

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

Does the Gay Ban Undermine the Military’s Reputation?

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This article asks what impact, if any, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy might have on the U.S. military’s reputation. Original empirical research is presented to suggest that the policy harms the military’s reputation in four ways: the policy is inconsistent with public opinion, it prompts many journalists to criticize the armed forces while attracting almost no favorable media coverage, it provides a vehicle for antimilitary protesters to portray military culture as conflicting with widely accepted civilian values, and it is inconsistent with the views of junior enlisted service members.

Keywords: *don’t ask, don’t tell; gays in the military; public opinion*

Like most organizations, the U.S. military devotes considerable efforts toward the maintenance and enhancement of its public standing. Every year, the Pentagon spends hundreds of millions of dollars on promotional and marketing activities including media advertising, parades, air shows, VIP tours, and other initiatives that are intended to manage its reputation with the public. In fiscal year 2003, the military’s budget for advertising alone was \$592 million, and the Army has gone so far as to sponsor its own race car. The Defense Department operates an entire school, the Defense Information School at Ft. Meade, Maryland, to provide “entry level and advanced training in public affairs, journalism, photojournalism, broadcasting, graphics, electronic imaging, broadcast systems maintenance, video production, and visual information management.”¹ Military officials appear to believe, quite rationally, that maintaining a positive reputation is important for recruiting, morale, retention, and a host of other related issues.

While the military’s reputation may be determined by many factors such as whether the country is at war, the extent to which Pentagon leaders communicate the military’s mission effectively to the public, and the quality and quantity of the military’s marketing efforts, some scholars and officials have suggested that the military’s treatment of minorities plays a partial role in influencing the public’s impression of the armed forces. For example, debates about whether or not to

integrate African Americans into the military in the 1940s, and also more recent conversations over the role of women in the military, have featured claims about whether or not integration would alienate the public.²

In addition, some prominent participants in debates concerning gays in the military have argued that allowing gays to serve openly would tarnish the military's reputation. For example, Colonel Ronald Ray, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, wrote,

After President Reagan restored confidence and rebuilt our national defense, the military is now again enjoying the respect and admiration of the American people, but this could quickly change if the military's ban on homosexuals were repealed. Public opinion of the military would decline.³

And Major Melissa Wells-Petry argued that

efforts to accommodate homosexuality within the military 'would conflict with [public] reality to such an extent that for that reason alone [accommodation] would be totally useless'—if not calamitous...the American people always are at issue when the Army formulates military personnel policies. It is the American people, ultimately, who must be persuaded of the wisdom of personnel decisions and have confidence in their efficacy.³

Concerns about the military's standing with the public also have been implied whenever observers discussed proposed policies of integration in terms of social experimentation. When military leaders say that the armed forces cannot be a laboratory for social experimentation, they are implying that the public is not ready for the integration of openly gay and lesbian service members and that the military cannot and should not implement personnel policies that are inconsistent with the norms of civilian society. Former Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig, for example, said, "The military isn't essentially a testing ground....[American society] hasn't reached a consensus [on gay rights]...in the end, the military itself shouldn't be a driver of that, but a follower of the consensus of society."⁴

Despite the importance and prominence of these concerns during various political and academic debates, their validity has not been subject to much scholarly scrutiny, particularly in the case of gays in the military. This article addresses the specific case of "don't ask, don't tell" by asking what impact, if any, the policy might have on the U.S. military's reputation and what impact that repeal of the policy would have. In response, original empirical research is presented to suggest that "don't ask, don't tell" harms the military's reputation in four ways: the policy is inconsistent with public opinion, it does not attract much favorable media coverage and prompts many journalists to criticize the armed forces, it provides a vehicle for antimilitary and antiwar protesters to portray military culture as conflicting with

widely accepted civilian values, and it is inconsistent with the views of junior enlisted service members.

The official justification for the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is the unit-cohesion rationale, which states that military performance would decline if gays and lesbians were permitted to serve openly.⁵ Given this justification, it may seem inappropriate to consider the reputational implications of the policy in this study. If “don’t ask, don’t tell” is necessary for preserving military performance and, in turn, the lives of service members, perhaps the question of whether or not the policy impacts the military’s reputation need not be raised.

While preserving service members’ lives is paramount, several factors explain why a focus on the reputational implications of “don’t ask, don’t tell” is important. In particular, there may be no neat and clean distinction between saving service members’ lives and promoting the military’s positive reputation. Given that a positive reputation is necessary for the pursuit of many mission-critical objectives, such as recruiting, morale, and retention, all of which contribute directly to service members’ safety, it seems important to determine whether various policies and initiatives (including “don’t ask, don’t tell”) contribute to or undermine the military’s standing with the public.⁶ The military itself often studies, assesses, and considers how to portray itself to the public, perhaps for just this reason.⁷ Related to this point, and as noted above, those who defend “don’t ask, don’t tell” have claimed that elimination of the policy would alienate the public. Especially given that several federal court cases are now challenging the constitutionality of the policy and that a legislative effort has been initiated to overturn it, it seems like an opportune moment to ask whether or not repeal would harm the military’s reputation.

The Policy Is Inconsistent with Public Opinion

During the past several years, eight national polls administered by five different polling organizations have asked members of the public whether gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve *openly* in the military (see Table 1). All polls found that that between 58 and 79 percent of the public believes that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly. Even the conservative Fox News polling organization found that 64 percent of the public, including 55 percent of Republicans, believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly.⁸ Gallup found that 91 percent of young adults believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly, and the polls show that solid majorities of people who attend church on a regular basis and people who hold negative attitudes about homosexuality believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly in the military. Regardless of which of these eight polls most accurately captures the public’s attitudes, it seems quite clear that “don’t ask, don’t tell” is inconsistent with public opinion and that, roughly

Table 1
Public Support for Allowing Gays and Lesbians to Serve Openly

Polling Organization	Date of Poll	Percent in Favor	Number of Respondents	Question Wording ^a
Fox News ^a	August 2003	64%	900	Do you favor allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military?
CNN- <i>USA Today</i> -Gallup	December 2003	79%	1,004	Do you think people who are openly gay or homosexual should—or should not—be allowed to serve in the U.S. military?
Annenberg National Election Survey (civilian sample) ^b	September-October 2004	67%	2,436	Should gays and lesbians be allowed to serve openly in the military, or shouldn't they be allowed to serve openly?
CNN- <i>USA Today</i> -Gallup	November 2004	63%	1,015	Do you favor or oppose allowing openly gay men and lesbian women to serve in the military?
University of New Hampshire Survey Center ^a	May 2005	79%	760	Should gays be allowed to serve openly in the military?
Pew Research Center ^a	July 2005	58%	2,000	Should gays and lesbians be allowed to serve openly in the military?
UC Davis (Internet)	Summer/Fall 2005	64%	2,860	Do you favor or oppose having a federal law that allows openly gay men and lesbian women to serve in the military? ^c
UC Davis (phone)	Summer/Fall 2005	71%	2,214	Do you favor or oppose having a federal law that allows openly gay men and lesbian women to serve in the military? ^c
Pew Research Center ^a	March 2006	60%	1,405	Should gays and lesbians be allowed to serve openly in the military?

a. Fox, UNH, and Pew did not report exact question wording. In these cases, wording was inferred from how results were reported.

b. Annenberg also sampled members of the military, as described in the text. The 67-percent figure refers to Annenberg's civilian sample, not its military sample.

c. To test the effect of question wording, UC Davis embedded an experiment within its survey, as half of respondents were asked their opinion about "a federal law that forbids openly gay men and lesbian women from serving in the military." Results were indistinguishable regardless of the question wording.

speaking, approximately two-thirds of the public believes that the policy should be repealed. These figures represent a significant shift from the early 1990s, when President Clinton tried to compel the Pentagon to allow gays and lesbians to serve openly. In 1993, only 40 percent of the public supported allowing “openly gay men and lesbian women” to serve in the military.⁹

Although polling data indicate that the public does not support “don’t ask, don’t tell,” this does not necessarily indicate that the policy has an impact on public attitudes toward the military. It is certainly possible that the public could disapprove of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, but that public approval of the armed forces could be so strong that the policy does not compromise the military’s reputation. One way to ascertain whether attitudes toward “don’t ask, don’t tell” influence public sentiments about the military would be to conduct a survey of the general public. An even more relevant test, however, would entail surveying a group whose members match the profile of a cohort of new military recruits. If the policy undermines attitudes toward the armed forces in a cohort that matches the profile of new military recruits, then this could have implications for military recruiting and should be taken into account in any assessment of “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

To provide such a test, a survey was conducted of a sample designed to match the characteristics of a cohort of new military recruits in terms of age, gender, and partisan affiliation.¹⁰ The sample, in other words, consisted predominantly of conservative, young male adults.¹¹ One limitation of the study, however, was that given the small sample size, it was not possible to match the characteristics of new military recruits in terms of race and religion.¹²

To avoid sending a signal about political correctness or the purpose of the research, only two out of fifteen questions on the survey mentioned homosexuality or “don’t ask, don’t tell,” with the rest focusing on various military and military recruiting issues.¹³ The survey item that is of particular interest for this study is as follows: “The military’s current practice of prohibiting homosexuals from serving openly in the armed forces makes me feel the following way about the military: very proud, somewhat proud, neither proud nor embarrassed, somewhat embarrassed.” Results were as follows: 17.5 percent of respondents said that the policy makes them proud or very proud of the military, 56.0 percent said that the policy has no impact on their impression of the military, and 24.2 percent said that the policy makes them embarrassed of the military (please see Table 2).¹⁴ Even among a sample designed to resemble an incoming cohort of military recruits, preventing gays and lesbians from serving openly appears to make more people feel embarrassed of the military than proud of it.¹⁵

Journalists Criticize the Military

There is almost no positive media coverage of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” A January, 20, 2005 *New York Times* editorial titled, “The Price of Homophobia,” said,

Table 2
“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and Public Impressions of the Military

	Very Proud	Somewhat Proud	Neither Proud nor Embarrassed	Somewhat Embarrassed	Very Embarrassed
Political party					
Republican	19.1%	5.4%	53.2%	8.6%	13.6%
Independent/other	6.6%	4.2%	72.4%	4.1%	12.8%
Democrat	9.5%	—	44.6%	27.9%	18.0%
Gender					
Male	14.7%	3.5%	55.2%	11.0%	15.7%
Female	9.7%	7.1%	67.4%	9.1%	6.6%
Traditional religious denomination ^a					
Yes	15.8%	6.1%	70.6%	5.2%	2.3%
No	13.3%	3.6%	54.1%	12.0%	17.0%
Race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	14.9%	5.7%	56.3%	12.3%	10.8%
Black, non-Hispanic	12.9%	—	69.0%	7.6%	10.5%
Other, non-Hispanic	—	—	52.3%	13.8%	33.9%
Hispanic	13.5%	—	56.4%	7.1%	23.1%
Two-plus races, non-Hispanic	7.1%	11.5%	67.8%	—	13.6%
Total	13.5%	4.0%	56.0%	10.4%	13.8%

Note: This survey was administered to a sample designed to match the profile of a cohort of new military recruits; mostly male, mostly conservative young adults. Hence, findings reported in this table most likely underrepresent overall public disapproval of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” With 95% confidence, the margin of error for this survey is plus or minus 5.8 percent.

a. Traditional religious denomination was set to 1 if the respondent was Mormon, Pentecostal, or Baptist and zero otherwise.

Don't ask, don't tell—just scream in frustration: it turns out that 20 of the Arabic speakers so vitally needed by the nation have been thrown out of the military since 1998 because they were found to be gay. It is hard to imagine a more wrongheaded rebuff of national priorities.

An April 13, 2005 *Washington Post* editorial titled, "Repeal the Gay Ban" said that "the gay ban...is as self-defeating as it is demeaning to people who want to serve their country at a time of great need. It is long past time for it to go." A November 16, 2004 *Los Angeles Times* editorial titled, "Military Ins and Outs" said that the policy should be "torpedoed" because it "drains skilled and willing soldiers even as generals force weary and reluctant ones to stay." An April 25, 2005 *USA Today* editorial titled, "Let Gay Soldiers Serve Openly" said that "the current policy lacks common sense." A December 5, 2003 *Chicago Tribune* editorial titled, "A Self-Inflicted Military Wound" said, "The most appropriate way to mark the anniversary of 'don't ask' is to abolish it and let gays serve in the armed forces, as they do in practically all other developed countries of the world." And a July 1, 2004 *Denver Post* editorial was titled, "Military Policy on Gays is Folly."

Some red-state publications say that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly. For example, a December 13, 2004 *Charleston Gazette* editorial titled, "Military Catching Up" said, "We hope this policy, along with the confused mindset that produced it, will yield as quickly as possible to common sense and the growing American tolerance for gays." Another *Charleston Gazette* editorial, titled "Military Dumb In Any Language," published December 8, 2002, said, "The Pentagon has let prejudice come in the way of the fight against terror." The tiny Winfield, Kansas *Daily Courier* (circulation 6,000) published an April 13, 2005 editorial titled, "Repeal the Gay Ban."

Perhaps, however, conservative or small-town newspapers express support for "don't ask, don't tell." To determine whether this is the case, a comprehensive list was obtained of all 199 newspapers throughout the United States that supported President Bush in the 2004 presidential election, ranging from the *Advertiser* in Lafayette, Louisiana to the *York Daily Record* in York, Pennsylvania.¹⁶ Of these 199 pro-Bush newspapers, 140 were contacted to determine their editorial board's position on "don't ask, don't tell."¹⁷ Of these, the editorial staffs of 36 were willing to conduct a brief telephone survey. Three of the 36 said that "don't ask, don't tell" should be left as is;¹⁸ eight said that the policy should be eliminated; seven didn't know; seventeen had no position; and none said that it should be tightened. One editor refused to answer the question using the choices provided, saying that the paper's official position was that the "issue should be left to the military, not politicians." If this response is considered to be pro-"don't ask, don't tell," then four out of thirty-six conservative newspapers (11.1 percent) were willing to acknowledge supporting the policy.

On one hand, these results should be interpreted with caution. As noted above, only 36 out of 140 editorial staffs (25.7 percent) were willing to grant interviews

about their positions on “don’t ask, don’t tell.” It is possible that many who declined to be interviewed supported the policy but did not wish to acknowledge their support during an interview with academics. On the other hand, even though these results do not prove that conservative members of the media disapprove of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” they do appear to suggest that conservative members of the media tend not to be willing to *acknowledge* supporting the policy.¹⁹ The communications director for a watchdog organization focused exclusively on “don’t ask, don’t tell” estimates that at least 60 editorials opposing the policy have appeared during the past five years, while not a single pro-ban editorial was published during that time.²⁰ While purely anecdotal, this does appear to confirm that very few members of the media, whether conservative or liberal, are willing to acknowledge supporting “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

As long as members of the media either do not support the policy or remain unwilling to acknowledge support, coverage of the issue will be slanted in one direction. It may be unfair for the media to criticize the military over “don’t ask, don’t tell,” given that the policy is inscribed in Congressional statute and that the Pentagon can claim that in discharging gays and lesbians, it is simply following the law. Although this point is certainly valid, it is nonetheless true that the policy has become the occasion for a great deal of criticism and that the criticism likely will not stop as long as the policy remains in effect.

Antimilitary Activists Use the Policy to Rally Opposition

While their numbers are difficult to estimate, some members of the public hold extremely antimilitary and antimilitaristic attitudes. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is a vehicle that allows these individuals to rally opposition against the Pentagon. There is little doubt that, in the current climate, opposition to the war in Iraq provides a much more potent explanation of antimilitary sentiment than the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.²¹ That said, even though “don’t ask, don’t tell” is not the major *cause* of antimilitary sentiment, it provides a convenient rally point that antimilitary activists use to mobilize antimilitary sentiment.

Consider several examples. Alan Dowd, former associate editor of the *American Legion Magazine*, reported that high schools denied military recruiters access to their campuses on 19,228 separate occasions in 1999, the last year for which figures are available, in part as an effort to “challenge the Pentagon’s policy on homosexuals in the military.”²² While Congress has been able to force schools to grant more access to military recruiters via provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act, the case illustrates how “don’t ask, don’t tell” has allowed antimilitary activists to rally opposition against the Pentagon. Indeed, conscientious objectors groups continue to emphasize “don’t ask, don’t tell” as a prominent theme in campaigns designed to discourage high school students from enlisting in the military.²³

A second example is the wave of protests that followed a November 2004 ruling prohibiting Congress from forcing universities to allow military recruiters on campus. After the ruling, which was issued by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit in *FAIR et al. v. Rumsfeld*, faculty members and students throughout the country held protests designed to drive military recruiters and ROTC programs from their campuses, and most of these initiatives were framed in terms of opposition to “don’t ask, don’t tell.”²⁴ The Supreme Court recently overturned the Third Circuit’s ruling in the case, and as a result, the protests have stopped. Although students and faculty are unlikely to resume efforts to banish the military from their universities as long as Congress threatens to cut federal funding from any campuses that do so, the case provides another illustration of how “don’t ask, don’t tell” has served as a rally point for antimilitary activism.

Finally, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted on July 12, 2005 to reject a plan to berth the USS *Iowa* on the city’s waterfront. A nonprofit citizens group would have paid the costs of moving the ship to the city, and analysts estimated that an on-board museum would have generated significant revenues for the city and for local business. While the Supervisors were motivated by a number of factors, including opposition to the Iraq war, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy played a partial role in the 8-to-3 vote. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Supervisors Tom Ammiano and Bevan Dufty, both openly gay, said they would not support bringing the ship to San Francisco because of how the military treats gay people.”²⁵ Many thoughtful observers believe that the Supervisors acted irrationally, and a compromise still may allow the ship to be berthed in San Francisco. Regardless of one’s views about the vote, the case provides yet another illustration of how “don’t ask, don’t tell” has provided cover for antimilitary activists who wish to rally opposition against the Pentagon.

Service Members Oppose the Policy

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” ostensibly is designed to prevent heterosexual service members from having to work with openly gay peers. According to the unit-cohesion rationale that serves as the basis for the policy, heterosexual service members do not like homosexuals and cannot trust them with their lives. As such, allowing gay and lesbian service members to serve openly in the military would prevent units from developing bonds of trust that are necessary for combat. Polls of military attitudes that were taken in the early 1990s appeared to confirm this rationale. Two different 1993 surveys, for example, found that only 16 percent of male service members believed that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve.²⁶ Since that time, however, shifts have occurred in service members’ attitudes about two issues: whether service members are personally comfortable around gays and lesbians and whether they believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly. On both

counts, “don’t ask, don’t tell” now appears to be inconsistent with the attitudes of key segments of the military.²⁷

While statistical data are presented in this section to document the shift in military attitudes, it may be worthwhile to begin with an anecdote. Sergeant Robert Stout was an openly gay combat engineer who served for five years in the U.S. Army, including ten months in Iraq. During a May 2004 patrol southeast of Samarra, Sergeant Stout suffered wounds to his face, torso, and arms when a rocket-propelled grenade hit his Humvee. He was awarded a Purple Heart and separated from the Army in 2005. During June 2005 testimony in front of an audience of staff members from the U.S. Senate, Stout reported that he as well as several other gay soldiers in his unit had revealed their sexual orientation to the members of the unit and that they had not encountered problems. The only gay soldiers who had been subject to harassment, Stout, said, were those who had not acknowledged their homosexuality candidly. Heterosexual service members were troubled, in other words, not that some of their peers were gay but that some were not honest about their identity. While purely anecdotal, this story seems consistent with other data.²⁸

With respect to the two attitudes mentioned above, whether service members feel comfortable around gays and lesbians and whether they believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly, the data reveal important shifts. A March 2000 study by Major John W. Bicknell of the Naval Postgraduate School found that between 1994 and 1999, the percentage of U.S. Navy officers who “feel uncomfortable in the presence of homosexuals” decreased from 57.8 percent to 36.4 percent.²⁹ General Wesley Clark confirmed in 2003 that the “temperature of the issue has changed over the decade. People were much more irate about this issue in the early ’90s than I found in the late ’90s, for whatever reason, younger people coming in [to the military]. It just didn’t seem to be the same emotional hot button issue by ’98, ’99, that it had been in ’92, ’93.”³⁰ The data suggest that the majority of service members feel comfortable around gays and lesbians and that, for most of those who do not feel comfortable, the issue has become less emotionally intense in recent years.

As for policy preferences, data presented above indicated that in the early 1990s, only a small minority of male service members favored allowing gays to serve openly. An October 2004 poll by the Annenberg National Election Survey provides perhaps the best available window into service members’ current thinking.³¹ According to Annenberg, 42 percent of service members believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly. Somewhat surprising is that a slim *majority* of 50 percent of junior enlisted service members (versus 43 percent opposed) believes that gays and lesbians should serve openly. (Officers and NCOs, by contrast, remain opposed.) This finding is potentially significant not only because it represents a shift from the 1993 polls but also because junior enlisted service members are those individuals whose supposed inability to develop bonds of trust with openly gay peers is the stated rationale for “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Unlike many other polls of military attitudes, Annenberg obtained a sample that was roughly representative of the entire military by using a clever scientific procedure in which phone numbers were “randomly selected by a computer from a complete list of thousands of active residential exchanges across the country.”³² Of the many thousands of individuals contacted by Annenberg, 655 respondents indicated that they or a household member had served in the military between February 2004 and October 2004. The responses from those military households were isolated from civilian households and analyzed separately to generate the findings of the poll. For those service members deployed abroad or unavailable to complete the survey, a household family member was queried as a proxy.

One potential bias of this methodology is that if a family member holds views that are inconsistent with those of the service member, then polling results may not reflect the findings of a purely random approach. That said, some research demonstrates a degree of political similarity among husbands and wives.³³ In addition, considering that service members are deployed throughout the world in so many different locales, Annenberg's methodology appears to come much closer to approximating a representative, randomly drawn sample than other nonrandom methods for surveying military opinion. For example, a December 2003 *Military Times* poll of 933 active-duty subscribers found that only 24.6 percent of respondents believed that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly, with 63.2 percent opposing and 12.2 percent expressing no opinion.³⁴ However, unlike the overall military, the pool of *Military Times* survey respondents was split about evenly between officers and enlisted personnel and included only nine individuals ranked E-3 or lower and only 41 individuals aged 24 or younger. As both the Annenberg and *Military Times* data show, support for allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly decreases with rank, and both the *Military Times* and Gallup data show that support decreases with age. Hence, the *Military Times* results probably underestimated overall military support for integration.

Confirmation of the plausibility of Annenberg's findings comes from a trip report written after a March 2004 visit to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where the author delivered lectures on “don't ask, don't tell.” According to the report, which was written seven months *before* the release of the Annenberg data,

My very rough estimate is that of the approximately 70 cadets and professors who attended my lectures and presentations, just under half (roughly 45 percent) appeared to agree that the ban is hurting the military and should be eliminated. Just under half (about 45 percent) appeared to have a mild preference for retaining the ban, but also believed that despite some problems during the transition period, the ban could be lifted without major, enduring complications. A very small minority (about 5 percent) felt strenuously that the ban should be retained for moral reasons but also that if the law changes, the military will be able to switch to a policy of inclusion without major

problems. An equally small minority (about 5 percent) felt strenuously that the ban should be retained for moral reasons, and that its elimination would be disastrous.

While purely anecdotal and impressionistic, it is worth mentioning that these estimates seem consistent with the Annenberg findings as well as General Clark's observation that even among those who oppose allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly, the level of emotional intensity surrounding this issue has declined. In 2005, a West Point cadet won the award for best senior honors thesis in his department for a paper arguing that "don't ask, don't tell" is inconsistent with the military's emphasis on fairness and equal treatment.³⁵

A final, relevant point about military opinion is that according to the Naval Postgraduate School poll by Major John Bicknell presented above, although a majority of service members feel comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians, most have the impression that others are not comfortable. That is, the majority identify themselves as comfortable around gays and lesbians but believe that their peers do not feel the same way. Such a belief cannot be accurate, because a majority of service members cannot be *both* comfortable *and* more comfortable than their peers. This finding seems to indicate that there is a cultural-organizational pressure within the armed forces to appear as though one is either uncomfortable or intolerant of homosexuality, but that underneath the performance, service members are in fact comfortable with their gay peers. Despite the pressure to pretend to be uncomfortable, the data show that (1) most service members are comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians, (2) a slim but growing majority of junior enlisted service members believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly, (3) most of those who remain opposed to integration do not feel strongly about the issue, and (4) most service members prefer their gay peers to acknowledge their sexual orientation candidly rather than attempting to conceal the information.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the Military’s Reputation

Most Americans hold very favorable views of the armed forces. Even in the immediate aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal, for example, a June 2004 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 85 percent of the public held favorable or very favorable impressions of the military.³⁶ As noted at the beginning of this paper, many factors contribute to public attitudes toward the military, and it is certainly not the case that "don't ask, don't tell" has devastated the military's reputation. Recall, for example, that 56 percent of respondents to the survey conducted for this study indicated that "don't ask, don't tell" does not impact their feelings about the military (see Table 1). That said, the data presented in this article do suggest that "don't ask, don't tell" appears to harm the military's reputation in four ways. The policy is inconsistent with public opinion; it prompts many journalists to criticize the armed forces

while attracting almost no favorable media coverage, it provides a vehicle for anti-military protesters to portray military culture as conflicting with widely accepted civilian values, and it is inconsistent with the views of junior enlisted service members.

Given the negative implications of “don’t ask, don’t tell” for the military’s reputation, and despite the fact that the public’s overall impression of the armed forces remains very favorable, those who care about preserving and enhancing the military’s standing with the public should be concerned about the impact of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Officials and politicians should acknowledge that contrary to the claims of some defenders of the policy, allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would not harm the military’s reputation. Quite to the contrary, integration would improve the public’s impression of the armed forces, even among conservatives.

Many leading academic experts on unit cohesion such as David and Mady Segal, Robert MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier, and others have suggested that “don’t ask, don’t tell” does not enhance military readiness.³⁷ While these experts are scholars and not military officers, their perspectives are based on extensive research and understanding. To the extent that these scholars are correct and that “don’t ask, don’t tell” does not promote readiness, then perhaps it would make sense for Congress and the Pentagon to consider whether military policy should, as Melissa Wells-Petry has argued, reflect national consensus.³⁸

Notes

1. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Recruiting, DoD Needs to Establish Objectives and Measures to Better Evaluate Advertising's Effectiveness*, Report to the Senate and House Committees on Armed Services (Washington, DC: GAO, September 2003, GAO-03-1005), 2.

2. David Ari Bianco, “Echoes of Prejudice: The Debates Over Race and Sexuality in the Armed Forces,” in *Gay Rights, Military Wrongs*, ed. Craig A. Rimmerman (New York: Garland, 1996), 47-52; Brian Mitchell, *Weak Link: The Feminization of the American Military* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1989). For public opinion of the military in general, see David L. Leal, “American Public Opinion toward the Military: Differences by Race, Gender, and Class?” *Armed Forces and Society* 32, 1 (2005), 123-138.

3. Ronald Ray, *Military Necessity & Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1993), 68-9; Melissa Wells-Petry, *Exclusion: Homosexuals and the Right to Serve* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1993), 68-69.

4. Robert Maginnis, “Homosexuals in the Military, 2001 Update,” Family Research Council, <http://www.frc.org/get/mp01c1.cfm> (site now discontinued).

5. *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004*, U.S. Code vol. 10, sec. 654.

6. Wells-Petry, *Exclusion: Homosexuals*, 173.

7. For one of numerous examples, see Wayne Hintze, *Recognition of Military Advertising Slogans among American Youth* (Arlington, VA: Defense Manpower Data Center, 1999).

8. Dana Blanton, “Majority Opposes Same-Sex Marriage,” August 26, 2003, Fox News.

9. See David Burrelli and Charles Dale, *Homosexuals and U.S. Military Policy: Current Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 2006), 6, citing a July 1993 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* Poll.

10. The survey was administered by Knowledge Networks, a survey research firm that recruited and now maintains an “online research panel that is representative of the entire U.S. population.” Participants for the national panel were identified “by a random selection of telephone numbers. Persons in selected households were then invited by telephone to participate in the Web-enabled panel.” For this particular study, Knowledge Networks drew a random sample of 557 individuals from its pool of active panel members, all of whom had been prescreened to meet the age criterion (18 to 24) reflective of new military recruits and then sent an e-mail to each selected individual inviting them to fill out a Web-based questionnaire. Of the 557 individuals invited to participate in the study, 424 agreed to do so, for a participation rate of 76 percent. The sample of 424 was then narrowed to 282 so as to meet quotas based on gender and partisan identification that were designed to match benchmarks for incoming military recruits, and those 282 individuals then completed the Web-based survey, which was fielded between August 5, 2005 and August 25, 2005. Extensive information about Knowledge Networks’ survey methodology is posted at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html>.

11. Respondents to the survey were 81.6 percent male and 18.4 percent female. In the military, the 2002 Population Representation of Active Accessions reported that 82.7 percent of new military recruits are male and 17.3 percent are female. See *Population Representation in the Military Services, Fiscal Year 2002*. One hundred percent of survey respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24, roughly evenly divided across each year. In the military, the 2002 Population Representation of Active Accessions reported that 91.6 percent of new military recruits are between the ages of 18 and 24. In terms of partisan identification, respondents to the survey were 57.1 percent Republican, 24.8 independent or undecided, and 18.1 percent Democrat. In the military, an October 2004 poll by the Annenberg National Election Survey revealed that 47 percent of service members identify as Republicans, 26 percent identify as independents, and 15 percent identify as Democrats. Annenberg reported that junior enlisted service members are only slightly more likely to lean Democratic than members of the overall military sample. See *NAES 04, National Annenberg Election Survey*, http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_military-data_10-15_report.pdf. In an important, forthcoming study, Jason Dempsey and Robert Shapiro confirm that of those junior enlisted personnel who identify with a political party, Democrats outnumber Republicans by three to two. However, Dempsey and Shapiro find that most junior enlisted personnel do not identify with either party. The analysis is preliminary as the authors continue to analyze their data at the time of the writing of this article, but their findings could have a major impact on the literature on partisanship in the military. See Jason Dempsey and Robert Shapiro, “Political Partisanship in the Army” (paper prepared for the 2006 Annual Conference of the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers, Montreal, May 18-21).

12. Respondents to the survey were 80.1 percent white, 5.3 percent African American, 7.4 percent Hispanic, and 7.1 percent other, while in the military, 67 percent of service members are white, 15.7 percent are African American, 11.3 percent are Hispanic, and 6 percent are other. In terms of religion, 19.5 percent of the survey’s sample was Baptist, Pentecostal, or Mormon, but the Armed Forces Chaplains Board reports that in the military, 39.1 percent are from these denominations. See Don Malin, “Military Chaplains and Religious Pluralism,” http://www.wfial.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=artGeneral.article_6 (accessed on December 31, 2002). As Table 2 indicates, the underrepresentation of African Americans in the sample probably lowered the total percentage who said they were embarrassed by the policy, while the underrepresentation of members of traditional religious affiliations probably inflated it. Matching the sample to a cohort of new military recruits in terms of race and religion (in addition to gender, partisan identification, and age) would have required adding significantly more respondents to the pool, and financial resources were not available for such an expansion. Data were not collected on the church attendance of respondents, so it is not possible to determine whether results confirm Gallup’s finding that the majority of regular church attendees believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly.

13. Dr. Jonathan Cowden designed the survey instrument with great care, and his efforts are very much appreciated.

14. With 95 percent confidence, the margin of error for this survey is plus or minus 5.8 percent.

15. While the tabular data are only suggestive and a regression analysis would be illuminating, data were not collected for several critical factors that have been demonstrated to be correlated with attitudes toward policies concerning gays and lesbians. For example, no data were collected as to whether or not the respondent has ever known a gay person. As a result, the development of a fully specified model is not possible. See Greg Herek and John Capitanio, "'Some of My Best Friends': Intergroup Contact, Concealable Stigma, and Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 4 (1996), 412-24.

16. The list appears to be the most comprehensive tally available of media endorsements in the 2004 election. See "Presidential Endorsements 2004," <http://toys.jacobian.org/endorsements/full.html>. A total of 212 newspapers endorsed John Kerry.

17. The papers were contacted in alphabetical order. Raquel Busani worked tirelessly on this project, and her efforts are much appreciated.

18. The three were the *Amarillo Globe News* (Amarillo, TX); the *Daily News* (Bowling, KY); and the *Daily News-Record* (Harrisonburg, VA).

19. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

20. Personal communication with Steve Ralls, director of communications, Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, September 16, 2005.

21. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

22. "Easier Access for Military Recruiters," *Tampa Tribune*, July 6, 2000; Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, "Military Recruiting Shortfalls Seen as Self Inflicted" (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 2001).

23. See, for example, the Web pages of the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, <http://www.objector.org/jrotc/discriminates.html>, and the American Friends Service Committee, in particular "Surviving Militarism, Racism, and Repression," <http://www.afsc.org/lgbt/YM/queer-youth-and-militarism.pdf>.

24. For example, the Portland State University student newspaper ran the following headline: "Student Senate May Ban Recruiters: Leaders Cite Opposition to Iraq War and Discrimination Against Gays as Basis for Potential Removal" (*Vanguard*, August 6, 2005).

25. Cecilia M. Vega, "Supes Torpedo Efforts to Land Old Battleship," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 13, 2005, B4. Also see Dean Murphy, "Battle of San Francisco: New Campaign for the Iowa," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2005.

26. Melissa Healy, "The Times Poll: 74% of Military Enlistees Oppose Lifting Gay Ban," *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1993, A1; Laura L. Miller, "Fighting for a Just Cause: Soldiers' Views on Gays in the Military," in *Gays and Lesbians in the Military: Issues, Concerns and Contrasts*, eds. Wilbur J. Scott and Sandra Carson Stanley (New York: Aldine, 1994), 70.

27. Surveying military attitudes is often an inexact science because of the difficulty of obtaining a truly random sample of members of the armed forces. This is particularly true on issues for which the Pentagon declines to provide official access to survey researchers. Hence, the statistical data presented in this section must be interpreted with caution. At best, the scholar may be able to form preliminary conclusions on the basis of comparing various survey results as well as expert testimony.

28. Herek and Capitanio, for example, find that heterosexuals who learn of an individual's homosexuality via direct disclosure may develop more favorable attitudes about gays and lesbians than those who receive the information indirectly, through a third party. In general, research has shown that disclosing personal information often increases positive feelings toward the person who has revealed the information. See *Self Disclosure: Theory, Research, and Therapy*, eds. Valerian Derlega and John Berg (New York: Plenum, 1987), as cited by Herek and Capitanio, 421. Also see the April 2005 *Sports Illustrated* poll, which revealed that 78 percent of respondents agree that, "It is OK for gay athletes to participate in sports, even if they are open about their sexuality." Only 40 percent agreed that, "It's OK for homosexuals to participate in sports provided they are not open about their sexuality." "Homosexuality and Sports,"

Sports Illustrated, April 12, 2005. (The *Sports Illustrated* poll was conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, Inc., which interviewed 979 adults selected from the general population from March 18-21, 2005. The margin of error for the poll was \pm 3.1 percent.)

29. John W. Bicknell, Jr., "Study of Naval Officers' Attitudes Toward Homosexuals in the Military" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, March 2000).

30. NBC *Meet the Press* transcript, June 15, 2003.

31. See *NAES 04, National Annenberg Election Survey*, http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_2military-data_10-16_pr.pdf.

32. For a description of Annenberg's sampling strategy and methodology, see *NAES 04, National Annenberg Election Survey* at http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_military-data_10-15_report.pdf.

33. M. Kent Jennings and Laura Stoker, *Political Similarity and Influence Among Husbands and Wives* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of Governmental Studies, Working Paper 2001-14, 2001).

34. See the *Military Times* Poll 2003 at http://www.militarycity.com/polls/2003_chart2.php#2. Readers interested in the *Military Times* raw data may contact the author.

35. Cadet Alexander H. Raggio, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Be: A Philosophical Analysis of the Gay Ban in the U.S. Military," Department of English, U.S. Military Academy at West Point, April, 2005.

36. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Field Poll, June 17, 2004.

37. Elizabeth Kier, "Homosexuals in the U.S. Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness," *International Security* 23, 2 (1998), 5-39.

38. Wells-Petry, *Exclusion: Homosexuals*, 172-173.

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