



MILITARY TIMES POLL IS FLAWED

Finding That Troops Won't Serve With Gays Is Methodologically Suspect

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In December 2008, a *Military Times* poll found that 58% of U.S. troops do not want gays and lesbians to serve openly in the armed forces. Subsequently, some experts have concluded that the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy should not be repealed, because repeal would be inconsistent with the preferences of the troops, 10% of whom say they would consider leaving the armed forces if the ban were lifted.¹ Despite the magnitude of the 58% finding, however, scholarly data indicate clearly that allowing open gay service would not undermine the military and would not lead to a decrease in retention or enlistment. Several factors explain why:

To begin, there is a significant gap between attitudes and behavior—what people believe, and how they behave. In the 1970s, far more than ten percent of officers said they would leave the service if women were admitted to West Point. Their survey responses reflected a widespread cultural resistance to women in the military. But when integration became a reality, there was no mass exodus; the opinions turned out to be just opinions.² When both Canada and Britain debated lifting their bans on gay service in the 1980s and 1990s, major poll results revealed even fiercer opposition. In a 1985 survey of 6,500 male soldiers, the Canadian Department of National Defence found that 62 percent of male service members would refuse to share showers, undress, or sleep in the same room as a gay soldier, and that 45 percent would refuse to work with gays.³ A 1996 survey of 13,500 British service members reported that more than two-thirds of male respondents would not willingly serve in the military if gays and lesbians were allowed to serve. Yet when Canada and Britain subsequently lifted their gay bans, nothing of the kind transpired. At most two or three people resigned citing the policy changes (and reports suggested these people were planning to leave anyway).⁴ Several internal and independent assessments in both countries found that the change was good for the armed forces and that none of the dire predictions of doom came true.⁵

A pioneering study from the 1930s illustrates the gap between stated attitudes and actual behavior. During that era, a white man named R. T. Lapiere traveled with two Chinese people throughout America. Lapiere contacted hundreds of hotels and restaurants and told them he was traveling with Chinese companions and asked if they would mind accommodating and serving them. When trying to make reservations, they were uniformly told they would be refused service. But when they showed up anyway, all but one served them.⁶ The study shows the yawning gulf between attitudes and behavior.

In any event, the trickle of people who might leave if the gay ban is lifted needs to be balanced against the number who might join or remain longer if that change is made, a category the *Military Times* survey curiously did not include. According to Dr. Gary Gates at the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, lifting the ban could attract over 40,000 new recruits and could result in 3,000 to 4,000 members remaining in their positions each year.⁷

Military Times acknowledges that its survey is not based on a random sample of military personnel. What is not explained, however, is how the non-random sampling may bias responses. Dr. Gates as well as Palm researchers looked closely at the *Times*’s raw data and found that in at least two important areas the *Military Times* pool of respondents looks different from the actual military: gender and partisan identification. For example, among the *Times*’s 1,947 active-duty respondents, only 10 percent were women, compared to 15 percent of the actual military; among enlisted personnel, only 22.6 percent of the *Times*’s respondents were independents, compared to 66 percent of enlisted personnel in the Army.

Why does this matter? Because political independents and women are more likely to favor repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” than the mostly Republican, male respondents who made up the bulk of the *Times*’s pool. When Dr. Gates adjusted the data to take into account these discrepancies, he found that the percentage who opposes repeal dwindles from 58 to barely half, far from an overwhelming majority. This also happens to be roughly what other polls which used a more scientifically valid sampling strategy found, including polls by Annenberg and Zogby.⁸ Compare this to fifteen years ago when the current “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was being formulated. At that time, 74% of enlistees opposed letting gays serve, and a whopping 97% of generals and admirals, according to one

survey, opposed lifting the ban.

Of course, polling the troops about their position on “don’t ask, don’t tell” is largely beside the point, because the key question is not how service members feel about the policy, but whether they are able to interact effectively with gay peers. And here the data show the opposite of what opponents of repeal argue. Between 1992 and 1998, the percentage of U.S. army men who “strongly oppose” gays serving in uniform dropped nearly in half, from 67% to 37%.⁹ Since then, tolerance of homosexuality within the military has only grown. A 2006 Zogby poll found that 72% of Iraq and Afghanistan vets are “personally comfortable” around gays, a fact which undermines the oft-heard assertion that letting gays serve openly would heighten tension and erode morale. In addition, among those 20% who said they are uncomfortable working with gays, only 5% said that they are “very uncomfortable.” The other 15% were “somewhat uncomfortable.” The vast majority of troops do not feel strongly about the issue. Indeed roughly a quarter said they knew someone in their unit was gay, and 45% said they suspected as much; of those who knew of gays in their unit, most said the information was widely known by others.¹⁰ In other words, gays already serve openly throughout the U.S. military, and this reality does not undermine morale or harm recruitment or retention, much less “destroy” the force.

Perhaps most importantly, it is troubling to see those who claim to care about national security argue that we should base military personnel policy exclusively on opinion polls. The same survey that asked about gays in the military also found that only 42% supported the war in Iraq, leaving 58% opposed, neutral, or not answering—the very same percentage who say they oppose openly gay service. Should the U.S. military decide when to invade a country based on whether the troops feel it’s a good idea? That would be absurd, but when it comes to gays, this is just what opponents of repeal argue.

¹ Brendan McGarry, “Troops Oppose Repeal of ‘Don’t Ask,” *Military Times*, December 29, 2008, available at http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2008/12/122908_military_poll_DADT/.

² David Segal quoted in Brendan McGarry, “Troops Oppose Repeal of ‘Don’t Ask,” *Military Times*, December 29, 2008.

³ R.A. Zuliani, “Canadian Forces Survey on Homosexual Issues,” Charter Task Force, Department of National Defence, Ottawa, 1986.

⁴ “Report of the Homosexual Policy Assessment Team,” United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, February 1996; Robert Shrimley, “Forces Set for Legal Fight on Gay Ban,” *The Daily Telegraph* (London), March 5, 1996.

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“A Review of the Armed Forces Policy on Homosexuality,” United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, October 31, 2000; “Briefing Note for Director of Public Policy,” Canadian Forces, Ottawa, August 25, 1995.

⁶ R. T. Lapiere, “Attitudes Versus Actions,” *Social Forces* 13, 1934, 230-237.

⁷ Gary Gates, Williams Institute Military Issues Studies, available at <http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/publications/Policy-Military-index.html>.

⁸ *The National Annenberg Election Survey*, 2004, available at http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_2military-data_10-16_pr.pdf; Zogby International, *Opinions of Military Personnel on Sexual Minorities in the Military*, December 1, 2006.

⁹ Melissa Healy, “The Times Poll: 74% of Military Enlistees Oppose Lifting Gay Ban,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1993; Laura L. Miller, “Fighting for a Just Cause: Soldiers’ Attitudes on Gays in the Military,” in Wilbur J. Scott and Sandra Carson Stanley, eds., *Gays and Lesbians in the Military* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994), 69-85; Elizabeth Kier, “Rights and Fights: Sexual Orientation and Military Effectiveness,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 2000), 194-201.

¹⁰ Zogby International, *Opinions of Military Personnel on Sexual Minorities in the Military*, December 1, 2006.