

# TALKING ABOUT



## Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell



Authors



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## Overview

A solid majority of Americans (79% according to a 2007 CNN poll) support allowing gay service members to serve openly in the military, a number that has increased steadily since 1994 when the issue of military service by gay Americans first rose to national prominence. Americans are concerned that our military is being stretched too thin, and they believe that whoever is qualified to serve should be allowed to serve.

## Don't Ask, Don't Tell Messages

*"This is about national security. Nobody wants to put America at risk, and discharging essential service members just because they're gay does just that."*

### Emphasize Common Ground

Focus on the need for a strong military and emphasize the overwhelming support—among the public, high-ranking military officials, and our military allies—for lifting the ban on gay service members.

**1) Focus on the vital need for a strong military.** Most Americans support a strong military and national defense. But it's clear that our military is currently stretched too thin. There's a shortage of troops in general and a need for some critical skills in particular (e.g., translators, engineers, and pilots).

Our military strength is compromised when we can't fill critical positions because we're rejecting or discharging qualified, capable, and highly skilled service members (such as the dismissals of 60 Arabic linguists) just because they're gay. Gay service members bring essential skills and experience to the military. Discharging these critical service members compromises our national security and puts us at risk.

**2) Emphasize the support for lifting the ban.** In addition to overwhelming public support for service by openly gay troops, the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT<sup>1</sup>) is supported by military experts and the experience of some of our strongest international allies. In recent years, a growing number of respected, high-ranking military officials and retired military officers have publicly stated their opposition to banning and discharging openly gay service members.

Also, strong military allies including Great Britain, Israel, Canada, and Australia have lifted their respective bans on openly gay military personnel. These military forces, especially those of Great Britain and Israel, are considered some of the best-trained, toughest militaries in the world. In each case, lifting the ban and allowing gay personnel to serve strengthened, or had no visible impact on, military effectiveness, unit cohesion, and morale. In fact, Britain's integration of gay soldiers is described by the country's Defense Ministry as an "unqualified success."

**3) Talk about common values.** Talk about the ideas and ideals that people associate with our nation's armed forces, and which gay service members exemplify—service, duty, loyalty, patriotism, sacrifice, bravery and courage.

### Illustrate Concrete Harms

Educate people about the unacceptable costs of DADT. It compromises national security, puts troops at risk, increases military costs, and takes a substantial personal toll on gay service members.

**4) Focus on the costs of DADT.** The military has discharged many highly skilled and essential personnel simply for being gay. The high-profile discharges of essential Arabic linguists highlight the heavy toll of the ban on openly gay service members. DADT creates

## Talking About Don't Ask, Don't Tell

**"It puts our country at risk to discharge essential service members just because they're gay."**

### Emphasize common ground

1. Focus on the vital need for a strong military and how dismissing critical gay service members compromises this.
2. Use the language of common values (e.g., service, duty, sacrifice).
3. Emphasize the overwhelming support for repealing DADT from military experts, the general public, and the experience of allies.

### Illustrate concrete harms

4. Focus on the costs of DADT (e.g., the loss of vital personnel, monetary costs).
5. Illustrate the harms to gay service members (e.g., thousands have been unfairly discharged after putting their lives on the line).

dangerous gaps in our military's ability to defend our nation. At the time of this writing, the military has fired over 12,500 qualified personnel, including more than 325 translators and 60 Arabic linguists.

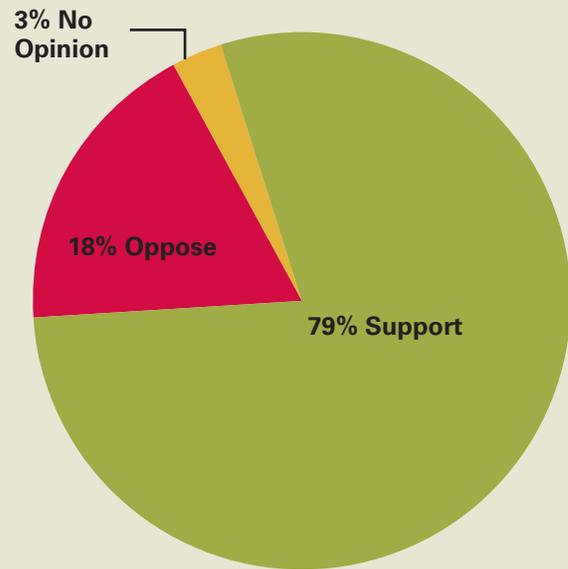
At a time when the military is facing a recruiting crisis, it's senseless and irresponsible to discharge or turn away skilled personnel. Unwarranted discharges also exact a high financial cost. A 2006 Blue Ribbon Commission report estimated that dismissals under DADT have already cost over \$363 million.

**5) Illustrate the harms to courageous gay service members.** In 2004, the Urban Institute estimated that almost 65,000 gay service members were serving their nation in active, guard, or reserve duty. Over the course of the ban, more than 12,500 patriotic gay Americans have been unfairly discharged after putting their lives on the line for their country. The sacrifices of gay service members are acknowledged only on the condition that they lie about who they are. Many times, gay service members have come home only to be cut off from the basic financial security that our veterans deserve. Not only that, but there have been cases where discharged gay service members have been forced to reimburse the military for education costs associated with their service.

## HIGH-RANKING MILITARY OFFICIALS SUPPORT REPEALING DADT

- General John Shalikashvili, retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "I now believe that if gay men and lesbians served openly in the United States military, they would not undermine the efficacy of the armed forces. Our military has been stretched thin by our deployments in the Middle East, and we must welcome the service of any American who is willing and able to do the job."
- Rear Admiral John Hutson (Ret.), former Judge Advocate General of the Navy, recently wrote, "... it would be a great tragedy if we didn't take advantage of (the) chance to correct a flawed policy."
- Lieutenant General Claudia Kennedy (Ret.), the first female three-star officer in Army history, called the law, "... a hollow policy that serves no useful purpose."
- Lieutenant General Daniel W. Christman (Ret.), former superintendent of West Point: "It is clear that national attitudes toward this issue have evolved considerably in the last decade."

## Support for Allowing Openly Gay Troops to Serve



Source: 2007 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll



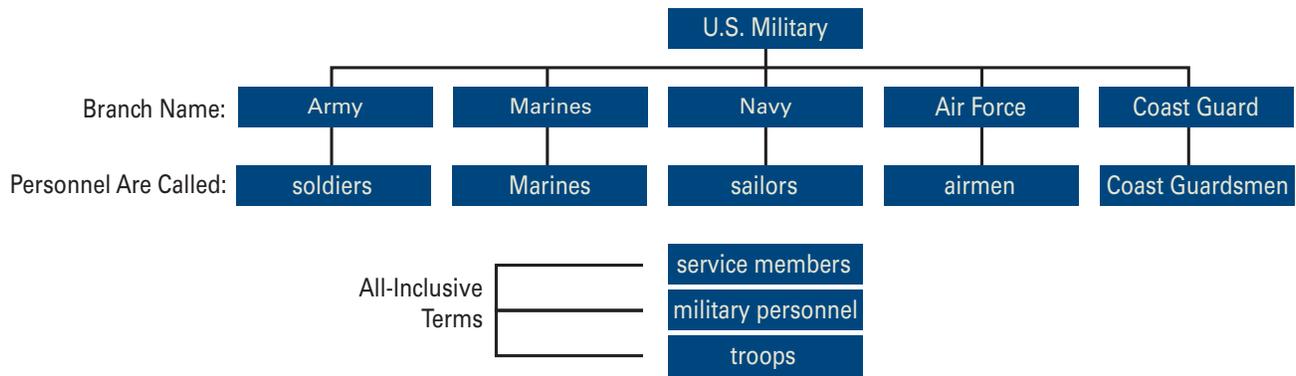
## ABOUT THESE APPROACHES

The *Talking About* series uses two interconnected approaches for discussing LGBT issues. The first approach, **Emphasize Common Ground**, helps reduce the sense of "otherness" that some Americans feel when they think about gay people by focusing on the common values and beliefs that gay and straight Americans share. The second approach, **Illustrate Concrete Harms**, helps people understand and connect with the specific and pervasive injustices that LGBT Americans face.

For additional information, see the *Talking About* document titled **Overall Approaches for LGBT Issues**.

<sup>1</sup> Due to space considerations, the acronym DADT is used in this document to refer to Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Because this acronym is not widely understood and can cause confusion in everyday discussions, we recommend against its use outside of specialized audiences who are already familiar with it.

## Understanding U.S. Military Branches and Personnel



The term "soldiers," in formal usage, only describes Army personnel (not Marine personnel or other branches of the military). Use this chart for accurate terms. Never use the term "gays in the military" (see Glossary below).

### DADT'S PERSONNEL AND FINANCIAL COSTS

More than 12,500 men and women have been dismissed under Don't Ask, Don't Tell. According to the Government Accountability Office, more than 800 of those service members had skills deemed critical by the Department of Defense, including linguistic training (more than 325 translators discharged), medical skills, and expertise in combat engineering:

- As of January 2006, the military had discharged 244 medical specialists under DADT, including physicians, nurses, biomedical laboratory technicians, and other highly trained medical specialists.
- Between 1998 and 2003, the military discharged gay personnel serving in 161 different and critical occupational specialties, including 49 nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare specialists; 90 nuclear power engineers; 52 missile guidance and control operators; 150 rocket, missile, and other artillery specialists; and 340 infantrymen.

The Pentagon has lost at least \$363.8 million enforcing the ban over the past decade.

### Things to Avoid

#### 1) Don't criticize the military, the war, or other military policies while advocating for lifting the ban.

While public opinion on the war in Iraq (and other conflicts abroad) is mixed at best, support, respect, and

### Don't Ask, Don't Tell Glossary

#### This is about:

- a strong national defense
- the ban on openly gay service members
- the ban on service by openly gay troops
- service, duty, loyalty, patriotism, sacrifice, bravery and courage

#### We need to:

- lift the ban, repeal the law, overturn Don't Ask, Don't Tell

#### We describe our service members as:

- service members, military personnel or troops
- gay service members or gay military personnel

admiration for our nation's troops remains very high. Ensure that messages on ending the ban—which would strengthen our military and enhance our nation's security—don't run counter to these views.

#### 2) Don't use the term "gays in the military."

Instead, talk about gay service members, gay military personnel, or gay troops. See "Don't Ask, Don't Tell Glossary" for more information.

#### 3) Don't use terms like "the military's anti-gay ban" or "gay ban."

Instead, focus on service members. Refer to "the ban on openly gay service members" or "the ban on service by openly gay troops."

#### ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, including: Overall Approaches, Marriage & Relationship Recognition, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, and Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell. For additional information, please email [talkingaboutseries@glaad.org](mailto:talkingaboutseries@glaad.org). © 2009 Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and Movement Advancement Project.