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Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Don't Bother!

When I was 18 and enlisted in the Vietnam-era Army, I swore to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic” and to “bear true faith and allegiance to the same.” I recall the gravity of the moment, realizing I was not pledging loyalty to a piece of paper but to the very legal basis of our American society. But more on that later.

Briefly, I served as a Russian linguist overseas; created and handled top-secret materials; achieved five ranks in three years; and was honorably discharged. Now as a veteran and as a gay man, my interest in “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” (DADT) is understandably keen.

It may surprise some that the U.S. military did not enforce a ban against homosexuals until World War II, so from the 1940s until DADT in 1993 there was an enforced outright ban. (Note: I did not yet realize I was gay when I served.)

DADT, permitting only closeted gays to serve, was President Clinton's face-saving compromise after he failed to push a unilateral non-discrimination policy past the Pentagon brass and a skeptical public. It has always been problematic:

- It requires deception. As Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, " I cannot help being troubled by the fact that we force young men and women to lie about whom they are in order to defend their fellow citizens."
- It wastes human resources. Over 13,500 have been discharged under DADT, including Arabic translators and others with critical specialties.
- It wastes material resources. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to enforce the policy.
- It is out of step with today's world. Twenty-five nations, including our closest allies, Britain, Australia, Canada and Israel, permit openly gay service members. The U.S. and Turkey are the only two original NATO countries that still have bans in place.
- It is not supported by a majority of the American public. Americans favoring gays serving openly range from 69 percent (Gallup) to 79 percent (CNN). Republicans supporting gays serving openly poll at 64 percent (*Washington Post/ABC News*).
- It is not supported by most Afghanistan and Iraq veterans. The non-partisan Vet Voice Foundation found an overwhelming majority of them (73 percent) are comfortable around gay people, and the same percentage would find it acceptable if gays were allowed to serve openly in the military.
- It is not supported by top military and civilian leaders, e.g., Commander-in-Chief Barak Obama, Adm. Mullen, former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell and Gen. John Shalikashvili. Gen. Shalikashvili was both principled and pragmatic when he wrote to the Pentagon leadership, “As a nation built on the principle of equality we should recognize and welcome change that will build a stronger, more cohesive military.” More than 100 retired admirals and generals support repeal.
- The troops don't get it. Half of today's military personnel are under 25 and have grown up in a society increasingly accepting of gay people. Many have friends outside and inside the military who happen to be gay – an estimated 66,000 gays are currently serving -- and it's no big deal. In fact, 73 percent of military personnel are comfortable with lesbians and gays (*Zogby International*). A 2009 Defense Department survey found that two-thirds of active duty battalion

troops do not think that knowing there are openly gay and lesbian soldiers in their unit would negatively affect their ability to carry out a mission, and a similar number did not think that openly gay service members would harm unit cohesion.

President Obama has called for DADT to be abolished in favor of a non-discrimination policy, much as President Truman did in the military of his day regarding race. Defense Secretary Robert Gates is tasked with a year-long study of the issue, but Thursday announced that effective immediately, DADT will be enforced much more selectively. A good intermediate step until Congress receives his report in December.

Back to the Constitution, which I as a teenaged soldier upheld and defended – and continue to do so. The document guarantees equal protection under the law for minorities, including for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans. It does not allow the majority to vote on minority civil rights, although that is often what happens in various referenda and legislation relative to gay and transgender citizens. It is gratifying that today's young military people not only uphold and defend but embody the principles of Constitutional equality in a way previous generations did not. There is real patriotism, not just car-magnet patriotism, and as a result of that perspective, DADT appears close to being scrapped. Good riddance.

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