

# US military lifts ban on being openly gay

Under a policy known as 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell', gay men and women in the American armed forces have been forced to hide their sexuality. This week ushers in a new era of openness.



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A protestor against 'don't ask, don't tell' laws, which many say were homophobic and discriminatory.

Over the last 18 years, more than 13,000 American servicemen and women have been discharged from the military because of disclosures about their private life. Under a long-standing law preventing openly gay or lesbian individuals serving in the forces, once a gay man or woman's sexuality became known, their career in the army, navy or air force came to an abrupt end.

But yesterday the law, known as 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell', was repealed, allowing those currently in uniform to enjoy a new era of openness, and prompting some of those discharged over the years because of their sexuality to say they want to rejoin the military.

Air Force Major Mike Almy, who became a high-profile campaigner for changing the rules after he was discharged, explains: 'Really it's been my whole adult life – I want to get back in because I just miss the people, the camaraderie, the mission.

I also want a retirement. I lost all retirement benefits when they kicked me out.'

Another said that while a weight had been removed from the shoulders of gay men and women in the military, serving alongside them should be 'a non-issue' for straight people. But a study by the Pentagon last year found that 40% of personnel opposed the repeal, and some have warned about disruption to the cohesion of military units, for example, where they live together, and a disincentive to non-gay personnel to join or stay in the military.

Ten of the 27 countries in the European Union do not allow gay people to serve openly in the armed forces, but the UK changed its rules in 2000, since when forces chiefs have described the situation as 'much better'. Lord Alan West, a former head of the Royal Navy, said he was dubious about the stated motives of nations with a ban still in place.

'I don't believe it's got anything to do with how efficient or capable their forces will be – it's to do with prejudices, I'm afraid.'

## EQUALITY BATTLE

In 1948, President Truman ended racial segregation in the American military, so that black and white servicemen and women could serve alongside one another. Campaigners are this week celebrating that, 60 years later, the same applies to gay and straight in the forces.

It's the end of what one member of the American top brass called 'a policy that forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens.'

But should individuality be a priority in institutions that rely for their effectiveness on discipline, obedience and strict hierarchies? And does sexuality of any sort have a place in a warzone?

## Q & A

**Q** Is life difficult for gay men and lesbians in the US?

**A** Even in countries with no law against homosexuality, there can be serious challenges. In the US, for example, there is a very active campaign for gay couples to be allowed to marry, which is allowed in some states and not in others. In the UK, same sex

couples can have a civil partnership but not a religious marriage, something the Government has promised to change.

**Q** Nothing like as bad as in some countries, though.

**A** In May, the UN human rights chief Navi Pillay warned that homophobic attacks were on the rise around the world. These occur even where discrimination is illegal, but tend to be more systematic where there is no

official or legal protection. In more than a third of countries, there are still laws against consensual homosexual acts, with severe punishments including the death penalty.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Anyone who doesn't fit in endangers the mission.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?