



## Would A Dem Prez End Don't Ask?

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Fourteen years after President Bill Clinton signed the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy even though he initially promised to end the ban on openly gay and lesbian service members entirely, gay leaders are saying that the current crop of contenders for the Democratic nomination for president, all of whom support ending the ban, are unlikely to reverse their commitment on that issue.

"I don't see the Democrats shrinking back from that at all," said Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay lobbying group. "I think that it's a very different time. What I hope we'll see is that whoever becomes the next president... they go into office with a plan to enact a set of commitments to this community."

Certainly, public opinion polls bear that out. A June 27 CNN/Opinion Research poll found that 79 percent of its respondents favored ending the ban. A mere 18 percent thought that out gay and lesbian personnel should be barred from the military. A 2005 poll of the public from the Boston Globe and a 2006 Zogby poll of military personnel also found strong support for ending the ban.

Polls can be unreliable with some respondents not wanting to disclose what might be perceived as negative feelings about homosexuals, but the support for ending the ban is very high. Those numbers may give candidates some comfort.

"If you look at the polling on Don't Ask, Don't Tell, as opposed to polls on other issues like gay marriage, the military issue always polls higher," said Steve Ralls, spokesman for the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), a legal group that represents gay and lesbian military personnel. "There is still a significant number who are there on this issue even when they are not there on some others."

That may reflect the changed circumstances since September 11, 2001. With the U.S. fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia, the public may see firing lesbian and gay personnel as wasteful. The military has discharged roughly 11,000 gay and lesbian personnel since 1993, when the policy was enacted. Stories about the dismissals of gay Arabic translators, roughly 60 since 2001, while fighting the so-called war on terror against an enemy that includes many Arabic speakers make the policy seem counterproductive.

"I think a significant reason behind the shift is the framing of Don't Ask, Don't Tell as a national security issue," Ralls said. "In 1993, a lot of people in Congress saw this as a gay rights issue."

Currently, there is a bill to end the ban in the House and it has 127 co-sponsors out of 435 members. Other representatives may be supportive, but do not see the need to sign on until the bill has a realistic chance of passing. A Senate version is expected by the end of 2007.

There has also been a marked shift in the military's defense of the policy.

In 1993, when Don't Ask, Don't Tell was being debated, military leaders did not hesitate to express their opposition to ending the ban. Currently, when queried about the policy, they will commonly say only that they are enforcing the law that Congress passed.

"That's a very tepid defense compared to the defense of the early '90s," Ralls said. Most recently, when General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, approved of the policy calling homosexuality "immoral" he was quickly forced to back off his comments.

This does not mean that the ban will end quickly or easily. The military's "tepid defense" may stem from the generals having the law they want in place and seeing no reason to pick a fight over it.

There is still opposition to ending the ban. All of the candidates for the Republican presidential nomination either support the ban or feel it should not be ended now.

Then will the Democrats, if elected, have the stomach for a tough fight should the policy come up for a vote in Congress?

**"We've experienced over many, many years people taking verbal positions of support, but not putting muscle behind it," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.**

**Foreman did not believe that the sort of retreat that former President Clinton engaged in could happen again, but that does not mean that candidates will show the same fervor they voice now once elected.**

**"I don't think that's possible simply because the electorate has moved so far in the last 15 years and the right-wing, thankfully, is on the defensive," he said. "What I do think is possible is the candidate gets cold feet in office."**

A related issue is the military ban on sodomy, which has been totally absent from the public debate and one which SLDN concedes it has not been lobbying on with legislators on Capitol Hill or presidential candidates.

In response to queries from Gay City News earlier this year, however, seven of the eight Democratic hopefuls - all but New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson - indicated that they support ending that restriction on private conduct as well. No Republican presidential candidate expressed the same view.