that unit cohesion would be adversely affected if the ban on gays were repealed was based on fear rather than facts. The report found that “having same-gender or opposite gender orientation is unrelated to job performance.”

• A 1993 RAND Corporation study noted that unit cohesion could be grouped into two categories: “social cohesion (intra-group attraction) and task cohesion (commitment to shared goals and objectives).” RAND noted that “sharing similar traits or values enhances social cohesion, but it is not necessary for task cohesion, so long as individuals share a commitment to the group’s mission.”

• In 2008, Laura Miller of RAND and Bonnie Moradi of the University of Florida examined data from a 2006 Zogby poll sampling service members who had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. They found “no associations between knowing a lesbian or gay unit member and ratings of perceived unit cohesion or readiness.”

• Air Force Colonel Om Prakash won the Secretary of Defense National Security Essay Competition in 2009 with an examination of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. The piece, which was published in Joint Force Quarterly, a publication prepared for the chairman of
the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted that task cohesion is developed through such factors as “leadership, group size, shared threat, and past success. Interestingly success seems to promote cohesion to a greater degree than cohesion promotes success.” Moreover, Colonel Prakash determined that “after a careful examination, there is no scientific evidence to support the claim that unit cohesion will be negatively affected if homosexuals serve openly.”

Israel

- Israel never had a blanket ban on open service by gays and lesbians. But the Israeli Defense Forces, or IDF, did maintain some irregularly enforced restrictions on gays and lesbians until May 1993—notably a restriction on homosexuals serving in intelligence positions requiring top secret clearances.

- Public testimony by former IDF Colonel Uzi Even on February 2, 1993, prompted a reconsideration of this policy. Even was stripped of his security clearance in 1983 based on his sexual orientation, even though he had “conducted highly classified military research for 15 years.” Nathaniel Frank notes that Col. Even “was deemed a security risk even though he had just come out of the closet, thus neutralizing any possibility of blackmail.”

- According to the 1993 RAND Corporation study, the IDF officially announced a policy of nondiscrimination on June 11, 1993. This policy stated that, “No restrictions shall be imposed on the recruitment, assignment or promotion of homosexual soldiers … and civilians due to their sexual inclination.”

- The Palm Center conducted intensive research in the wake of Israel’s decision to allow unrestricted open service, including reviewing all known published scholarly books and articles on the subject and interviewing “all known experts on the issue of gays in the Israeli military from the Defense Ministry, the IDF, Israeli and American universities and civil rights organizations.” Palm researchers were not “able to find any data indicating that lifting the gay ban undermined Israeli military performance, cohesion, readiness or morale. In addition, none of the thirty-five experts [they] interviewed could recount any indication that the lifting of the gay ban compromised military effectiveness.”

- In 1993, the Government Accountability Office (then the General Accounting Office) studied Israel’s policies on homosexuality in the military as part of a larger report. Researchers noted that while “the military has not studied how the inclusion of homosexuals in the military affects unit readiness, effectiveness, cohesion or morale… officials told us that, based on their experience, the inclusion of homosexuals has not had an adverse impact on these areas. They also said homosexual soldiers performed as well as heterosexuals.”
United Kingdom

• The United Kingdom repealed its ban on gays and lesbians in the armed forces in 2000. Four former service members had challenged the policy in front of the European Court on Human Rights, which ruled in September 1999 that the policy violated the European Convention on Human Rights, of which the United Kingdom is a signatory.12

• The United Kingdom announced in December 1999 that it would comply with the court’s decision and no longer investigate or discharge service members on the basis of their sexual orientation. The policy became effective in January 2000.13

• After the ban had been lifted, the Palm Center conducted intensive follow-up research in 2000 to determine the policy change’s impact. The center’s researchers interviewed “more than twenty-five representatives from the military, academia, and non-governmental organizations.” Not a single person reported major problems with the change in policy, and researchers noted that “no one has heard of any difficulties related to recruitment or training completion rates; recruitment levels are characterized as ‘quite buoyant.’”14

• Thirty months after the United Kingdom changed its policy, the U.K. Ministry of Defense completed a tri-service review of the Army, Air Force, and Navy, and concluded that the transition had been accomplished successfully. The Royal Air Force reported that “All COs [commanding officers] agreed that there had been no tangible impact on operational effectiveness, team cohesion or Service life generally.” Naval Officers reported that “the majority view is that the new policy has not made any significant change to Service life.” Army officers noted that, “There is general acceptance of the change amongst officers with many agreeing that the impact of the policy will have no significant impact upon units.”15

Canada

• Canada began permitting open service by gays and lesbians in 1992. Restrictions on homosexuals had been loosened in 1988, but severe discriminatory practices were left in place. Five former service members challenged the military’s policy in court, claiming that it violated the country’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Canadian government settled the case against Michelle Douglas, one of the five service members, on October 27, 1992. That same day the government announced that “The Canadian Forces will comply fully with the Federal Court’s decision. Canadians, regardless of their sexual orientation, will now be able to serve their country in the Canadian Forces without restriction.” Additional policy changes and internal guidance followed.16

• According to Palm Center researchers, “after the ban was lifted... follow-up studies found no increase in disciplinary, performance, recruitment, sexual misconduct, or resignation problems.”17
• The RAND Corporation conducted a comprehensive 1993 study on homosexuality and the military, for which researchers spoke with Canadian uniformed military, Department of National Defense officials, civilian experts, and members of parliament. Canadian Forces officials consulted after the policy change reported “no fights or violent incidents, no resignations (despite previous threats to quit), no problems with recruitment, and no diminution of cohesion, morale, or organizational effectiveness.”

Endnotes


2 Quoted in Frank, Unfriendly Fire, p. 118-120.


8 Frank, Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America, p. 140.


10 Belkin and Levitt, “Homosexuality and the Israeli Defense Forces; Did Lifting the Gay Ban Undermine Military Performance,” p. 5.


