



U.S. Military Marches Past ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’

Full Recruitment Goals Met on Eve of Gay and Lesbian Integration

Lawrence J. Korb and Laura Conley March 30, 2011

The Pentagon announced two weeks ago that recruiting and retention across all of our armed forces were strong in the first five months of fiscal year 2011. In fact, all active-duty services and all reserve components save one either met or exceeded their recruiting goals between October last year and February this year (the lone exception was the Air National Guard, which achieved “only” 99 percent of its goal). Retention presented an even rosier picture: “All of the active-duty services and reserve components are on target to meet their fiscal year retention and attrition goals.”

This announcement and the successful recruiting and retention processes it references is impressive in a time of war but otherwise would be entirely unremarkable were it not for the existence of an unprecedented parallel process in the U.S. military early this year—preparation to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the federal policy that prohibits openly gay and lesbian troops from serving in the armed forces. Currently all branches of the U.S. military are moving forward with efforts to educate troops about the changes to come once this outdated policy is no longer the law of the land.

Congress and the president last December set the conditions for final repeal of the law, including a requirement that repeal be delayed until the president, secretary of defense, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff certify that ending “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” will not undermine military readiness and retention. But this agreement was not accomplished without fierce resistance from supporters of the policy, who claimed that repeal—right now, or at all—would have serious, detrimental effects on the U.S. armed forces. The Pentagon’s new recruitment and retention numbers give good reason to finally put these claims to rest.

Supporters of continuing to prohibit openly gay and lesbian Americans from serving our country painted dire pictures of the breakdown in recruiting, retention, and military effectiveness, all of which they claimed would result from repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Among the most vocal opponents of repeal was the Center for Military Readiness’s Elaine Donnelly, who claimed that as a result of doing away with the policy, “combined voluntary and involuntary losses of careerists in communities, grades, and skills that are not easily replaceable could break the all-volunteer force.”

Less extreme supporters of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” also chimed in to suggest that service members would not take well to working alongside openly homosexual troops. Perhaps the most outspoken member of this group was Marine Commandant James Amos, who argued that the presence of openly gay troops could pose a deadly distraction on the battlefield.

Commandant Amos, it should be acknowledged, has become an exemplary advocate for a smooth and orderly repeal since Congress and the president finalized the bill last year. And the latest recruitment data underscores the fact that U.S. troops are more interested in doing their jobs than wringing their hands about whether their colleagues are gay or straight.

Indeed, DADT repeal training over the past several months makes it clear that change is happening and is being actively dealt with professionally. In the Navy, for example, training includes a 90-minute to two-hour session that draws on a 24-slide PowerPoint presentation, a two-page pamphlet, an eight-page discussion of frequently asked questions, and 14 written vignettes about a fully integrated military.

These detailed sessions did not trigger the feared mass exodus of troops. Nor, as the recruitment figures attest, are our armed forces unable to find men and women willing to sign up to serve in a military that will soon welcome openly gay and lesbian Americans.

This total lack of fuss among the members of the armed services over the impending repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” should come as no surprise. It echoes the experiences of all of the U.S. allies that have done away with similar discriminatory laws. As researchers at the Palm Center at the University of California-Santa Barbara note, “In both Canada and Britain, two-thirds of male troops said that they would not work with gay men if gay bans were lifted in those countries,” yet resignations were in the single digits in both countries once their respective policies were ended.

The Navy estimates that it can complete training sailors for the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” at all levels by June 30 of this year, while the Army, the largest of the armed services, estimates it may take until late August. But certification still must happen. Given the smooth transition thus far, however, all branches should be easily able to meet the Navy’s mid-summer goal. And the president, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and secretary of defense all should begin preparing now to sign-off on ending this unjust law.

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