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Spacemen, Scholars, and Sailors: Another Look at the Military's Treatment of Gays

by
Mark J. Eitelberg¹

This paper examines three different perspectives on the military's treatment of gays during the 1990s. One perspective comes from disinterested observers in another place and time. For the purpose of alliteration, these observers are termed *spacemen*. A second perspective comes from the author, who works in the community of *scholars*, and feels the pressing need to tell a story from years past. The third perspective—and the main focus of the paper—comes from Navy officers, or *sailors*, who participated in three surveys that span the history of the military's current policy on gays.² But first, let's take a flight of fancy, imagining how we must appear to our neighbors above; and then allow the author to indulge himself in telling a tale of political arm-twisting and the study that might have been.

Spacemen

Imagine for a moment that television broadcasts from throughout the earth are being monitored and analyzed by scientists on planets in the far-distant heavens. Imagine, too, that an alien researcher, perhaps an authority in earthly human culture, has decided to study the period that earthlings call “the 1990s.” This particular researcher specializes in the geopolitical region known as the United States of America (or USA) because of its vast wealth, military dominance, relatively advanced technology, and powerful influence on earth. In looking at “the 1990s,” the alien researcher discovers that, aside from a war in the area called Persian Gulf, human sexual behavior is the most

¹ Paper prepared for presentation at the national conference of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, August 2003. Author's contact information: Dr. Mark J. Eitelberg, Professor of Public Policy, Graduate School of Business and Public Policy, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943-5000. Author's email: meitelberg@nps.navy.mil. The views presented here are those of the author and should not be attributed to any government agency with which the author is affiliated.

² The term “gays” is used throughout the paper as a simplified reference to women and men with a homosexual orientation.

heavily covered television news story of any dealing with the military.³ This is odd, the researcher concludes, for surely this must be a culture that is so free of pressing problems and basic human needs that it can afford to concentrate its attention on such a thing. Even more strange, the researcher concludes, is the way in which differences of opinion have been resolved on the matter of human sexual behavior: the USA leaders have established a special rule, not found elsewhere in their society, that people who join the military cannot be asked about their sexual preferences as long as they do not tell anyone about their sexual preferences; these people may possess a sexual preference for persons of the same sex and still be a member of the military, but they must restrain their sexual nature and not discuss it with anyone, lest they be removed from the military in times of peace; if someone suspects that a member is sexually attracted to persons of the same sex, no one is allowed to investigate the possibility of a rule violation without a defined cause, which few members of the organization fully comprehend; further, recognizing that a number of people in the military have a tendency toward homosexuality or bisexuality, even though they have not revealed such tendencies, no one is permitted to bother these people because of their suspected preference for persons of the same sex.

The researcher ponders the name of the military's rule—"Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, Don't Harass"—and wonders why it exists. "Aha! I get it," the researcher shouts telepathically to a junior associate. "It's a military secret that's not a *secret* at all." The researcher reflects for another moment or two, sighs in an alien way, and records the following in a scientific journal: "Curious species."

Scholars

In the fall of 1990, three years before the introduction of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a colleague and long-time friend called me to ask if I would join him and others on a panel for the 1991 national conference of the American Psychological Association (APA) in San Francisco. The panel was tentatively titled "Gays and the Military," and the participants would examine the US Defense Department's policy prohibiting homosexuals from serving in the armed forces.

³ As reported by the "Women, Men, and Media Project," Women in Military Service for America Foundation, 7 March 2000. See http://www.all4nationaldefense.org/articles_archives.html

The military's ban on gays had become a particularly "hot" topic a year before, in October 1989, when it was revealed that the Defense Department had tried to suppress the work of several psychologists from the Defense Personnel Security Research and Education Center (PERSEREC) in Monterey, California. The results of two separate studies challenged the main reasons given for excluding gays from the military, and officials in the Pentagon were outraged. Although these officials attempted to discredit the PERSEREC reports, eventual disclosure of the findings kicked open a door that had long concealed the military's policy from public scrutiny.⁴

Up to the point of the proposed panel at APA, no one associated with the Department of Defense said much of anything about the reports other than that they were "unauthorized," "flawed and useless," "not of value," "a feeble, unreadable waste of taxpayer's money," representing "only the personal opinion of the authors," and containing nothing "new or useful . . . that has not been considered over time in the formulation of the present DoD policy that homosexuality is incompatible with military service."⁵ It soon became quite apparent that no one from the Pentagon would even discuss the military's ban on gays in public, as Defense Department officials repeatedly refused invitations to appear on television talk shows, news broadcasts, and in other venues. The Secretary of Defense eventually acknowledged that prohibiting gays from obtaining a security clearance was an "old chestnut"—but he quite carefully stipulated that his remarks pertained to gays working in a civilian capacity. In a sense, then, the proposed APA panel would break the Defense Department's informal code of silence.

My role on the APA panel would be to compare the policy on gays with the military's previous exclusionary policies, particularly those regarding the service of African Americans and women. I had written several works on "population representation" in the military and also coauthored a book on blacks and the military, so it was assumed that I could contribute a comparative or historical perspective. I agreed to join the panel and write a paper, without really considering any potential consequences;

⁴ The most controversial of the reports was Theodore R. Sarbin and Kenneth E. Karols, *Nonconforming Sexual Orientations and Military Suitability* (Monterey, CA: Defense Personnel Security Research and Education Center, 1988). Often overlooked is a second, later work: Michael McDaniel, *Pre-service Adjustment of Homosexual and Heterosexual Military Accessions: Implications for Security Clearance Suitability* (Monterey, CA: Defense Personnel Security Research and Education Center, 1989).

⁵ These comments were actually directed at the report by Sarbin and Karols. See Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the US Military* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 649, 681.

after all, this would be a simple, relatively isolated, harmless discussion of a policy issue by a group of scholars at a professional meeting.

My memory is a little hazy on the precise details and timing of what happened next, but the final outcome was the voluntary withdrawal from the panel by all persons directly affiliated with the Department of Defense. I do remember that I was working late one day in my office at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), when I received a phone call from one of the school's deans. APA had recently published its schedule for the upcoming conference, and the dean said he wanted to talk with me about my participation in the panel on gays in the military. Apparently, APA's conference agenda had been brought to the attention of an assistant secretary of the Navy who was quite "disturbed" upon seeing that a Navy employee was slated to appear in a public discussion of the military's policy toward gays. As it goes, the assistant secretary called the NPS superintendent to express concern; the superintendent called the dean; the dean called me. The dean assured me that I had every right to be on the panel, every right to academic freedom, regardless of my position as a Navy employee. The dean expressed his confidence in my ability to "not say anything that would embarrass the Navy" (words I had often heard before from various public affairs offices). He surmised that the assistant secretary was uneasy about the location of the APA meeting, in an area with a large gay community, speculating that the press would attend in large numbers or that gay activists would disrupt the panel.

In the back of my mind, I couldn't help but think that the situation was somehow affected by the tenor of times, when the armed forces were being "downsized" and many military installations were being scrutinized for possible realignment or closure. In the back of my mind, too, I must have considered the fact that my position with the school was still temporary. I told the dean that I fully intended to honor my commitment to participate, and that he should trust my judgment. I was never asked to remove myself from the panel, and it was never even suggested that I do so. At this point, however, I began to understand that my presence on the panel would be watched with great interest and that it would not necessarily be free of consequences for me or for others.

One week later, I was visiting the Pentagon office of my colleague, the person who had invited me to participate in the panel. I was telling him about the phone call

from the NPS dean, and expressing my great surprise to learn that an assistant secretary of the Navy, a top official in the Navy Department, had taken a personal interest in our otherwise inconspicuous panel at APA. How would anyone even *know* about the panel, outside of our usual circle of scholars and psycho-geeks within APA? Just as I concluded my impassioned soliloquy, almost on cue, my colleague's telephone rings. He answers the phone and immediately strikes a stony pose, staring down, never glancing my way. "Yes, I understand," he says. "Yes. Yes. Yes. No, I understand. Okay." From the expression on my colleague's face, I could sense that he'd been hit with a mix of disappointment, frustration, and anger. With pursed lips, almost painfully, he forced out the words: "That was the assistant secretary of defense. I've been instructed to remove myself from the APA panel."

The great irony in this, as it turned out, is that the panel itself might have gone virtually unnoticed—except for the watchful eyes of certain high-ranking Defense officials—if it had only proceeded as originally planned. Instead, an account of the panel appeared prominently in the *New York Times* and in other major news outlets, and the lead was the Defense Department's "gagging" of its employees. One would think that the Defense Department's actions over the PERSEREC reports, less than two years before, would have demonstrated that attempts to prevent open discussion and debate of controversial policy can easily backfire. Would many people have taken interest in the findings of few wacky psychologists from Monterey, California, if the Pentagon hadn't tried to bury the PERSEREC reports? Similarly, would the APA panel on gays in 1991 be "all the news that's fit to print" if the Pentagon hadn't intervened?

The Story Continues

I never did get to write about the connections between the military's treatment of gays and its exclusionary policies for other groups.⁶ My research moved in other directions, and I regret that I did not contribute more to the debate that eventually resulted in the current policy.

⁶ Fortunately, I was able to find an excellent replacement. Judith H. Stiehm, a highly accomplished scholar and author, took my seat on the infamous panel. In the end, the panel benefited in substituting Judith for me, since she had conducted far more research than I on women in the military and had recently authored an article on the military's treatment of gays for a respected law journal.

If I had taken the time to write the paper, I would have made heavy use of historical language and arguments from published and unpublished sources—tracking similarities in how the justifications for exclusion are structured and expressed. I would have challenged the reader, maybe in a mock test, to distinguish between the concepts, evidence, and actual words used to argue against racial integration, gender integration, or the service of homosexuals. I would have explored the facts and fallacies. And I would have suggested, as others have done, that the military’s mystique and long-treasured role as the majority’s male rite-of-passage have operated to exclude blacks, women, and gays, who were all deemed inferior in one way or another. Actually, how can one successfully complete the rite-of-passage—demonstrating courage, patriotism, citizenship, and masculinity—when the organization permits full membership by those who are mentally feeble, physically weak, or morally corrupt? How can one express his true manhood in the military alongside people who are generally inferior, men who behave like women, or women themselves?

If I had written the paper, I would have included a section that discusses how convenience and military necessity have often intervened in the way the military treats otherwise excluded groups. In 1982, Binkin and Eitelberg wrote “the black experience in the American armed forces has likewise been marked by policies of exclusion during periods of peace and expedient acceptance during mobilization for war.”⁷ Likewise, one can trace periods in recent history when the military just “looked the other way” regarding homosexuality, for the benefit of a military operation. In fact, the armed services have even prohibited the discharge of homosexuals, to prevent personnel turnover or organizational disruption during critical military operations.

One of the most obvious differences between the military’s treatment of blacks, women, and gays relates to the organization’s place within the larger society. The US armed forces are widely recognized as a pioneer in racial integration, a trailblazer in equal opportunity and race relations. By 1954, one year before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, a full decade before the Omnibus Civil Rights Act of 1964, the last of the military’s all-black units was abolished.

⁷ Martin Binkin and Mark J. Eitelberg, *Blacks and the Military* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1982), 11.

Although integration of the sexes would not occur for another twenty-plus years, and women would be barred from combat-related jobs for nearly twenty more years on top of that, the military has likewise been a national leader with respect to the employment of women. For all of its well-publicized problems in gender relations, the US military actively works toward eliminating sexual harassment and discrimination, as the nation's foremost employer of women in traditionally-male occupations and a place where women can rise to positions of authority in comparatively large numbers.

It is strange, then, to find the armed forces several steps behind society in their treatment of gays. The US military, with its history of blazing a trail for equal opportunity, in a nation that so strongly professes to uphold and protect the rights and freedoms of its citizens, must surely seem out of touch as well to the rest of the world. At last count, no fewer than 24 countries—including the closest allies of the US—allowed gays to serve openly in the military.⁸ One of the most interesting examples is Australia, which removed its ban on gays in the military during the period between President Clinton's election to President in November 1992 and his inauguration in January 1993. Reportedly, Australia anticipated similar action by the US, given Clinton's pledge to eliminate restrictions on the service of gays, and saw its move as in keeping with an international trend.

There is yet another connection between blacks, women, and gays, although it is based purely on personal experience. In the early 1980s, when I was working on the Brookings Institution's study of blacks and the military, I found that people were quite willing to grab my ear and share their views on the book's topic. Obviously, my coauthor, Marty Binkin, and I knew that our work addressed a controversial and sensitive area, and we could easily understand that many of our friends, acquaintances, and co-workers would feel obliged to express an opinion or two. We did not expect, however, that a number of people would seize the opportunity to tell us a racist joke, thinking that it was acceptable behavior or that we would appreciate the joke because of our research. Completely independently, we would even hear some of the *same* racist jokes from different people, perhaps stories that were making the rounds inside the Beltway or

⁸ Aaron Belkin, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Is the Gay Ban Based on Military Necessity?," *Parameters* (Summer 2003): 109.

within sectors of the military establishment. We often wondered jointly in comparing notes, why did people simply assume that we would appreciate hearing these jokes? And, more importantly, why did they feel comfortable *telling* the jokes?

I didn't spend much time thinking about this phenomenon after the book was published, because it seemed to stop. The joke-tellers may have realized, after seeing the contents of the book, that the material was different than what they had expected. Then, a few years later, the phenomenon repeated—with a different target. I had become heavily involved studying the debate over assigning women to military combat; and when the subject of my research arose in conversation, particularly at social functions, I began to hear more and more sexist jokes. "Blonde jokes" were making the rounds, but it did not stop with that.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I began using the military's treatment of gays as a case in my graduate seminars on military manpower policy analysis. My students knew that I had studied the topic, because I would incorporate the Defense Department's historical data on discharge rates in my background lectures and discussions. I would always strive to maintain complete objectivity and to conceal my personal opinions on the issue, whether in or outside of class. Yet, for some reason, most students probably assumed that I was strongly opposed to removing barriers on gays. Just as I tried to conceal my personal views, I am certain that I did nothing to promote this impression. In hindsight, I believe that it was merely taken for granted, largely because of my long-term employment with the Department of Defense, my professional affiliations, and my long association with various policy-level offices. In my students' universe, where an extremely vocal majority supported barriers on gays, how could anyone feel otherwise? Simply put, there is a proper way of thinking about certain controversial issues; and, if one has achieved success within the defense establishment, she or he must be thinking properly. Outliers do not last; they either remove themselves or they are rejected and cast out by the system. And so, I observed yet again that my academic interest in the subject of gays in the military led others to believe that they should share their opinions with me, along with the most awful jokes about homosexuals that one could possibly conceive.

Sailors

My continuing interest in the military's policy on gays eventually brought two Navy officers, Fred Cleveland and Mark Ohl, to my door in September of 1993. Cleveland, a graduate student in the NPS Financial Management curriculum, and Ohl, a graduate student in the field of Acquisitions and Supply, were interested in exploring whether Navy officers at NPS—supposedly representing the service's best and brightest leaders of the future—actually understood the military's brand new "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. The interest shown by these students was undoubtedly stimulated by their own difficulties in distinguishing between homosexual "conduct" and "orientation," at least as defined by the policy, as well as by apparent misunderstandings over the new responsibilities of officers. Ted Sarbin, a preeminent psychologist and coauthor of the most controversial PERSEREC report on gays, joined the study team as co-advisor, and we began the first in a series of three surveys at NPS. As the Cleveland and Ohl study progressed, Ralph Carney, a social psychologist at PERSEREC, also joined the project as a third co-advisor.⁹

The First Survey, 1994¹⁰

NPS offered an ideal environment for conducting a survey of Navy officers regarding "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Officers at NPS are considered to be among the Navy's finest, likely to remain in service and to rise in rank and influence. At the same time, the new policy, in removing any questions about homosexuality ("don't ask") from the military's recruiting or application process, had shifted the responsibility for "gate keeping" from those at the point of entry to all members of the active-duty force, particularly those in positions of authority.

NPS was not only a good place to administer a small survey of attitudes toward gays, it was one of the *only* places. Two studies were commissioned by the Department of Defense during the period of the Great Debate: a major study organized by the RAND

⁹ Ralph Carney later co-organized a workshop on gays and the military for the 1994 national convention of APA in Los Angeles. Papers from the workshop, along with other related articles, can be found in Gregory M. Herek, Jared B. Jobe, and Ralph M. Carney, eds., *Out in Force: Sexual Orientation and the Military* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁰ The discussion of survey results draws heavily from Fred E. Cleveland and Mark A. Ohl, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell': Policy Analysis and Interpretation" (Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 1994).

Corporation, at a cost of about \$1.3 million, and another, smaller inquiry by a team of Pentagon experts.¹¹ But major studies take time, and the high-powered effort by RAND was not completed before a political deal began to take shape. Still, because of the controversy and delicate nature of the compromise, the Department of Defense wanted its two studies to be the last word on the matter, at least until the smoke cleared. As a result, the Defense Department refused to allow any surveys of active-duty personnel regarding gays in the military. A few researchers were clever enough to sidestep the embargo on surveys by interviewing personnel as they entered or departed from a military installation. Other researchers, such as Cleveland and Ohl, wore the protective mantle of academic freedom; at NPS, they only needed to obtain the base commander's approval, uphold the usual protections of privacy and confidentiality, and limit the survey to persons assigned to the command.

Cleveland and Ohl set out to identify potential problems that might hamper the effective implementation of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”—including how Navy officers assessed their responsibilities and whether an officer’s ability to administer the policy might be influenced by personal experiences, biases, or possible difficulties in distinguishing between homosexual conduct and orientation. (Under the original provisions of the policy, “homosexual conduct” is grounds for discharge; sexual orientation, on the other hand, is considered “an abstract sexual preference” that is “distinct from a propensity or intent to engage in sexual acts” and thus deemed personal, private, and acceptable.¹²)

Cleveland and Ohl used a combination of focused interviews and a structured survey to gather data for the study. The survey contained 43 items and was distributed to 1,000 Navy officers attending NPS in February 1994. A total of 605 completed surveys were returned. Focused interviews were subsequently conducted with a diverse sample of Navy officers.

¹¹ RAND produced a 518-page report that reflected the work of about 70 researchers. In contrast, the Defense Department experts submitted a 15-page, double-spaced memorandum. As a contributor to the RAND report observes, one of the studies was clearly “more influential” than the other. See the comments of Robert MacCoun in Aaron Belkin and Geoffrey Bateman, eds., *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 77-80.

¹² Cleveland and Ohl, “Don’t Ask,” 26-30.

One of the most interesting findings in the study by Cleveland and Ohl was the degree of ignorance displayed by officers regarding the policy. For instance, over two-thirds of the survey respondents claimed to know the difference between “conduct” and “orientation,” as defined by the policy; yet, when asked to distinguish between the two concepts in five typical scenarios, most respondents failed the test in four of the five examples.

Given the heated debate that preceded the new policy, and the many public statements from within the defense establishment against removing the gay ban, most officers were expected to express strongly negative views toward the presence of gays in the military. In fact, 82 percent of survey respondents indicated that they “would prefer not to have homosexuals in [their] command.” At the same time, an almost equal proportion (79 percent) of Navy officers felt that homosexuals “can cause the downfall of good order and discipline” in the Navy. This sentiment was echoed in follow-up interviews. A frequently heard sentiment was captured in the words on one officer: “The military keeps out overweight and blind people, so it should also keep out homosexuals, who would not improve the level of defense.” Opinions on gays seemed to soften somewhat when two controversial issues—gays in the military and women in combat—surfaced in the interviews. A number of male Navy officers confessed that they would rather serve at sea with a homosexual man than with a straight woman.¹³

The Cleveland and Ohl study explored whether Navy officers in different warfare groups or demographic categories held noticeably different opinions of gays or the military’s policy. The authors found differences of opinion based on age, officer community, gender, and race/ethnicity. As anticipated from previous research and various national polls, younger officers appeared to have greater tolerance for gays than did their more senior counterparts; whites expressed greater acceptance of gays than did minorities; officers in “support” communities showed greater tolerance than did those in “warrior” fields; and female officers were considerably more tolerant of gays than were male officers. Regarding differences by gender, for example, 86 percent of male officers preferred to not have homosexuals in their command; this compares with 60 percent

¹³ One cannot help but wonder where the blind and overweight fit in this hierarchy of undesirables. The researchers never inquired.

female officers. In focused interviews, the researchers observed “a sort of kindred spirit” in the views of many women who felt that barriers based on sexuality are similar to those based on gender. It is also noteworthy that three-quarters of all female respondents felt they were more tolerant than their “peers” on the issue of homosexuality in the military. About half of the male respondents claimed to feel the same way.

The so-called “contact hypothesis” was a subject of special interest in the study by Cleveland and Ohl, and it was an area that would be explored again in subsequent research. Briefly, the “contact hypothesis” identifies certain types of contact between persons in majority and minority groups that may help to explain changes in attitudes toward minorities.¹⁴ In the present context, researchers attempted to determine if contact with homosexuals had any noticeable impact on estimated levels of tolerance or the greater acceptance of gays as “individuals” by Navy officers.¹⁵

To address the “contact hypothesis,” Cleveland and Ohl cross-tabulated responses to a question regarding personal contact (“I have a friend or relative who is homosexual”) with responses to various other questions on the survey. Nearly half of all respondents claimed to have (or “possibly” have) a friend or relative who is homosexual. When asked if they felt “uncomfortable in the presence of homosexuals and have difficulty interacting normally,” officers responded differently based on their level of contact: one-third of those who said they definitely (“yes”) had a homosexual friend or relative agreed to being uncomfortable; this compares with about half of those who “possibly” had a gay friend or relative and almost two-thirds of officers who claimed to have no homosexual friends or relatives. Additionally, Cleveland and Ohl found that officers interpreted the concept of “sexual misconduct” differently, according to their level of contact with homosexuals. This and other results led the researchers to conclude that contact between Navy officers with gays promoted generally increased tolerance by officers and more positive views toward allowing gays in military service.

¹⁴ See Gordon Allport, “The Effect of Contact,” in *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1954), 261-281.

¹⁵ On this point, see Theodore R. Sarbin, “The Deconstruction of Stereotypes: Homosexuals and Military Policy,” in Herek, Jobe, and Carney, eds., *Out in Force*, 177-196. Additionally, Gregory Herek has examined the topic with respect to gays in a number of separate publications.

The Second Survey, 1996¹⁶

In April and May of 1996, Margaret Friery administered a survey at NPS with most of the same questions used by Cleveland Ohl two years earlier. Friery added seven questions to the survey and also conducted a series of seven focus group interviews. The interviews were held several months after the survey, in October and November.

Friery distributed 800 surveys to Navy officers at NPS. A total of 306 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 38 percent. This is considerably below the rate obtained by Cleveland and Ohl (about 60 percent), likely reflecting diminished interest in the topic among officers. Nevertheless, a number of officers exhibited remarkable enthusiasm: almost one-third of all respondents took the time to submit written comments along with the survey. Further, despite the lower response rate, respondents were found to compare quite favorably with the total population of Navy officers at NPS based on gender, race/ethnicity, and years of military service.

The results of the second survey indicated that a sizable proportion of Navy officers were still averse to serving with gays. Almost 77 percent of officers in the second survey preferred “not to have homosexuals in my command.” This proportion is lower—by about 5 percentage points—than found on the previous survey. It should also be noted that “preference” is a rather weak indicator of opinion, and it is better examined in terms of intensity. Of particular interest, then, is a relatively larger decline in the intensity of the officers’ “preferences” to not serve with gays—as the proportion of those expressing a “strong” preference against gays fell by 10 percentage points between 1994 (56 percent) and 1996 (46 percent).

In line with the results of the previous survey, Friery found that officers who had contact with a homosexual showed greater tolerance in their answers to survey questions. It is important to point out that the key indicator of personal contact, “I have a friend or relative who is homosexual,” was modified for the second survey by eliminating the response, “possibly,” and forcing officers to select either “yes” or “no.” Because of this change, proportionately more officers said “yes” on the second survey (46 percent) than on the first (29 percent); however, the proportion of officers saying either “yes” or

¹⁶ The discussion of survey results draws heavily from Margaret R. Friery, “Trends in Navy Officer Attitudes Toward the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Policy” (Master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, March 1997)

“possibly” on the first survey (47 percent) was nearly the same as the proportion of officers indicating “yes” on the second survey.

The responses to several question on the second survey provided further support for the “contact hypothesis.” Although the differences in opinion were not particularly large between those who knew a homosexual and those who did not, the trend was consistent. For example, 69 percent of officers who claimed to know a homosexual were averse to serving with gays; this compares with 84 percent of officers who said they did not know a homosexual. Similarly, 64 percent of officers who knew a homosexual agreed with the statement that “gays can cause the downfall of good order and discipline”; 70 percent of officers who did not know a homosexual agreed with this statement. Further, 33 percent of officers who knew a homosexual—compared with 54 percent of those who did not—claimed to feel comfortable interacting normally with gays. When officers were asked to rate themselves on their own tolerance toward gays, 71 percent of those who knew a homosexual claimed to be more tolerant than their peers; among those who did not know a homosexual, 57 percent felt they were more tolerant.

On the matter of tolerance, 15 percent of all respondents thought that they had actually become more tolerant since the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was enacted, and another 55 percent said that “the Navy’s attitude” had moved toward greater tolerance of gays since the policy was established. Additionally, over half of the Navy officers felt that gays would eventually be allowed to serve openly in the military.

The combination of survey questions and focus group interviews led Friery to conclude that Navy officers were even more confused and uncertain in 1996 than in 1994 about the basic elements of the policy and an officer’s role in enforcing it. A number of officers, in fact, disagreed with the policy’s fundamental premise that “homosexuality is incompatible with military service.” Perhaps these were the same officers who freely admitted in the interviews that they exercised discretionary judgment in applying or ignoring the policy. According to Friery: “If the homosexual [known to the officer] is a good performer and does not cause problems in the unit, the officer will probably turn a blind eye to the person’s homosexuality. Conversely, if the service member is not a good performer or could use their homosexuality to disrupt the unit, officers say they will

interpret the policy in a way that will facilitate removing the ‘problem sailor.’”¹⁷ Or, in the words of one Navy officer: “These guys are a resource. And as long as they don’t manifest their sexual orientation by actions or vocalizing this orientation, then the cost associated with their orientation is nonexistent. As soon as they manifest their behavior, then you’ve introduced a whole new set of baggage to their contribution.”¹⁸

The Third Survey, 1999¹⁹

John Bicknell administered the third and most recent survey of Navy officers at NPS in October 1999. Bicknell sought to determine if the attitudes of Navy officers toward gays in the military had changed since “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was introduced, relying heavily on the results of the two previous studies. Bicknell’s research design was modeled after that employed in the earlier efforts, utilizing similar methods of data collection, most of the same survey questions, and a similar target population. The questionnaire used by Friery was modified only slightly by eliminating one question and adding another. Bicknell opted to forego interviews, but expanded the survey to include Marine Corps officers at NPS as well as enlisted personnel from the Navy and Marine Corps at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California.

Survey forms were distributed to 626 Navy officers and 185 Marine Corps officers enrolled at NPS. Navy officers returned 216 completed surveys, and Marine Corps officers returned 74 surveys. This amounts to a return rate of approximately 35 percent for Navy officers and 40 percent for the Marines. In November 1999, a total of 363 survey forms were distributed to Navy enlisted personnel at DLI, and another 250 were distributed to enlisted Marines. Response rates for enlisted personnel were considerably lower than for officers: just 23 sailors (6 percent) and 59 Marines (24 percent) returned completed surveys. Remarkably, written comments were submitted by 74 officers (26 percent of officer respondents) and 19 enlisted personnel (23 percent of enlisted respondents).

¹⁷ Friery, “Trends,” 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁹ The discussion of survey results draws heavily from John W. Bicknell, Jr., “Study of Naval Officers’ Attitudes Toward Homosexuals in the Military” (Master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, March 2000).

Officers who responded to the survey were a reasonably close match to the base population of officers at NPS in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, years of service, rank, and education level. The representativeness of officers by occupational community could not be adequately determined. Although the sample of enlisted respondents was also similar to the enlisted population at DLI, based on several demographic measures, the sample was considered too small for meaningful statistical analysis.

Bicknell's study, despite lacking an interview component, was the most comprehensive of the three summarized here, as he attempted to apply a range of statistical techniques in analyzing the survey results, comparing the attitudes of Navy officers with those of Marine officers, and identifying trends across the three surveys. This brief review can only touch upon his major findings.

As in the previous two surveys, the vast majority of Navy officers (67 percent) "would prefer not to have homosexuals" in their command, and an even higher proportion of Marine Corps officers (88 percent) felt the same way. The proportion of Navy officers who were averse to serving with gays, however, fell with each administration of the survey (15 percentage points lower in 1999 than in 1994 and 10 percentage points lower than in 1996). Even more noteworthy is the fact that the intensity of this feeling declined successively: from 56 percent agreeing "strongly" in the first survey, to 46 percent in the second, to 37 in the third.

This apparent "softening" of views toward gays in the military was observed in survey questions across the board over time; just as Friery found evidence of greater tolerance toward gays in 1996 than in 1994, Bicknell found continuing movement in this direction from the second survey to the third. For example, on one of the key questions—"feeling uncomfortable" with gays and having "difficulty interacting normally" with them—the proportions of Navy officers agreeing declined from 58 percent in 1994 to 44 percent in 1996 to 37 percent in 1999. At the same time, 56 percent of Navy officers agreed that "a division officer's sexual preference has no effect on the officer's ability to lead"—a view shared by 53 percent of officers in 1996 and 38 percent in 1994. Noteworthy, too, was the finding that 20 percent of respondents "strongly agreed" with this statement in 1999, compared with just 12 percent in the first survey. Even the respondents themselves claimed to have greater tolerance: in 1999, 71 percent

of Navy officers felt they were more tolerant than their peers regarding gays in the military; recall that 64 percent made the same claim in 1996 and 56 percent in 1994.

In the two previous surveys, the results clearly demonstrated that Navy officers had a poor grasp of the military's policy and their new responsibilities as "gate keepers." By the time of the third survey, some seven years since "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was introduced, Navy officers expressed greater confidence in themselves as a group: more than four out of five officers felt that they could distinguish the difference between homosexual conduct and sexual orientation. On questions designed to test the knowledge of respondents, officers in 1999 also exhibited proportionately greater agreement regarding the answers. A major problem here, however, was that these officers sometimes coalesced on the wrong answer. For instance, over 80 percent felt that lawful off-duty sexual activity was of no concern to them as Navy officers; almost 70 percent would not investigate a report of hand-holding by two service members of the same sex in a movie theater; and 74 percent did not feel that marching in a "gay parade" demonstrated homosexual orientation. In fact, according to the policy: no distinction should be made in how a service member conducts herself or himself on-duty or off-duty; a report of same-sex hand-holding should be investigated; and marching in a "gay parade" demonstrates sexual orientation (but should not be construed as homosexual misconduct).

In reviewing the findings of the 1994 study, researchers concluded that some errors in interpreting the policy were the result of officers merely attempting to apply common sense. The officers assumed that the policy was intended to ease restrictions on the service of gays. In the second study, a number of officers were surprised to learn that their definition of homosexual misconduct was different than the definition required by the policy. So, one must ask: were the officers in 1999 truly more ignorant of the policy than those who came before; were they assuming too much of the policy, say, that it promoted greater leniency toward the treatment of gays; or were they actually indicating how they would act in a given situation, based on a common-sense approach?

Bicknell concluded that officers in 1999 were generally more tolerant of gays, in many ways, and less inclined to initiate action under the policy: "Policy semantics aside, [the results] show that Navy officers' opinions about conduct and orientation have

changed over the 1994-1999 period, and that respondents are less likely to pursue reports involving gay activity—whatever that activity may be.”²⁰

Although still in the minority, 44 percent of Navy officers in 1999 claimed to “like the current policy better than the old policy.” This compares with 30 percent in 1996 and 23 percent in 1994. An unusual finding here is that appreciation for the current policy has apparently risen along with increased misunderstanding of the policy’s key elements and greater confidence by the very same officers in being able to apply the policy correctly. So, officers like the policy better but understand it less—and they are more convinced than ever that they can fulfill their responsibilities under the policy. This odd set of trends could suggest that Navy officers are becoming more tolerant of gays in the military—the “softening” of attitudes mentioned above—and projecting their views onto the policy. This could also help to explain why almost 60 percent of Navy officers in the third survey felt it was “just a matter of time” before gays are allowed to serve openly in the military—up from 56 percent in 1996 and about 50 percent in 1994.

A continuing theme in the three studies revolves around the notion that wider contact with gays leads to greater tolerance of their presence in the military. Previously, this theme was investigated using a single question as the basis for determining contact—that is, whether the individual had a friend or relative who was homosexual. In the 1999 version of the survey, a question was added to further explore the “contact hypothesis”: “I personally know a homosexual service member.” In addition, respondents were given the opportunity to once again express their uncertainty in answering either question regarding personal knowledge of a homosexual. (Recall that Friery limited responses to either “yes” or “no.”)

The results of the third survey, including the option of indicating uncertainty, suggest that the proportion of Navy officers who claim to have a gay friend or relative has increased: in 1999, 36 percent of the respondents answered “no,” compared with over half of the respondents in each of the previous two surveys. Even more noteworthy are the results to the new question: over 21 percent of Navy officers were *certain* that they knew a homosexual service member, and another 26 percent were not sure enough to say “yes” or “no.” Taken another way, at least one in five Navy officers claimed to know

²⁰ Bicknell, “Study,” 67.

someone in the military who was definitely gay. Now, how would these officers actually *know* that a person was homosexual if they had not been “told” or seen evidence of homosexuality from near or afar? Are these officers unaware of their responsibilities under the policy, or do they just choose to ignore the matter? (Another explanation is that some of the respondents are gay, and they may know others who are gay through confidential networks.) In the sample of Marine Corps officers, discussed more fully below, only 4 percent claimed to know a homosexual service member; about 84 percent of Marine officers were certain that they did *not* know a homosexual in the military.

Similar to the findings of the previous two surveys, Bicknell found that Navy officers who had a gay friend or relative expressed considerably stronger acceptance of gays in the military. For instance, 20 percent of officers with a gay friend or relative indicated that they felt “uncomfortable” or had “difficulty interacting” with gays; the proportion was *three times as large* among those without a gay friend or relative. Forty percent of officers with a gay friend or relative agreed that “allowing gays in the Navy will erode good order and discipline”; this compares with about 80 percent of officers without a gay friend or relative. Overall, levels of acceptance of gays appeared higher in 1999 than in 1996. Interestingly, the opposite trend was found for Navy officers who did not know a homosexual—in a sort of “reverse contact hypothesis”—as their levels of acceptance or “tolerance” actually declined in 1999 from that of the previous survey.

Bicknell also discovered that increased contact generally raised levels of acceptance: Navy officers who had a gay friend or relative *and* claimed to know a gay service member were seemingly more tolerant than were those who reported just one or the other form of contact. Curiously, officers who reported knowing a gay service member, but not having a gay friend or relative, were less tolerant in their survey responses than were those who reported having no gay contacts at all. This may be attributed to the small sample size of officers in the category, or to the understanding that the person known to be homosexual by these officers was neither a friend nor a relative.

According to Allport, casual forms of contact may actually intensify prejudice toward a minority group.²¹

As for officers with both forms of contact—friends or relatives as well as a gay service member—nearly 80 percent agreed that “homosexuals should not be restricted from serving in the Navy.” This compares with about 50 percent of the officers who reported having a gay friend or relative, 24 percent of those with no contact, and 14 percent of officers who said they only knew a homosexual service member.

More intensive statistical analysis of the “contact hypothesis” (an approach using principal components and exploratory factor analysis, model formulation, and ordinary least squares [OLS] regression analysis) suggested that the combination of having a gay friend or relative *and* knowing a gay service member was the key influence in changing the attitudes of Navy officers toward greater tolerance.²² As Bicknell writes: “The significant BOTH variable [combination of forms of contact] parameter estimates ranged in magnitude from -0.68 to -0.97 , which means that persons who have contact with a homosexual are much more likely to be tolerant of gays in the military, comfortable in the presence of homosexuals, and less likely to think that the presence of gays in a unit will [adversely] affect readiness.”²³

Bicknell also attempted to identify differences in attitudes by demographic group and by military service, since the 1999 survey was the first of the three to include a non-Navy sample. As expected from previous research on attitudes toward gays, survey results varied by gender and age: Navy women were more tolerant than Navy men, and junior officers were more tolerant than senior officers in both the Navy and the Marine Corps. In addition, Navy officers were generally more tolerant than officers in the Marine Corps. Comparing results across the three surveys, the responses of Marine Corps

²¹ Just 14 Navy officers were in this category. A total of 31 officers had contact with a friend or relative *and* knew a gay service member; and 68 officers reported having only a gay friend or relative. Allport addresses “casual” forms of contact in “The Effect of Contact,” 263-264. (See Bicknell, “Study,” 84-85.)

²² See Bicknell, “Study,” 101-132 for a complete description of the methodology and results. Measures of comparative tolerance are based on a principal component called Condemnation-Tolerance.

²³ *Ibid.*, 128. As Bicknell points out, however, in citing the work of Gregory Herek and Eric Glunt (“Interpersonal Contact and Heterosexual’s Attitudes Toward Gay Men: Results From a National Survey,” *Journal of Sex Research* 30 (August 1993), 239-44), contact with homosexuals does not necessarily cause heterosexuals to have a more favorable attitude toward gays. Indeed, people who have a more favorable attitude toward gays from the outset are more likely to have contact with gays and develop a relationship that is not superficial.

officers in 1999 often appeared similar to the responses of Navy officers in 1994; and, in certain areas, such as readiness and leadership, Marine officers appeared less tolerant than did Navy officers in 1994. For example, on the question of whether “homosexuals and heterosexuals should have equal rights,” 47 percent of Marine Corps officers said they should not; this compares with 30 percent of Navy officers in 1999, 33 percent in 1996, and 47 percent in 1994. Thirty-two percent of Navy officers in 1999 agreed that they did “not want a gay person as a neighbor”; this is lower than in 1996 (39 percent) and in 1994 (55 percent), and *half* the proportion of Marine Corps officers (64 percent) agreeing with the same statement in 1999.

“Aside from the differences between the two Naval services,” Bicknell observes, “Gender was the largest *tangible* demographic variable found to be linked with levels of tolerance.”²⁴ Navy women emerged as the “single most tolerant group” from the data analysis. For example, 75 percent of female Navy officers claimed to have “no difficulty working for a gay commanding officer,” compared with 37 percent of their male counterparts who felt the same way. About 75 percent of female Navy officers—and 33 percent of male Navy officers—felt that “homosexuals should not be restricted from serving in the Navy.” Nine out of ten female Navy officers agreed that “sexual preference has no effect on leadership ability” and that they (the survey respondent) would have “no difficulty obeying an order from the Commanding Officer to work with a homosexual” on a difficult or dangerous assignment.

Concluding Observations

One particular trend in the 1999 survey may be most useful in speculating about the future. As mentioned above, younger officers were generally more tolerant of homosexuals than were their senior counterparts. Increasing seniority implies that the officer has been “homogenized” to some extent by the organization. Simply put, officers who best resemble those in power, those who rate personnel performance and grant promotion, are most likely to be promoted into the higher echelons of the organization. At the same time, officers who are not promoted according to a set schedule must leave (“up or out”); and officers who recognize that their values, principles, attitudes, or beliefs

²⁴ Bicknell, “Study,” 137.

differ markedly from those of the organization or most of its members may decide to leave voluntarily (that is, “select themselves out”). In the past, this cycle of conformity—resulting from self-selection and the organization’s reward system—has operated to perpetuate a predominately negative view toward gays in the military, and one that apparently remains quite strong in the Marine Corps.

The results of the three surveys of Navy officers, however, suggest that change is afoot. As a majority of Navy officers indicated in 1996 and in 1999, “it is just a matter of time” before the military’s restrictions on gays are completely removed. Increasing levels of tolerance toward gays are found among more officers who have passed through the early hurdles of career advancement and appear headed toward leadership roles in the Navy. For whatever reason—the “contact hypothesis,” changing views in American society, demographic influences—the cycle of conformity is gradually shifting toward greater tolerance of gays in the Navy and, perhaps, in the larger military.

The inevitability of allowing acknowledged homosexuals to serve in the military was an important point of agreement among most scholars who participated in a conference on the military’s policy held in December 2000. “Most of us presume that lifting the ban is inevitable,” observed one participant.²⁵ “Perhaps the military ought to use more constructively the time that ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ provides and try to prepare for the inevitable inclusion of gays and lesbians,” another scholar and retired Navy captain commented, “for I do think it is inevitable.”²⁶ And the director of a legal and political advocacy group for gays stated: “We do see it as inevitable that the policy will be overturned, but we think it will be within five to ten years, not within the next administration.”²⁷

Gays in the military, as our spacemen discovered, dominated all television news about the peacetime military in the entire previous decade, and it is not likely to just disappear quickly or gently. Whenever I contemplate the inevitability of lifting the ban—and it surely is inevitable—I try to remind myself of a discussion held in a graduate seminar on policy analysis a few years ago. The students, all military officers, had just finished reading Ted Sarbin’s excellent paper on “The Deconstruction of Stereotypes,”

²⁵ Belkin and Bateman, eds., “Don’t Ask,” 169.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

originally presented at an APA symposium on “Integrating Lesbians and Gay Men into the Military.” In his paper, Sarbin identifies four discrete constructions of homosexuality in American history: “homosexuality as *sin*, as *crime*, as *sickness*, and, most recently, as the defining feature of a *minority group*.”²⁸ It was my intent in class to work our way through these four social constructions. As it turned out, after nearly two hours of spirited, often heated discussion, I realized that we had essentially failed to progress beyond a single construction, *sin*.

Curious species, indeed.

²⁸ Sarbin, “Deconstruction,” 179. Emphasis added.