



SOLDIERS ALL

Robert M. Hill, Ed.D.

ON 20 SEPTEMBER 2011, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” became history. As Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said at a press conference that day, “Thanks to this change, I believe we move closer to

achieving the goal at the foundation of the values that America’s all about—equality, equal opportunity, and dignity for all Americans.” The repeal took a long time to happen, and looking back, it is not always clear why. While it is important to understand the evolution of thinking about and the actual integration of minorities into the U.S. military, how we move forward from this point is what matters most. We have a rare opportunity to reassess progress in achieving an Army that fully reflects the diverse nation we are sworn to defend and that believes in equality among all soldiers. We must take it.

We’ve Come a Long Way, But . . .

In 1994, I attended the U.S. Army Advanced Public Affairs Course at the University of South Carolina. The culmination of the course was a team project that required us to focus on a current or emerging “thorny” issue and to devise a communication strategy to address the issue successfully. Because several legal challenges to Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell were ongoing in the early 1990s, our team believed that it would be overturned within three to five years and that a proactive public affairs campaign was essential to deal with this eventuality.

The three to five years we envisaged turned into 16. Interestingly, what we saw in 1994 as a potentially fractious event became almost a non-event by 2010. I believe this was due to two key factors. First, the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was not imposed by the courts, but rather came through legislative action—allowing the military time to implement the change methodically and carefully. In addition, the acceptance of gays and lesbians among the general population increased during those years.

After exploring the issue in depth in 1994 and conducting focus groups at nearby Fort Jackson, the team I was on devised a hypothetical campaign, primarily internal in focus, entitled “Soldiers All.” The campaign’s objective was to unify the force by reminding soldiers and leaders that what mattered was not one’s faith, skin color, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, but rather our common mission, purpose, and values. Sixteen years later, the question arises: Are we indeed unified by this belief?

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PHOTO: U.S. Marines attend a training session on the military’s new policy on gay and lesbian service members and the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” Camp Pendleton, CA, 28 April 2011. (AP Photo/Lenny Ignelzi)

The answer is mostly *yes*, but room for improvement still exists. As the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell proceeds, the potential for incidents of harassment, intolerance, and even violence is real. Such incidents will likely be few, but we must be collectively vigilant and refuse to idly stand by and let incidents of violence happen, work harder to end sexual harassment and assaults against women, and guard against other forms of bigotry, such as discrimination against Muslim soldiers based on their religion and ethnicity.

Achieving an Army in which "Soldiers All" resonates fully means being sensitive to the fact that very real differences exist within our force, and that these differences make us stronger. While this may increase the challenge of achieving unity, we must accept and encourage our differences with the overarching belief that all soldiers deserve equal respect and opportunity. We must demonstrate this belief by our words and actions.

Army Strong Equals Army of One

To ensure a strong Army, we must ensure an inclusive one, an Army in which we enable every soldier to feel he or she can fully contribute to our collective success. The harmonization of individual gifts and capabilities makes us stronger, more vibrant, and more effective. Such strength begins with accepting that everyone is unique and equally integral to the whole. Denying or marginalizing any one person or sub-element degrades the whole.

As I write this article, media outlets are reporting on the relief of the commander of the USS *Enterprise* for videos in which he appeared when he was the ship's executive officer. The videos show him using foul language and making sexualized jokes, some of which demean gays and women. In a compilation video, this leader acknowledges that the videos have proven offensive to some, yet dismisses these concerns. This commander's admirers argue that the videos were meant to boost morale and that those outside the military (and outside the ship-borne Navy in particular) cannot begin to understand this matter. This cautionary tale suggests that despite significant advances in the integration of minorities into the military, we still have more to learn and farther to go before we are a military and, more specifically, an Army

of One. The following are my thoughts on ways to accelerate this advancement.

Apply the golden rule or its philosophical equivalent. Our human tendency is to fragment ourselves into "in" groups and "out" groups. The Golden Rule's fundamental premise is that we are all equally deserving of love and respect; thus, there can and should be only one group, one large "in" group. We must seek to celebrate difference rather than criticize or contain it, then find ways to synchronize and synergize it. Applying the Golden Rule must be every soldier's and leader's daily task, especially for commanders. They must work tirelessly to promote open, inclusive, and supportive environments.

Immediately correct inappropriate behavior. Creating inclusive and supportive environments means speaking up against and then correcting behavior that works against unity and inclusiveness. Initially, I was going to write *rebuke* inappropriate behavior, but rebukes spark defensiveness. They do not lead to understanding why certain behaviors, such as making slurs or telling derogatory jokes, are inappropriate. Instead, everyone must be willing to take the time to correct, educate, and enlighten himself and his fellow soldiers if we are to produce lasting, positive change. At the same time, we must swiftly punish those who assault or harass others and those who abet such behavior, especially commanders who actively or passively create environments in which predatory behavior is allowed to exist and thrive.

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Be politically correct. The term "political correctness" tends to be employed by those who feel that public leaders, politicians, military brass, and even tactical-level commanders forsake candor in an effort to appeal to or appease everyone. They argue that we should be able, unapologetically and boldly, to single out something for what it is. Unfortunately, all too often, their perception is



President Barack Obama signs the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010, 22 December 2010, at the Interior Department in Washington. From left are CDR Zoe Dunning, Marine SSG Eric Alva, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

distorted by stereotype, misinformation, or insufficient information. While we can't pretend that differences don't exist, we cannot build morale, let alone cohesion, on the backs of any one subgroup or minority. We must work to build unity through difference. This means dealing with teams or subgroups for what they are: collectives of individual people with distinct personalities who together achieve more than they could acting alone. The first place this insight should gain traction is among the members of these teams or subgroups themselves.

Give a voice to everyone. Today's operational environment is highly complex. If organizations are to survive and thrive in complex environments, they must evolve from a top-down hierarchy into a network, and grant every member of the organization equal voice and opportunity to solve the challenges confronting it. Creating more networked units and teams will accomplish two important outcomes that will enable unity through difference. First it will thwart group-think. While group-think is a risk inherent within any group,

it is far less likely to occur in highly diverse units in which heterogeneous rather than homogeneous thinking is actively encouraged. Second, it will foster greater innovation in attacking problems and dealing with them swiftly and effectively by those most capable of addressing them.

All We Can Be

In writing this article, I have incorporated the Army's most recent campaign slogans or mottos. They suggest that all along we have fundamentally believed we are better and stronger when we embrace diversity and treat each other as equals.

Embracing unity through difference means that we must continue to topple barriers that prevent the Army from becoming "All It Can Be." The Navy has enabled women to serve on submarines, and the Army is now considering opening up combat arms to women, but there will always be a subgroup or minority that will test our resolve toward full inclusiveness and unity. If we fail this test, the consequences could be dire.

As a previous Army deputy chief of staff for personnel, Lieutenant General Michael D. Rochelle, stated in 2008, "We tend to think rather narrowly about diversity sometimes—it's a black-white or it's a Hispanic-black-white issue. It is not. Diversity is a national security issue and one that every one of us should be concerned about, frankly, because it is a force multiplier for our soldiers."

There is no better time than right now to redouble our efforts toward creating an Army in which every service member feels an equal and essential part of the whole. We cannot assign the task elsewhere. It falls to each and every one of us. Let us do our duty. **MR**