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Repealing ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’

President Obama wants to let gays serve openly in the military. Will the ban soon be lifted?

Source: *The Week*, March 12, 2010

What is ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’?

It’s the policy that enables gays to serve in the military, provided their sexuality remains a secret. It began in 1993, when President Clinton tried to overturn the ban on homosexuals in the armed forces but Congress and the Pentagon resisted. DADT is the compromise that emerged. Since then, nearly 13,000 gays have been discharged from the Army, Marines, Navy, and Air Force—most of them honorably—due to their sexual orientation. In the peak year for discharges, 2001, 1,227 gays were kicked out; 644 gays have been discharged since President Obama took office vowing to end the policy. “So many simple things that straight people take for granted could have ended my career,” says retired Navy Capt. Joan Darrah, who came out after she left the Navy in 2002, “even a comment such as, ‘My partner and I went to the movies last night.’”

How does the policy work?

Gays in uniform can be dismissed if anyone discovers their sexual orientation—even if they aren’t acting on it. Just being gay is enough. People can be “outed” by anyone—themselves, a rival, an angry ex, or even through an anonymous accusation. The policy requires that incriminating statements of any kind, even musings on a private Facebook account, be investigated. Because no proof of homosexual behavior is necessary, the standards of evidence can be murky. After a fight over money, Senior Airman Sonya Harden was accused by her roommate of being gay. The accuser eventually recanted, ex-boyfriends testified that Harden was straight, and evidence against her was found to be forged. But Harden ended up being discharged. Once you’re accused of being gay, Harden says, “You’re gay,” regardless of the evidence.

Why are gays excluded from the military?

The Pentagon has long considered homosexuality to be “incompatible” with military service. The military banned gays in 1916 and screened for “effeminate” behavior during World War II. In the past, closeted homosexuality was considered a potential security risk, since homosexuals could be subject to blackmail. The primary argument today is that homosexuals in the ranks, especially in a time of war, will undermine unit cohesion, morale, and effectiveness. Democratic Sen. James Webb of Virginia, a Vietnam veteran and former secretary of the Navy, says homosexuality introduces into a unit the potential for “eros”—and favoritism. “There is no greater or more natural bias than that of an individual toward a beloved,” Webb wrote in 1997.

Why change the policy now?

Attitudes toward gays have changed. When President Clinton tried to overturn the ban in 1993, only 44 percent of Americans supported his position, and the Pentagon rebelled. But today, support for gays serving openly in the military stands at 75 percent, according to an ABC/Washington Post poll. “Society is always reflected in the military,” says

retired Gen. Colin Powell, who recently reversed his own opposition to openly gay soldiers. "It's where we get our soldiers from." Proponents of repeal point to studies dating to the 1950s that have concluded that homosexuality is unlikely to undermine unit cohesion. They also note that Israel, as well as Canada, the U.K., and the vast majority of other NATO countries allow gays to serve. Surveys of rank and file military personnel show that within the military, resistance to gays is declining, too, though it's far from gone. A 2009 Army Times survey of 3,000 active-duty troops found 51 percent were opposed to openly gay service members, down from 63 percent in 2003.

So is change coming?

It seems so, though not necessarily soon. Repealing the ban on gays in the military requires legislation, and it's not clear that supporters have the 60 votes they'll need in the Senate to defeat a likely filibuster. In the House, Iraq veteran Rep. Patrick Murphy has nearly 190 co-sponsors for legislation allowing gays to serve openly. But Rep. Ike Skelton, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, who represents a conservative district in Missouri, is opposed, complicating its prospects. In any event, Congress is likely to give great weight to the military on this question.

Is the Pentagon on board?

More so than in the past, but the signals have been mixed. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has endorsed ending the gay ban, as has Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "I have served with homosexuals since 1968," says Mullen. "Everybody in the military has." But other high-ranking officers, including Marine Commandant Gen. James Conway, remain opposed to repeal, and the Pentagon wants to await the results of a new study before anything drastic is done. "We need to know more than we know now about what the potential impact would be," Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said last week. "And we need to be armed with that information so that we could work with the Congress to help inform the process that they undertake, if they undertake it."

The change agents

For more than two decades, gay-rights activists hoping to repeal don't ask, don't tell have deployed a highly effective public relations tool: gay service members with exceptional records. Lt. Dan Choi is the latest advocate in that mold. A West Point graduate and infantry officer in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, Choi served for a decade under DADT. But last March, he outed himself on The Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC; his discharge proceedings began a few weeks later. In addition to his West Point pedigree, Choi is an Arabic linguist, a rare and highly valued specialty. Choi says the policy promotes deception and dishonesty and deprives the military of the services of gays who want to defend their country. "They do it because they believe in the values of our country, that it's worth protecting," he says. "That's the reason why I joined."

Possible WN topics:

- What is your stance on "DADT"? Explain.
- Predict what will happen to the effort to repeal DADT.