

DOD Should Have Asked for Troops' Opinion on 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

Nowhere within the 103-question survey were respondents asked directly if they wanted the law repealed or not

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If the ban on homosexuals serving openly in the military is repealed, it could be partly due to a flawed survey instrument that focused more on implementation and not on whether servicemembers wanted the law lifted.

On Tuesday, the Department of Defense released a highly anticipated report after nine months of surveying nearly 160,000 military members and their families, and conducting more than 230 town hall meetings and smaller focus groups at dozens of U.S. military installations.

The DOD working group tasked with compiling the report had a two-fold mission: to assess the impact of repealing "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" on military readiness, military effectiveness, unit cohesion, recruiting, retention, and family readiness; and to recommend appropriate changes, if necessary, to existing regulations, policies, and guidance in the event of repeal. Nowhere within the 103-question survey were respondents asked directly if they wanted the law repealed or not.

"We are very much aware that the push to repeal is coming from outside the military, not from within," said Richard L. Eubank, the national commander of the 2.1 million-member Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and its Auxiliaries. "So our problem is why would DOD listen to outside opinion polls from a society who, for the most part, would never consider military service, but not ask their own troops what they think?"

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In response to a question posed by Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) at yesterday's Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the survey was not designed to poll the troops, but instead was to provide additional information on the types of challenges military leaders could face if the law was repealed.

"I can't think of a single precedent in American history of doing a referendum of the American armed forces on a policy issue," he said. "That's not the way our civilian-led military has ever worked in our entire history. This question needs to be decided by the Congress or the courts, as far as I'm concerned."

"The VFW disagrees because Congress and the courts are not manning rifles at the tip of the spear where unit integrity and morale mean life and death," said Eubank, a retired Marine and Vietnam combat veteran from Eugene, Ore.

The VFW national commander also believes the deck was stacked against the troops in the first place. "There is no other way to comprehend why more than a half-million surveys were sent out on implementation, but nothing about whether repeal should occur or not," he said. "Those who do all the fighting should have been listened to because it will be their squads and platoons that are affected the most."

The VFW is against repeal, a position reaffirmed in August by delegates attending its 111th National Convention in Indianapolis, yet Eubank is pragmatic about the issue.

"The United States military has always been about customs and traditions and an adherence to standards that civilians will never, ever comprehend or appreciate," he said. "If the law is repealed, the services will follow orders and move forward, but until that happens, military leaders must continue to give lawmakers their very best advice about the potential impacts repeal will have on the force."

Appearing before the Senate committee today were the five military service chiefs, who indicated they would follow orders and implement the change if the law was repealed, but cautioned that now is not the time, and that there will be a significant number of challenges commanders at all levels would have to address both deployed and at home station.

For more on Thursday's hearing, go to the Senate Armed Services Committee website

at http://armed-services.senate.gov/e_witnesslist.cfm?id=4879. Information on today's hearing is at http://armed-services.senate.gov/e_witnesslist.cfm?id=4880.