

By Johnny Symons



DISCUSSION GUIDE

As wars rage in the Middle East, the U.S. military is eager for more recruits—unless you happen to be openly gay. ASK NOT explores the tangled political battles that led to the infamous “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and reveals the personal stories of gay Americans who serve in combat under a veil of secrecy.

FROM THE FILMMAKER

One of my earliest childhood memories is marching in a protest against the Vietnam War. Though my grandfathers both served in WWII, my parents became 1960's anti-war activists. I still have a letter I wrote when I was four years old: "Dear Mr. Nixon. Please end the war."

As an adult, I was no more inclined to embrace the military than I had been as a child. But after I realized I was gay, I witnessed the pervasiveness of homophobia and became actively involved in fighting for the same values that the military strives to uphold – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As a cultural warrior, I found that documentary film, with its power to counter misinformation by telling real stories of gay lives, became my weapon of choice.

Stories of injustice are prevalent, but the saga of "don't ask, don't tell" struck me as a particularly blatant example of institutionalized discrimination. The policy is predicated on the idea that, regardless of the qualifications of the servicemember, being openly gay is so problematic that it will rip the armed forces apart; or, in military language, "destroy unit cohesion." The military will admit gays and lesbians, and send them into combat, but only on the condition that they hide an essential part of their identities. Those gays and lesbians who do serve, risk expulsion. Some are subject to months of interrogation and investigation, while others are kicked out of their units literally overnight. Many lose years' worth of educational and retirement benefits.

Creating ASK NOT became a means of finding answers to persistent questions about this hypocritical policy – not just those I asked myself as a gay man concerned about equal rights, but those that interested me as an American citizen. What are the costs of spending our national tax dollars to train doctors, intelligence experts and Arabic linguists, only to discharge these highly qualified men and women because they are gay or lesbian? Does a military unit function more effectively when its members can speak openly about who they are, or when some are forced to lie? And what is the experience of taking on one of the most stressful jobs in the nation, and doing it with the added burden of being forced to conceal your sexual identity?

Heterosexuals in combat positions enjoy open communication with their families and psychological support networks for their spouses, but gay troops find their communication and their relationships undermined. Sadly, gay and lesbian soldiers often grow accustomed to the bitter realities of serving under "don't ask, don't tell." They leave for war without their partners allowed on base to say goodbye. They wake each day wondering not just whether they will be killed, but additionally, whether they will be outed, discharged and excommunicated from the military and their fellow soldiers. They know that if death does come on the battlefield, military officials will not provide their partners with heartfelt condolences and a lifetime benefits package; instead, the partners will receive nothing, and will likely read about the deaths in the newspaper.

As I made ASK NOT, I gained an appreciation for the familial, communal and personal reasons why people, gay and straight, choose to enlist. The bonds of comradeship that develop between unit members can be incredibly strong, and they can easily withstand and transcend differences in sexual orientation. Creating this film has taught me that, despite my peacenik origins, being anti-war and being anti-military are not one and the same. Even as the painful toll of war is evident, most Americans can agree that we need a military, and that we'd like it to be both nondiscriminatory and maximally effective.

My hope is that ASK NOT will deepen awareness, cultivate lively debate and mobilize more public action against this archaic policy. With an estimated 65,000¹ LGBT people currently in the military, it is essential that, as Americans, we ask ourselves if "don't ask, don't tell" serves our collective interests and values: from national security to human rights, from economic stability to upholding the principles of the Constitution. Until the government allows gays, lesbians and bisexuals to serve the country openly, the very notion of American citizenship is threatened, just as it would be if any other group were singled out, excluded and punished on the basis of who they are, not what they do. Our military fights for those types of democratic rights in other nations every day. We should demand no less at home.

- Johnny Symons, Filmmaker



¹ <http://www.sldn.org/pages/research-and-polls>

THE FILM

Homosexuality is the last vestige of official discrimination in the armed forces of the United States. The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”—or DADT—policy legislated by Congress in 1993 was intended to protect gay people by letting them serve in the military without being subject to questions about their sexual orientation. The law was also meant to prohibit the harassment of individuals suspected of being gay and eliminate the possibility of putting them at risk of ending their military careers. ASK NOT looks at the fifteen-year history of the DADT policy and examines its ramifications both for gay and lesbian individuals and for the military itself.

Soon after Bill Clinton took office in 1993, his campaign pledge to lift the ban on homosexuals serving openly in the U.S. armed forces became a heated issue, with military leaders, Christian fundamentalists, and conservative members of Congress lining up in vehement opposition. Charles Moskos, a sociologist at Northwestern University, proposed DADT as a compromise, in effect establishing a double standard within the military. Homosexuals could serve as long as they were not open about their sexual orientation and did not engage in homosexual behavior. Silence and celibacy became the rule. In spite of DADT, harassment and pursuit of gays in the military has continued. Since the law’s implementation, over 12,000¹ personnel have been discharged after they were “outed”, including linguists and others whose skills are critical in the war on terror.

ASK NOT presents two initiatives aimed at calling attention to the unfairness of DADT and educating the public about what is increasingly considered a failed military policy. The Call to Duty tour, conducted in 2006, engaged gay former military personnel in speaking to communities across the country about the facts of their own service and presenting logical arguments against the ban on openly gay service members. As Jarrod Chlapowski, one of the Tour’s leaders explains, they were attacking the problem at its source, educating the public about misperceptions of homosexuals. The Right to Serve Campaign targeted military recruitment centers. Individuals attempted to enlist, openly declaring their homosexuality; when they were refused enlistment, the would-be recruits and supporters held sit-ins and were arrested for trespassing. Comparing these nonviolent actions to the lunch counter sit-ins of the civil rights era, Jacob Reitan, a co-director of Right to Serve, declares that getting arrested strengthened their message.

¹ <http://www.sldn.org/pages/about-dadt>

Woven throughout the film are the thoughts and experiences of “Perry”, a homosexual army enlistee whose identity is obscured because he is in active service in Iraq. He describes the stress of always having to conceal his sexual orientation and the need for every soldier serving in combat to control his feelings. Perry feels that in turning off his emotions, he has turned off his sexuality. His focus is survival, not his homosexual identity.

Now, more than fifteen years after “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was passed, scores of retired and active military officers support doing away with the policy. The change of attitude within the military reflects to a lesser degree the feelings of the great majority of the public that now favors allowing gays to serve openly. As attitudes change, expectations that the DADT policy will be repealed are on the rise. But, as Rear Admiral Alan Steinman, advisor to the Call to Duty Tour points out, only an act of Congress can repeal the law and replace it with a policy of recruitment into the armed forces based on merit and ability, as so many countries around the world have already done.



INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN ASK NOT

Alex Nicholson – former Private, U.S. Army & representative, Call to Duty Tour

Jarrod Chlapowski – former Specialist, U.S. Army & representative, Call to Duty Tour

Alan Steinman – Rear Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard (Ret.) – advisor, Call to Duty Tour

Fred Fox, former Staff Sergeant, U.S. Army Infantry

“Perry” – soldier, U.S. Army, deployed to Iraq

David Mixner – civil rights activist

Aaron Belkin – Associate Professor of Political Science, University of California-Santa Barbara

Robert Maginnis – Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army (Ret.)

Vince Patton – Master Chief Petty Officer, U.S. Coast Guard (Ret.) – military research analyst

Charles Moskos – Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Northwestern University – coined “don’t ask, don’t tell”

Haven Herrin – Co-director, Right to Serve Campaign

Jacob Reitan – Co-director, Right to Serve Campaign

Rhonda Davis – former Petty Officer, U.S. Navy

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Overview

Before 1993

The policy of the U.S. military was that homosexuality is incompatible with military service. Individuals who signed up for military service were asked specifically about their sexual orientation; admitted homosexuals were not allowed to serve. Those in the military who were suspected of being gay were questioned, prosecuted and often dishonorably discharged, making them ineligible for military retirement benefits.

Starting in 1993

The Clinton Administration and Congress reached a compromise, and the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue, Don’t Harass” policy became law.

Cost of the policy

• *Fiscal cost* – Estimates vary considerably. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) put the cost of the policy during the ten years from 1995-2005 at \$191 million. Other estimates put the price tag at \$35 million a year. A blue ribbon panel of experts estimates the cost of DADT, so far, to be more than \$363 million. Among the costs included in these estimates are recruitment, training, and transportation of military personnel who are subsequently discharged when their sexual orientation was discovered.¹

• *Loss of troop strength* – About 12,500 service members have been expelled since 1993, and each year, 4,000 don’t re-enlist because they can’t be honest about their sexual orientation.²

1 http://online.logcabin.org/issues/logcabin/gays_in_the_military_overview.html
<http://www.sldn.org/pages/congress-reports>
http://www.servicemembersunited.org/docs/Doc_06_Blue_Ribbon_Commission_Report_Financial_Analysis.pdf

• *Loss of skills* – Hundreds of service members in intelligence-related occupations and other critical operations, as well as translators fluent in foreign languages critical to the War on Terrorism, such as Arabic, Farsi, and Korean, have been discharged because of their sexual orientation.

Ongoing

- Harassment continues, in the form of derogatory remarks, offensive speech, jokes, and physical assaults.
- Women are subjected to an additional level of harassment because of so-called “lesbian baiting”, which can jeopardize a woman’s military service regardless of her sexual orientation. A woman can be accused of being lesbian in retaliation for a poor performance review of a man under her command; when she spurns a man’s sexual advances; or when she accuses a man of sexual harassment. While women make up 14% of Army personnel, 46% of those discharged under DADT in 2007 were women. In the Air Force 20% of personnel are women, but 49% of its DADT discharges in 2007 were women.³

Getting it straight about gays

Numerous beliefs about homosexuality persist, perpetuating stereotypes, and hence, discrimination against gay people. Among those “myths” are the following:

Myth: *Homosexuality is a choice, not an in-born trait.*

Fact: Studies show that sexual orientation is generally determined between conception and the first years of life. People might be able to change their behavior but not their underlying orientation.

Myth: *Homosexuals perform perverse sexual acts.*

Fact: No single sex act can be said to be exclusively homosexual. While the main sexual techniques of homosexuals and heterosexuals may differ, both types of couples engage in the same variety of sexual practices.

Myth: *Homosexuals are child molesters.*

Fact: The vast majority of child molesters are heterosexual men.

Myth: *Homosexuals are promiscuous.*

Fact: Some are and some aren’t. Homosexuals and heterosexuals are similar in their levels of sexual activity.

Myth: *Homosexuals can be identified by their mannerisms and physical characteristics; men who act effeminate and women who appear masculine must be gay.*

Fact: These stereotypes refer to gender roles, not sexual orientation. A large percentage of gay people don’t fit these stereotypes, and a small proportion of heterosexuals do match them. Homosexuality is defined by a preference for a same-sex sexual partner, not by the exhibition of masculine or feminine behavior.

See Resources for more myths and facts about homosexuality.

2 <http://www.sldn.org/page/-/Website/Fact%20Sheets/DADT%20Fact%20Sheets/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Discharges%201994-1996.pdf>
http://www.servicemembersunited.org/docs/Doc_09_Williams_Institute_on_Retention.pdf

3 <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3675>
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/23/washington/23pentagon.html>



Other countries' policies

Countries that no longer ban military service by openly gay people:

Australia	Italy	Austria	Lithuania
Belgium	Luxembourg	Canada	Netherlands
Czech Republic	New Zealand	Denmark	Norway
The Philippines	Estonia	Slovenia	Finland
South Africa	France**	Spain	Germany
Sweden	Ireland	Switzerland	Israel*
United Kingdom**			

Of the 26 countries that participate militarily in NATO, more than 20 permit open lesbians, gays, or bisexuals to serve.

* Israel is the only country in the Middle East that openly allows gays and lesbians to serve in the military.

**Of the five permanent members of the U.N Security Council, only France and the United Kingdom allow openly gay people to serve in the military. China bans gays and lesbians outright; Russia excludes gays and lesbians during peacetime but allows some gay men to serve in wartime; and the United States technically permits gays and lesbians to serve, but only in secrecy and celibacy, through its 'don't ask, don't tell' policy.⁴

Current status of the law & what's ahead

Military Readiness Enhancement Act of 2007 (H.R. 1246)

PURPOSE: To amend title 10, United States Code, to enhance the readiness of the Armed Forces by replacing the current policy concerning homosexuality in the Armed Forces, referred to as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", with a policy of nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Feb. 28, 2007: Introduced by Martin T. Meehan (D-MA) & 148 co-sponsors

Mar 28, 2007: Referred to the Subcommittee on Military Personnel.

Mar 2, 2009: Reintroduced by Rep. Ellen Tauscher (D-CA), who took over as the lead sponsor of MREA following Rep. Meehan's retirement. The new bill is H.R. 1283.

Votes needed to pass this measure in the House: 218

Also needed: someone to sponsor this bill in the Senate.

Report of the General/Flag Officers' Study Group

4 http://sldn.3cdn.net/877fa9ce3ef2a2b2bc_wrm6bngt7.pdf

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_orientation_and_military_service

(University of California, Santa Barbara)

In 2008, a nonpartisan national study conducted by a group of retired senior officers representing different branches of the military offered these four recommendations:

- 1- Congress should... return authority for personnel policy to the Department of Defense.
- 2- The Department of Defense should eliminate "don't tell" while maintaining... service regulations to preclude misconduct prejudicial to good order, discipline and unit cohesion....
- 3- Remove from Department of Defense directives all references to "bisexual," "homosexual," "homosexual conduct," and "homosexual acts." Establish in their place uniform standards that are neutral with respect to sexual orientation....
- 4- Immediately establish and reinforce safeguards for the confidentiality of all conversations between service members and chaplains, doctors, and mental health professionals.

Attitudes: Public vs. Military

According to a 2008 Washington Post-ABC News poll 75% of the public support gays serving openly.

Poll results of the attitudes of active-duty service members are varied. Some show a majority of military personnel feeling comfortable around gays, as well as a growing percentage of officers in favor of dropping the DADT policy. Clear interpretation is difficult because of different polling techniques, but the trend appears to be moving toward acceptance of openly gay people serving in the armed forces.

Plans of the Obama Administration

During the presidential campaign, President Obama pledged to lift the ban on gays serving openly in the military. But he did not set a timetable for this and he is not expected to act quickly, given the other major issues on his plate. Overturning DADT will require legislation to be passed by both houses of Congress, and many members still need to be convinced that the ban should be lifted. Expectations are that the issue will not come to the forefront until 2010.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Does the racial integration of the armed forces after World War II serve as a useful model for the acceptance of gays in the military? Which parallel aspects make this a persuasive model, and which don't?
2. Opponents of gays in the military argue that having openly gay service members would be disruptive to teamwork and unit cohesion. Military leaders admit that having women in the armed forces has caused such problems in some instances. Why, then, are women accepted into military service but not gays?
3. When it comes to issues of civil rights, is sexual orientation a characteristic that justifies differential treatment of an individual? Why or why not? What do you think the threat or fear of homosexuality is all about?
4. If President Clinton had signed an executive order lifting the ban on gays in the military, would the response have been the same as the one to President Truman's order to integrate the armed forces? Why or why not? Why do you think Clinton did not keep his campaign promise to allow openly gay people to serve in the military?
5. Do you think that, at the time (that is, 1993), Don't Ask, Don't Tell was an "honorable compromise"? Why or why not?
6. Between 1993 and 2006 there was an enormous positive change in the attitude of military personnel toward gays and lesbians serving in the military, from only 16% believing that gays should serve openly to over 70% feeling comfortable serving with gays and lesbians. What do you think accounts for this change?
7. Within the ranks of the military, there is still resistance to having openly gay people serve. How can this resistance be addressed and overcome?
8. Are we at a point now where we have a more rational environment (as President Clinton says was needed) to seriously consider lifting the ban on gays serving openly in the military? As a society do we still need to talk through this issue some more? What objections have not yet been raised and discussed publicly?
9. What is the impact of the final scene in the film showing "Perry" at the military cemetery in Normandy?
10. What advice would you give to a young gay person considering military service?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Write to your representatives in Congress and ask them to support gays wanting to serve openly in the military. See the map under Action Alerts on the American Veterans for Equal Rights web site (<http://aver.us/aver>) for information on your Congressional representatives.
2. Join the efforts of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) to obtain equal treatment for all citizens, regardless of their sexual orientation. Contact the HRC (see Resources) for a copy of their booklet "Speak Out! Activist tools for GLBT equality".
3. If you know people who have been affected by DADT, encourage them to share their story, either on the Human Rights Campaign web site or by blogging on the Servicemembers United web site. These stories can help to educate others about LGBT issues and about the unfairness of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell".
4. Organize a community discussion about DADT. Invite a speaker from the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) to talk about the issue, or find local service members or veterans with direct knowledge and experience relating to DADT to share their information at a program about DADT. Include as broad a cross-section of the community as possible in this discussion. Distribute "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Fact Sheets and other information from the SLDN web site (see Resources).
5. Volunteer to work with Servicemembers United (see Resources) to educate the public on the issue of DADT. Organize a public education event in your community with a clear call to action for participants, such as writing letters to the editor, op-ed articles, or a petition to Congress on this issue.
6. Work to end hate crimes and other forms of discrimination against gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender individuals. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force provides ideas and tools for community action on LGBT issues. Click on their interactive map to find out what's going on and what you can do in your community. Go to www.thetaskforce.org/activist_center/take_action.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens, the web site of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the web site of your PBS station.

RESOURCES

History, Policy & Statistics

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don't_ask,_don't_tell – This site provides a comprehensive overview of military attitudes toward having homosexuals in the ranks, including history and statistics relating to the subject.

www.palmcenter.org – The Palm Center is a research institute of the University of California, Santa Barbara, which sponsors state-of-the-art scholarship to enhance the quality of public dialogue about critical and controversial issues of the day, including research on sexual minorities in the military.

www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3675 – This article explains the additional discrimination experienced by women under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

<http://thomas.loc.gov> – At this site, search for HR 1283 & click on the co-sponsors link to see if your local representatives have signed on.

http://www.hrc.org/laws_and_elections/5659.htm – The Human Rights Campaign's page on HR 1283.

Education & Action

www.calltodutytour.org – Click on The Ground War to see a report of the spring 2006 Call to Duty Tour, which contains a "Common Questions and Concerns" section providing sound arguments for allowing gays to serve openly in the U.S. armed forces.

www.soulforce.org - Soulforce works to end religious and political oppression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people through nonviolent resistance. Through its Right to Serve Campaign, young gay and lesbian adults have held sit-ins at military recruitment centers in thirty cities across the country.

www.sldn.org – The Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a non-partisan, non-profit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell". The web site is a source of background information, news and fact sheets about the issue.

www.hrc.org – The Human Rights Campaign contains information relating to discrimination against homosexuals in the military, along with specific 'take action' remedies.

www.opencongress.org/bill/111-h1283/show – This site tracks the Military Readiness Enhancement Act and its status based on the actions taken by Congress. It also includes recent news articles about actions to repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell.



RESOURCES CONT'D.

<http://servicemembersunited.org> - Servicemembers United was founded to continue and expand upon the work and success of the spring 2006 Call to Duty Tour. It is the largest all-veteran organization dedicated to educating the American public about the ban on known gay men and women in the military.

<http://aver.us/aver> – (formerly: Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Veterans of America, or GLBVA) American Veterans for Equal Rights is a non-profit, chapter-based association of active, reserve and veteran service members dedicated to full and equal rights and equitable treatment for all present and former members of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Homosexuality Myths & Facts

www.apa.org/topics/orientation.html - The American Psychological Association's perspective about sexual orientation.

www.mcgill.ca/studenthealth/information/queerhealth/myths/ – A set of myths and facts about homosexuality provided by McGill University.

www.virgil.azwestern.edu/~dag/lor/Homosexual.htm – This article is one of many written by Dr. David Gershaw, a professor at Arizona Western College, to educate the public on issues in psychology.

www.hrc.org/documents/A_straight_Guide.pdf - A guide developed by the Human Rights Campaign to educate anyone seeking information about homosexuality, including myths and facts.

www.hrc.org/documents/resource_guide.pdf - A guide produced by the Human Rights Campaign aimed toward those on the brink of coming out. Essential resources for effective communication with one's self and others, including myths and facts of homosexuality.

ASK NOT WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN JUNE 2009. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

ASK NOT is a co-production of Persistent Films LLC and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema.

