



Let's Ask, Let Them Tell, and Listen: The Voices of Gay & Lesbian Veterans

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ABSTRACT

When people in America think of a war veteran, they most likely picture an old, white, Christian man with an American flag pin on his shirt, a wife that supports him, and kids that aspire to be in the US military in the future and follow their father's footsteps. But in reality, veterans come in all different races, backgrounds, genders, and sexualities. In fact, the addition of more diverse veterans has been steadily growing over the years, as it is becoming more and more common for women, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) people to join the military. While I do not mean to separate these groups, and feel as though all veteran's stories need to be shared, I particularly wanted to focus on how gay and lesbian veterans were able to fight against the white, straight, male veteran stereotype and voice what they had to go through. I agree that all veterans' involvements and stories are valuable, but a point that needs emphasizing is how gay and lesbian veterans are undervalued and understudied, when they have come up against different, tougher experiences, simply because of who they love.

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“DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL”

In the early years of America, being a gay or lesbian person was very much frowned upon, and of course that also held true for anyone in the military. Gay and lesbian veterans had to hide who they were in order to not face backlash or harassment from their peers. One important federal policy that was upheld in the US was the notion of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT). This phrase was used by military folks who identified as gay or lesbian, to not speak of their homosexual actions, as it could have led to them being kicked out of the military or be a target for harassment by their peers. The Human Rights Campaign described DADT as “discrimination in its purest form and prevented service members from being openly queer without threat of being discharged.” (Human Rights Campaign, n.d, para. 1). While this policy was theoretically meant to minimize harassment towards military service members based on their sexual orientation, it still upheld many hints of homophobia and ended up doing more harm than good.

WASN’T “DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL” ENOUGH?

Some might argue that the DADT policy was more than enough to secure the rights of gay and lesbian people within the military. In their eyes, as long as people keep their “sinful thoughts” to themselves, there would not be a problem with them serving their country. However, what these people fail to understand is how difficult it could be to hide something that is part of your identity, and not being able to say anything about it could cause a lot of stress and anxiety. Under DADT, people in the military “would not be discharged simply for being gay. Engaging in sexual conduct with a member of the same sex, however, would still constitute grounds for discharge” (Herek, 2012, para. 18). According to [History.com](#), in the around 17 years that the DADT policy was active, “the military had discharged more than 13,000 gays, lesbians, and bisexuals” (Pruitt, 2018, para. 11). It is evident that although DADT was a decent step forward towards change to the treatment of gay and lesbian military members, it still shut them out and left them in the dust.

THE REPEAL

Luckily, in September of 2011, the DADT policy was repealed, allowing gay and lesbian US service members to openly be themselves and not undergo consequences for expressing who they really are. This had a major impact on the gay and lesbian people who were currently serving, or thinking of joining the military, as it showed that they would have a layer of protection from the government

against any harassment or discrimination. After the repeal of the DADT policy was signed, it brought gay people, as a community, together—even those who weren’t involved in the US military. *Rolling Stone* describes the signing of the repeal as bringing “visibility and connectedness to the homosexual community, which continues to influence gay culture in America” (Benes, 2016, para. 1). It is evident that the importance of gay and lesbians having rights, being protected from discrimination in the military, and being treated the same as everyone else, actually indirectly had an effect on all other gay and lesbian people in the world. This interpretation challenges the thoughts of some who have assumed that shedding light on gay and lesbian veterans is invaluable, as it proves that the impact of this repeal had a positive effect on the LGB community as a whole. The repeal was seen as a step further in the right direction toward bringing equality to all sexualities. Just from this big action dealing with just a small group of the community, it has shown that they stand united with each other and it brings them hope that they matter in our society.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

As we have already discussed, a person in the military could get kicked out of their position simply for being gay or lesbian. At the time, even after the DADT policy was signed, there was still enough reason to send someone packing as long as they were seen or heard of doing any homosexual act. In the eyes of the government and military officials, this was to expel any discomfort that it would bring to their peers, as well as because of any religious reasons. Many of these veterans had disruption to their work and lifestyle, even after they served, whether it was before, during, or after the DADT process.

TED SAMORA

Ted Samora, a veteran who served in the Vietnam war and was active in the US military before DADT was signed, was a gay man who struggled during his service, as he wasn’t able to be himself in fear of being booted out of his job and identity as a military service member. In his oral history, Samora described himself as having to kick out two men who were convicted of partaking in homosexual acts, which he felt terrible doing, seeing as he was a gay man himself (Estes, 2007, p. 82). Because of the constant homophobia from his peers around him, and the pressure of having a position where you would have to kick someone out for performing homosexual activities, Samora started doubting his own identity, convincing himself that he

wasn't gay. He explains that he wished he knew more about the concept of sexuality at that time, but instead he "kept it to [himself], which caused a lot of problems"; he even states: "I was homophobic within myself" (Estes, 2007, p. 82). Even though he wasn't a victim of the policies directly, this proves to show that even though he wasn't kicked out for doing any homosexual acts, it still very much took a toll on him and affected his future as well. Ted Samora states that he turned to substances such as alcohol in order to cope with all the issues that came with being a gay man in the military at the time. Because of his unhealthy drinking, Samora decided that "Getting clean and sober was part of a healing process that took nearly two decades," and how a big reason he chose to do that was because of the way that the war and his place in it took a negative toll on him and his relationships with his family (Estes, 2007, p. 83). Ted Samora's experiences show that because of all the hardships he faced being a gay man in the military, he developed alcoholism, which in turn negatively affected his relationship with his family and even though he was able to get clean and rejoin ties, the trauma will live with him forever. Samora's situation highlights the personal struggles gay and lesbian veterans must deal with, specifically before the signing the DADT, and proves that the homophobic system has negative lasting effects on real people. To learn about and study these specific examples, one must realize that these people had very different experiences than a straight man would have, and to know that the way they were treated was wrong is the first step in realizing the significance of studying LGB veterans.

THE REPERCUSSIONS

With the DADT policy now repealed and gay and lesbian people are safe to join the military without fear that they will be kicked out or discriminated against based on their sexuality, you would think that the problem is over. But, that is not necessarily the case. After decades of homophobia and discrimination at large in the military community, there are bound to be some lasting factors that still make it hard for gay and lesbian service members today. In a 2020 article, *Military Times* reports that "Though it was no longer an discharging offense, they feared bias could affect them more subtly" (Myers, 2020, para. 15). The essence of Myers' (2020) argument is that gay and lesbian people in the US military still fear that if they openly come out and express their sexuality, it would cause bias and they wouldn't be treated the same as any other service member on their team. For example, a gay Marine who reported to *Military Times* stated: "I do not want to screw myself before I even

have that opportunity [to be promoted]," (Myers, 2020, para. 16). Even though they are legally allowed to join the US military and cannot be booted out for their sexuality, they still have to face things like not being able to express it, in case it would hinder them from being taken seriously and promoted into a better position. Because of this fear, these veterans are put in a much tougher position, as they wouldn't get the same benefits if they were to truly be themselves, showcasing their own specific different struggles and what they had to do to overcome it. It is important to realize that these repercussions made it even harder for them, and that their voices should be heard of the discrimination they faced, even if it was indirect.

THE FACTS

In a poll of gay and lesbian veterans/current service members, "41% of respondents felt it was important to be open about their identities" (Myers, 2020, para. 19), which shows that less than half of these people truly feel like they are able to fully be themselves, even when there are these policies in place that protect them.

Even after the events of repealing the DADT policy, some gay and lesbian veterans still have a hard time getting the benefits they need post-service. American Progress reports that "LGBT veterans were more than four times more likely than non-LGBT veterans to report that they are finding it difficult to get by financially" (Mahowald, 2022, para. 13). While this statistic also includes transgender people, this still proves that even though we are in a more diverse time and people are more accepting, gay and lesbian veterans are still being discriminated against for their sexuality, more so than heterosexual veterans. By highlighting these difficulties, it not only proves that gay and lesbian veterans had a hard time adapting to the military lifestyle, but also had an even harder time dealing with the post-service world and all its struggles. These people were met with nothing but disappointment and retaliation from the country they fought so hard to keep safe, which is why they need to be heard.

THE END?

Unfortunately, no, it is not the end. Although we, as a country, have made several advancements in the process of helping out gay and lesbian service members and veterans, there are still issues they face in today's society. It is important to show how these human beings who would go so far as to use their life to protect our land and country will still face harassment and be treated differently, simply because they are different.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Hovig Dadayan is a 4th-year student at University of California, Irvine (UCI) where he is pursuing a Bachelor's degree in business economics. He is currently working as a community assistant for an on-campus housing apartment complex at UCI and plans to use that experience to further his career in the business world. Dadayan is passionate about the entertainment industry and hopes to learn a lot about all the behind-the-scenes business aspects that go along with it. He plans to either work in production management, financing, or marketing for a firm in the movie/TV world upon the completion of his undergraduate studies. Along with all this, Dadayan is also fervent in the topic of equality and freedom for every race, gender, and sexuality, which is why he chose to focus on the importance of gay and lesbian veterans in yesterday's and today's society. He hopes you enjoy the read!

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