



# Myth vs. Fact: Repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

## Common Misconceptions Debunked

The U.S. military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that bans open service by gays and lesbians should be repealed—it’s discriminatory, leads to the discharge of thousands of qualified men and women, and deters untold others from serving their country. Further, a new CAP report [points out](#) that repeal is supported by top-ranking civilian and military leaders, service members, and the American public.

But proponents of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” continue to argue that the ban should be kept in place because repealing it would harm military readiness and unit cohesion, hurt recruitment, and require a lengthy and complex repeal process, among other things. An examination of existing research and the experiences of our allies who’ve repealed their bans, however, shows these arguments are weak and erroneous.

---

**Myth:** Repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and allowing gay men and lesbians to serve openly in the military will be a complicated and time-intensive process.

**Fact:** Many of the military’s existing rules and regulations are already neutral in regard to sexual orientation and therefore wouldn’t need to be changed if “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” were repealed. For example, current military regulations on sexual harassment do not specify the genders or sexual orientations of the involved parties. Some minor adjustments and updates to regulations will be necessary, but good leadership and consistent enforcement can ease the transition to a military that permits gays and lesbians to serve openly. CAP’s [report](#) outlines the regulatory changes that would need to happen after repeal.

Our allies in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Israel transitioned to unrestricted open service policies quickly and without problems. The British military noted that the transition was smooth with few problems just six months after repeal.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian switch was described as a “non-event.”<sup>2</sup> The Israeli Defense Force’s move to eliminate all discrimination against gays and lesbians was well received by both the military and the general population, leading to a smooth transition.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the change to open service did not require a drawn-out process in any of these countries.

---

**Myth:** Allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly will undermine unit cohesion and military readiness.

**Fact:** Permitting openly gay and lesbian service personnel will not undermine cohesion or readiness, and the experiences of our allies are a good guide. Commanding officers in the United Kingdom stated that the decision to allow open service had “no tangible impact on operational effectiveness, team cohesion or Service life generally.”<sup>4</sup> Department of National Defence personnel noted “no diminution of cohesion” shortly after the Canadian ban was lifted in 1993.<sup>5</sup> In Israel, researchers from the Palm Center at the University of California-Santa Barbara were not “able to find any data indicating that lifting the gay ban undermined Israeli military performance, cohesion, readiness or morale.”<sup>6</sup>

The militaries of all of these countries continue to perform admirably as do U.S. service members who work alongside these forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Moreover, U.S. research indicates gay and lesbian service members do not undermine cohesion or readiness. A RAND Corporation study noted in 1993 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.”<sup>7</sup> In 2008, Laura Miller of the RAND Corporation 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 and found “no associations between knowing a lesbian or gay unit member and ratings of perceived unit cohesion or readiness.”<sup>8</sup>

---

**Myth:** Allowing openly gay service will reduce recruitment and retention rates.

**Fact:** Openly gay service has never been shown to reduce recruitment or retention significantly. After the United Kingdom lifted its ban in 2000, Palm Center researchers found later the same year that “no one has heard of any difficulties related to recruitment or training completion rates; recruitment levels are characterized as ‘quite buoyant.’”<sup>9</sup> The RAND Corporation’s 1993 study found that the Canadian Forces had suffered “no resignations (despite previous threats to quit), no problems with recruitment.”<sup>10</sup>

---

**Myth:** Openly gay service will undermine military order and discipline and may lead to unfair charges of discrimination against officers and noncommissioned officers who discipline openly gay service members.

**Fact:** The military justice system is largely neutral in regard to sexual orientation. The Uniform Code of Military Justice already provides a framework to ensure that service members faithfully follow their superiors' orders without regard to personal factors like sexual orientation. Further, service members already have options to seek redress if they feel that they have been disciplined or passed over for promotion unfairly.

Moreover, the fear that officers will be unable to discipline gay service members for fear of accusations of harassment or discrimination is overstated. Military practices for addressing these situations offer fair procedures for all parties to defend and clarify their actions.

The British, Canadian, and Israeli militaries have not experienced significant problems with order or discipline following their decisions to permit unrestricted open service. The British military created a uniform code of conduct that applies to all service members regardless of sexual orientation and British military regulations provide opportunities for service members to seek redress of grievances.<sup>11</sup> The Canadian military has administrative orders in place to fairly pursue accusations of harassment and sexual misconduct, and the military's Queen's Regulations and Orders dictate that no service member shall knowingly make a false accusation against an officer or noncommissioned member.<sup>12</sup> A 1993 study by the Government Accountability Office found that in the Israeli military, gays and lesbians are simply "judged on their merits like any other soldier."<sup>13</sup>

---

**Myth:** The experiences of foreign militaries are not good models for decisions by the U.S. military.

**Fact:** There is much to learn from the experiences of our allies, especially the United Kingdom, Canada, and Israel. Like U.S. forces, these militaries deploy frequently, require their service members to share close living quarters such as on submarines, engage in combat regularly, and perform effectively under fire.

Moreover, these countries and the service members who constitute their armed forces all share common social values with the United States. Canada and Israel began to permit unrestricted open service around the same time that the United States instituted "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and the United Kingdom repealed its ban 10 years ago.

None of the nightmare scenarios predicted by some opponents of open service occurred in these countries.

---

## Endnotes

- 1 Nathaniel Frank, "Gays in Foreign Militaries: A Global Primer" (Santa Barbara, CA: Palm Center, 2010), p. 32, available at <http://www.palmcenter.org/files/GaysinForeignMilitaries2010.pdf>.
- 2 Ibid, p. 51.
- 3 Ibid, p. 93.
- 4 United Kingdom Ministry of Defense, "Tri-Service Review of the Armed Forces Policy on Homosexuality and Code of Social Conduct" (2002), available at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/ACED4F62-2C04-4B19-AC50-E49552732385/0/impact\\_studies\\_homosexuality.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/ACED4F62-2C04-4B19-AC50-E49552732385/0/impact_studies_homosexuality.pdf).
- 5 Bernard Rostker and others, "Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1993), p. 79, available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2009/MR323part3.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2009/MR323part3.pdf).
- 6 Aaron Belkin and Melissa Levitt, "Homosexuality and the Israel Defense Forces: Did Lifting the Gay Ban Undermine Military Performance," *Armed Forces and Society* 27 (4) (2001): 541-565.
- 7 Rostker and others, "Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy," p. 29.
- 8 Bonnie Moradi and Laura Miller, "Attitudes of Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans Toward Gay and Lesbian Service Members" (Santa Barbara, CA: Palm Center, 2009), p. 2, available at <http://www.palmcenter.org/node/1220>.
- 9 Aaron Belkin and R.L. Evans, "The Effects of Including Gay and Lesbian Soldiers in the British Armed Forces: Appraising the Evidence" (Santa Barbara, CA: The Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, 2000), p. 2.
- 10 Rostker and others, "Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy," p. 79.
- 11 "Armed Forces Code of Social Conduct," available at <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/WhatWeDo/Personnel/EqualityAndDiversity/ArmedForcesCodeOfSocialConductPolicyStatement.htm>; United Kingdom Ministry of Defense "JSP 831 – Redress of Individual Grievances: Service Complaints" (2008), p. 1, available at <http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/20B6439E-DC25-4D78-AFD6-1340A095292C/0/JSP831.pdf>.
- 12 "CFAO 19-39 Personal Harassment," in Bernard D. Rostker and others, "Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy," p. 431 – 435.
- 13 General Accounting Office, "Homosexuality in the Military," Report to the Honorable John W. Warner, U.S. Senate, June 1993, p. 42, available at <http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat5/149440.pdf>.