

Ask! Tell!

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We dare you to try to find the straight dope on recruiting statistics. Every month, armed forces recruiting numbers are announced, but when you read a handful of news stories about these same figures side-by-side, you find competing narratives about what these numbers mean.

But one indicator of how hard-up the military is for live, warm bodies is a startling relaxation of the silly “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy. DADT prohibits any behavior that might suggest “a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts” on the grounds that it “would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion.” (And while we’re on the subject, we would like to say that we endorse any and all behaviors and acts that pose a threat to the military’s “high standards.”)

Under DADT, anyone simply stating that “they are homosexual or bisexual,” or who seeks to “marry or attempt to marry a person of the same biological sex,” will be discharged.

The Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), a pro-military gay advocacy group dedicated to fighting for the “freedom to serve” by ending the harassment of personnel based on “perceived sexual orientation or gender identity,” excitedly reported recently that there are some 500 “openly gay” troops currently “serving without consequence.” A SLDN spokesman said that this was “the highest number we’ve ever been aware of.” More to the point, the number of troops being discharged under DADT is half of what it had been seven years ago, and those numbers have statistically dropped most sharply since the US invasion of Iraq.

Military commander scofflaws who ignore the DADT prohibition are an important sign to the SLDN that these discriminatory regulations might be headed for extinction, but we say don’t get excited. First of all, you’ve got to wonder if not pursuing DADT complaints might be the Pentagon’s way of keeping more boots on the ground in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, and that the minute that the recruitment crisis passes, they’ll go back to tossing out “out” soldiers. (An especially cynical and somewhat paranoid addendum to that would be that a softening of the DADT is a great way to split antiwar sentiment within LGBT communities, since it’s easier to be against the war if the US Army is hunting down gays in their ranks with more persistence than they do Osama bin Laden.)

Secondly, and much more significantly even if this does mean that DADT will be repealed and that there’ll be less civil rights violations by the US military against its own personnel in the future, who cares? So then gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and cross-dressers will be allowed the “freedom to serve” in imperial wars that destroy other people’s lives for profit? This would be seen as a human rights victory? Fuck that noise. Fuck DADT, but more importantly, fuck the SLDN.

To be clear, any discrimination, prejudice, and harassment based on real or perceived violations of ridiculously puritanical heteronormative standards is disgusting and should never be tolerated. But on some level it’s a shame that DADT isn’t being vigorously and strictly enforced in the armed services: for anyone wanting to get the hell out of the service right now, it would be so much easier (and, frankly, much more fun) to make-out with a comrade-in-arms in the shower room, or to be seen knockin’ the boots with a bunkmate, or to propose marriage to your same-sex commanding officer in front of everyone than it would be to go AWOL when no one’s looking.

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