

Master's thesis

THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES MILITARY

The acceptability and integration of LGBTQ+ service members in the U.S. Armed Forces from 1993 to 2025

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“Equality means more than passing laws. The struggle is really won in the hearts and minds of the community, where it really counts.”

– Barbara Gittings, LGBTQ+ activist.

Foreword

Sciences Po Lille does not intend to express any approval or disapproval of the thesis and opinions expressed in this research paper. They should be considered as those of the author alone. I certify that this research paper is the result of my own work, that it cites and references all sources used, and that it does not contain any passages that have already been used in a similar work.

Abstract and keys words

This research thesis investigates how policies around LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. Armed Forces translate into effective changes within military culture. Specifically, this project aims to understand the interconnection between personnel policies and military culture and how their shared dynamics shape the integration of LGBTQ+ service members. To answer these questions, six qualitative and semi-structured interviews were conducted with active duty service members and veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces to better grasp the lived experiences of queer military personnel in various environments and under different federal policies. The results showed that personnel policies have a decisive influence on LGBTQ+ integration because they shape the military's environment and culture. This study emphasizes the need to implement inclusive policies that will contribute to shifting military culture toward a safer environment for LGBTQ+ service members to integrate and thrive, benefiting them and military readiness.

LGBTQ+ community – sexual orientation – gender – U.S. military – service members – veterans – personnel policies – “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” – integration – discrimination

Résumé et mots-clés

Ce mémoire de recherche porte sur la façon dont les politiques relatives aux personnes LGBTQ+ dans les forces armées des États-Unis se traduisent par des changements effectifs au sein de la culture militaire. Il s’agit de comprendre l’interconnexion entre politiques fédérales et culture militaire et comment les dynamiques qu’elles partagent façonnent l’intégration des militaires LGBTQ+. Pour répondre à ces questions, six entretiens semi-directifs ont été menés auprès de militaires en service actif et d’anciens combattants des Forces armées américaines afin de mieux comprendre les expériences vécues par le personnel militaire queer dans divers environnements et sous différentes politiques fédérales. Les résultats ont montré que les politiques du personnel ont une influence décisive sur l’intégration LGBTQ+ parce qu’elles façonnent l’environnement et la culture des militaires. Cette étude met l’accent sur la nécessité de mettre en œuvre des politiques inclusives qui contribueront à faire évoluer la culture militaire vers un environnement plus sûr pour les militaires LGBTQ+ afin qu’ils puissent mieux s’intégrer, dans leur intérêt et celui des forces armées.

communauté LGBTQ+ – orientation sexuelle – genre – armée américaine – militaires – vétérans – politique du personnel – “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” – intégration – discrimination

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Glossary and acronyms

Bisexual: A person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one gender, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gay: A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to people of the same gender. Men, women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

Gender: Refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. It includes norms, behaviors and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy.

Gender identity: Refers to a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or designated sex at birth.

Gender expression: External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, body characteristics or voice.

Heterosexual: A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to people of the opposite gender.

Homophobia: The fear and hatred of or discomfort with people who are attracted to members of the same sex.

Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

Queer: A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people. This term was previously used as a slur, but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ+ movement.

Sexual orientation: An inherent enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

DADT : Don't Ask Don't Tell policy

DoD : Department of Defense

LGBTQ+ : Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and others (inclusive acronym for all sexual orientations and gender identities)

LGB : Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual

VA: Veteran Affairs Department

VHA: Veteran Health Affairs Department

Table of contents

Foreword	3
Abstract and keys words.....	4
Acknowledgments	5
Glossary and acronyms	6
Introduction	8
Chapter 1 : The evolution of the integration of LGBTQ+ troops in the Armed Forces	17
Section 1: A brief history of personnel policies.....	17
Section 2: An intersectional approach to integration: joint evolution with women’s rights.....	29
Chapter 2 : How military culture shapes the integration of LGBTQ+ service members	40
Section 1: The concept of military culture	40
Section 2: A shift in military culture favoring LGBTQ+ integration	51
Chapter 3 : Interactions between federal personnel policies and military culture	60
Section 1: Influence of personnel policies on effective integration of LGBTQ+ soldiers	60
Section 2: Dissociation between troops beliefs and official policies	71
Conclusion.....	78
Bibliography	80
Annexes	91

Introduction

A 2024 Gallup survey found that LGBTQ+ identification in the United States is now at 9.3%, compared to 7.6% in 2023.¹ Particularly, more than one in five Generation Z adults identify as LGBTQ+ and consider themselves something other than heterosexual.² According to Gallup, which conducted this poll, the recent increase is due primarily to more adults in their late teens, 20s, and 30s saying they are bisexual, especially women. Gallup reports that the percentage of U.S. adults who consider themselves something other than heterosexual has nearly tripled since Gallup first asked about sexual orientation and transgender identity in 2012, precisely because younger generations are more likely to be vocal about their identities. The polling company predicts that “the rate of LGBTQ+ identification is likely to continue to grow, given the generational shifts underway,” with over 10% of LGBTQ+ identifiers within the next three decades.³ Figures are unequivocal: Americans have become more and more vocal about their sexual orientation and gender identities.



Source: Gallup

¹ Results for this poll are based on telephone interviews conducted by ReconMR in 2024, with combined random samples totaling 14,162 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. In each survey, Gallup asks respondents whether they identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or something else.

² Jones, J. M. (2025, February 20). *LGBTQ+ identification in U.S. rises to 9.3%*. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/656708/lgbtq-identification-rises.aspx>

³ Jones, J. M. (2024, March 13). *LGBTQ+ Identification in U.S. Now at 7.6%*. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/611864/lgbtq-identification.aspx>

On June 28, 1969, the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village in New York City, was raided by the police and was the scene of violent riots gathering about 400 people. The clash kept going for over six days and eventually contributed to a change in the discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ activism in the U.S. Due to intense media coverage, the Stonewall protests gave birth to a much larger political movement for gay rights. Many historians view the Stonewall events as a shift in gay activism that gave more visibility to the LGBTQ+ community in public space.⁴ The gay rights movement continued to develop in the 1970s and 1980s alongside other movements for civil rights, feminism, and other minorities. Through political activism and legal battles, the gay rights movement has advocated for equality and justice for homosexuals and other sexual and gender minorities. Over the years, gay activism contributed to changing views on homosexuality in American society, making the LGBTQ+ community more visible and accepted.

Although the debate on homosexuality seems to belong in the past, sexuality and gender minorities are still topics up for debate in public space and political discussions. It is particularly the case today for transgender individuals, whose existences are denied at the federal level and who have become targets of the Trump administration. Only one week after his inauguration as President of the United States on January 20th, 2025, Donald Trump signed an executive order directly threatening transgender people's rights. He declared in Executive Order 14166: "It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality."⁵ Through this executive order, Trump redefined the word "sex" at the federal level so that it only refers to biological characteristics "at conception" that are unchangeable. Therefore, it directly targets transgender, non-binary, and intersex people who are considered deviant from the new definition. Although the Williams Institute underlined the limits of executive orders in terms of practical impacts, signing such an order in the first week in office sent a strong political message: transgender, non-binary, and intersex identities do not exist. Through this executive order, Donald Trump is paving the way for future attacks on LGBTQ+ rights by questioning nondiscriminatory laws. Many advocacy groups, as well as judges across the country, have filed lawsuits to challenge Trump's anti-LGBTQ+ orders.

This backlash in the civilian world is also happening in the military, as the new administration revoked Biden's Executive Order 14004 of January 25th, 2021 (Enabling All Qualified

⁴ Library of Congress. (n.d.). 1969: *The Stonewall Uprising - LGBTQIA+ Studies: A Resource Guide*. <https://guides.loc.gov/lgbtq-studies/stonewall-eraGuides Loc.gov+7>

⁵ The White House. (2025, January 20). *Defending women from gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth to the federal government*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>

Americans to Serve Their Country in Uniform⁶) that granted transgender service members the right to serve openly in the military. Shortly after, Trump announced the revival of the ban on transgender people openly serving in the Armed Forces through a new executive order, backed by a Pentagon Memorandum about military personnel readiness. President Trump stated in Executive Order 14183, "Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness," that being trans "conflicts with a soldier's commitment to an honorable, truthful, and disciplined lifestyle."⁷ The new policy, excluding trans troops, provides that service members who have a current diagnosis or history of, or exhibit symptoms consistent with, gender dysphoria will be processed for administrative separation. Gender dysphoria is defined by the Department of Defense as "a marked incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and assigned gender," making transgender service members unfit to serve.

In response to the discriminatory policy, numerous judges, like U.S. District Judge Benjamin Settle in Washington State, issued a preliminary injunction against the executive order, arguing that the administration had not presented proof that trans troops harm military readiness. U.S. District Judge Ana C. Reyes in D.C. also filed a lawsuit against the order, saying that it was unconstitutional and that such a policy undermined national security. On May 6th, 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that the Trump administration was allowed to start enforcing its ban on transgender service members, after lower courts blocked the president's executive order.⁸ Although the legal battle is still ongoing and LGBTQ+ advocates keep opposing the ban, the Pentagon began the removal of 1,000 service members who openly identify as transgender, following a directive issued by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth on May 8th. Other trans troops who have not come out were given 30 days to separate voluntarily. As of December 9th, 2024, there were 4,240 service members diagnosed with gender dysphoria across the Armed Forces, according to officials.⁹ Drawing on different estimates, including an official Defense Department estimate, the Palm Center recommends citing 14,700 as the number of transgender troops serving, as of 2018. Today, estimates are still around the same figure. In 2025, 58% of Americans continue to favor allowing

⁶ The White House. (2025, January 20). *Initial rescissions of harmful executive orders and actions*.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/initial-rescissions-of-harmful-executive-orders-and-actions/>

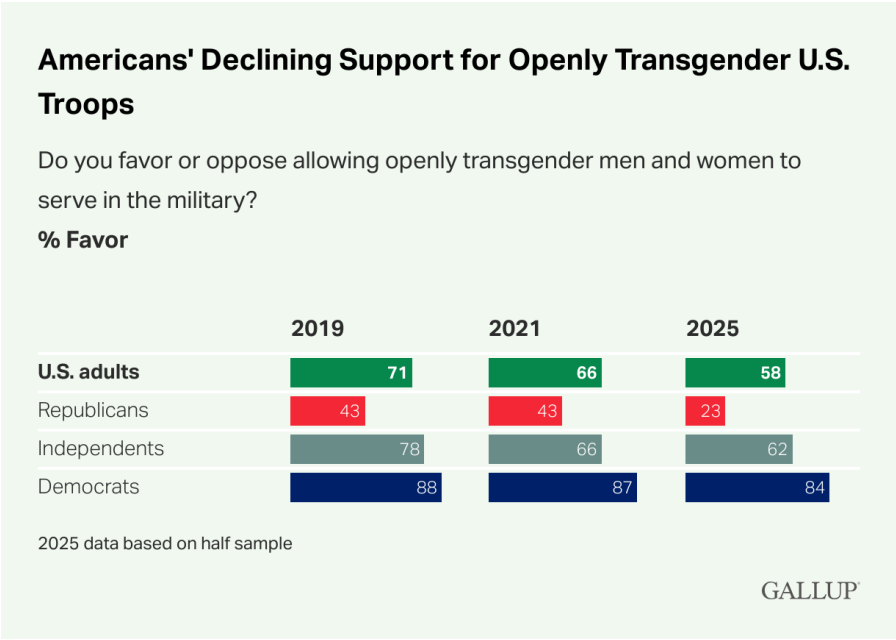
⁷ The White House. (2025, January 27). *Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness*.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/prioritizing-military-excellence-and-readiness/>

⁸ Marimow, A., E. & Jouvenal, J. (2025, May 6). Supreme Court lets Trump ban transgender troops while case continues. *The Washington Post*.

⁹ Reporter, G. S. (2025, May 9). US to begin immediate removal of up to 1,000 trans military members. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/08/trump-pentagon-trans-military-ban>

openly transgender men and women to serve in the U.S. military, but this support has declined from 71% in 2019 and 66% in 2021, primarily because of Republican decline from 43% to 23%.¹⁰



Source: Gallup

The topic of LGBTQ+ people serving in the military is not new. However, in recent years, it has been brought back into the political arena through the debate about the right of transgender individuals to serve. The current targeting of trans troops echoes the past targeting of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) service members before the repeal in 2010 of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that allowed service for homosexuals, as long as they did not disclose their sexual orientation. Today, civilian and military officials use similar rhetoric about readiness and professionalism to justify the exclusion of transgender service members, saying they are unfit to serve and will disturb military effectiveness. In light of the recent events previously described, civilian and military leaderships, through federal legislation, hold a strong power over the military and its members, by deciding who gets to serve and under which conditions. Despite restrictions and exclusive policies, LGBTQ+ individuals have always served in the ranks of the U.S. military throughout history, whether they served openly or not. Some examples prove that LGBTQ+ service members can resist and challenge unfavorable policies. Other instances show that they could have negative experiences in the military, even in times of favorable policies that allowed open service for sexual and gender minorities, because of persisting cultural norms.

¹⁰ Brenan, M. (2025, February 10). *Openly transgender troops backed by reduced majority in U.S.* Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/656534/openly-transgender-troops-backed-reduced-majority.aspx>

According to a RAND Health Related Behaviors Survey from 2018, 6.3% of military personnel described themselves as LGBTQ+ across all the services, which is equivalent to approximately 79,000 service members. Given the persisting stigmas around LGBTQ+ identities in a military context, these figures are most likely underestimates, as some individuals might not want to disclose information about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity for fear of prejudice and discrimination. Although lesbians, gays, and bisexuals have been allowed to serve openly since 2011, challenges remain for the LGBTQ+ community within the military. Some queer service members still experience discrimination and struggle to integrate, despite improved inclusivity across all services of the Armed Forces. This persisting inconsistency between official policies and lived experiences for the LGBTQ+ community in the military needs to be further addressed to better understand the dynamics at play and eventually improve LGBTQ+ integration. In the current context of backlash for transgender service members following Trump's election in November 2024, undertaking this research appears even more critical. Through years of activism and legal battles, LGBTQ+ individuals' rights have kept improving. However, recent news shows that these rights cannot be taken for granted, as the administration in place can threaten them. For better or worse, policies are not immutable and can change depending on the leadership that holds power. In turn, the lives and rights of human beings can be impacted through discrimination and exclusion.

Literature review

This research thesis seeks to be incorporated within a broad academic framework, at the intersection of military sociology, public policy analysis, cultural studies, and gender and sexual minorities studies.

Throughout history, the integration of LGBTQ+ people into the U.S. military has been a complex process influenced by evolving legal, political, social, and cultural contexts. Various academic and policy-oriented studies have addressed the different aspects influencing LGBTQ+ integration, from institutional and legal reforms to cultural changes. One of the primary debates in the literature has centered on the impact of LGBTQ+ inclusion on military readiness and effectiveness. Although DADT was enacted to protect military effectiveness, authors like Nathaniel Frank in his book *Unfriendly Fire* (2009) argued that the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy was a gay ban based on prejudice and not military necessity. Through his research, he showed that DADT was anti-gay because it discriminated against gay people, despite the policy being presented as progressive and accepting. Since the 1990s and especially in the 2000s, there has been a general consensus in the academic field about the fact that LGBTQ+ individuals do not negatively impact military effectiveness,

especially as multiple and extensive studies were conducted to assess the impact of LGBTQ+ personnel on the military when officials discussed the potential repeal of DADT. Results proved that LGBTQ+ service members did not disrupt unit cohesion or negatively impact military effectiveness and readiness.

Various actors in both the civilian world and the military eventually reached the consensus that DADT had negative consequences for many LGBTQ+ veterans while it was in place, but also after it was repealed. Most scholars agree that it is necessary to allow LGBTQ+ military personnel to serve openly as a moral and practical imperative. Today, the resurgence of an anti-woke rhetoric that is hostile to LGBTQ+ integration into the Armed Forces is visible at the forefront of the political arena. The right of transgender individuals to serve openly is still a heated debate in the United States, as the most recent news has shown. Despite changes in federal policy, several authors like Shields and Weiss highlighted how the persistence of heteronormative and masculine norms in military culture hinder the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ personnel. More recently, in 2022, McNamara showed how LGBTQ+ service members can still face microaggressions, harassment, and discrimination because of their identities. His findings underscored the importance of leadership and education in implementing inclusive policies and ensuring effective integration of LGBTQ+ members.

Although several scholars have researched sexuality and gender in the U.S. Armed Forces, there are still significant gaps in the literature, and many aspects of the topic have not yet been addressed. Generally, little research has been conducted since DADT's repeal. Most literature about LGBTQ+ service members is condensed between the 1990s and 2000s, when the topic was particularly present in the public sphere and the political debate. Once the open integration of LGB personnel was not up for debate, it stopped drawing the attention of scholars. Therefore, it can be more challenging to understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ troops post-repeal and determine the practical effects behind legal progress. The few scholars in the field of cultural and gender studies who engaged in the topic after DADT argued that LGBTQ+ integration has remained a struggle because the improved legal framework did not change the heterosexist (homophobic) military culture that perpetuates prejudice and discrimination. Alford and Van Gilder particularly expanded on this point, arguing that even after the repeal of DADT, persisting cultural and institutional practices hindered full inclusion and equality for sexual minorities. Additionally, it appears that the case of transgender service members has not gathered much attention, and their experiences have not been thoroughly studied. Since the issue of transgender service members has been particularly volatile, the literature on the topic is still emerging. Authors like Schaefer and Morris have primarily focused on health care access for trans troops and the impacts of policy on

their mental health. These studies underline how crucial it is to implement inclusive policies for the well-being of transgender individuals.

Research question and hypotheses

This thesis aims to contribute to the research about LGBTQ+ integration in the Armed Forces by offering a new perspective at the intersection of the legal and cultural aspects of the question at hand. The ambition of this project is also to be more inclusive by integrating the experiences of transgender individuals who chose to serve in the U.S. military. To do so, this thesis will explore the following research questions:

How do policies around LGBTQ+ people in the Armed Forces translate into effective changes within military culture?

More precisely, how does the interconnection between personnel policies and military culture shape the integration of LGBTQ+ service members?

To address these study questions, I formulated two central hypotheses:

1. Military personnel policies do not positively impact LGBTQ+ integration in the military.
2. The persistent traditional military culture is hostile to LGBTQ+ identities and prevents the effective integration of queer people into the Armed Forces.

For the purpose of this thesis, the focus will be on the 1993-2025 period, comprising the implementation and repeal of DADT and the recent legal back-and-forth for transgender troops. This will allow us to grasp the evolution of the integration of LGBTQ+ service members over time and better understand how policies and military culture shape this integration.

Methodology

A comprehensive analysis of a large variety of sources was undertaken to produce this research thesis. Primary sources, composed of official reports from federal institutions and legal documents from the U.S. administration, were used to understand the integration of LGBTQ+ personnel on the institutional and legal levels. Many statistics were used throughout this paper to account for global trends regarding LGBTQ+ integration. It is essential to keep in mind that those statistics are only partial tools that do not necessarily fully represent the LGBTQ+ community within the military and outside. Only a handful of people take part in such surveys, and among them, many can choose not

to identify as part of the LGBT community, for various reasons. Additionally, numerous secondary sources such as academic literature, press articles, papers from think tanks, and activist work were examined to analyze the military institution's diverse and complex social dynamics.

The heart of this research project rests upon the semi-structured interviews conducted with LGBTQ+ service members. I led six qualitative interviews with American service members throughout February and March 2025. All interviews were conducted through WhatsApp calls or video calls, given the remoteness of my field of inquiry. Recruiting people for interviews was a laborious task, having no initial acquaintance in the U.S. military and being far from the country. Therefore, I mainly used social media, especially TikTok, to contact service members who would mention their identity online. Once I established contact with one person, I relied on snowball sampling by asking them to spread the word if they knew anyone interested in participating in my research. First, I interviewed Owen, an active duty soldier in the Army who identifies as a gay man. Then I talked to Zoe Dunning, a veteran who served in the Navy and who identifies as a lesbian. Next was Chris, a trans man who served in the Army and is now retired. Through Chris' interview, I met Jayden, a trans man who served in the Army. He is currently going through a medical board for separation, independently from his identity. Jayden introduced me to Chrissy, a trans woman working in cyber for the Air Force. She is also in the process of separating because of the recent policy against trans service members. Finally, I heard about Joseph, a Marine Corps veteran who identifies as a gay man.

Despite my struggles, I was able to gather a pretty diverse sample in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity (2 gay men, 1 lesbian, 2 trans men, and 1 trans woman), but also in terms of branches and jobs within the military. This diverse sample allowed me to recognize shared themes and struggles, despite different experiences. Four interviewees were in their late twenties, giving me a good up-to-date situation, and two others were older veterans (50-60), giving me a longer-term perspective on how things have evolved for the LGBTQ+ community under DADT and post-repeal.

Notes on terminology

Throughout this paper, I chose to use the acronym LGBTQ+, when referring to the queer community as a whole, to embrace all sexual orientations and to be as inclusive as possible. Regardless of the specific personal labels people may use, anyone who identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community will be considered a minority within the military, which is mostly cisgender and heterosexual.

I also chose to shorten the acronym into LGB when I am discussing issues under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” because lesbian, gay, and bisexual were the specific identities explicitly targeted by this policy. However, other closeted sexual and gender identities also suffered from such harmful policies.

The words “military” and “Armed Forces” are used interchangeably throughout this work to refer to all branches of the U.S. military.

Outline

To address my research question, I divided my analysis into three chapters.

In chapter 1, I will describe the evolution of the integration of LGBTQ+ troops in the Armed Forces. After briefly reviewing the earliest personnel policies on homosexuality, I will expand on the implementation and the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a policy that allowed homosexuals to serve if they remained closeted, before accounting for the most recent policies regarding LGBTQ+ integration. Then, I will adopt an intersectional approach to better understand the progressive integration of sexual minorities in the military by exposing the similar historical evolution with women's rights and by emphasizing the role of stereotypes in restricting both women's and LGBTQ+ integration.

In chapter 2, I will analyze how military culture shapes the integration of LGBTQ+ service members. First, I will define military culture as a sociological concept that clashes with diversity before explaining the varying degrees of inclusion among different branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. Then, I will account for the ongoing shift in military culture that favors the integration of LGBTQ+ service members by explaining how the civilian world induces those cultural changes and how younger generations are entering the military institution.

In chapter 3, I will elevate my research to investigate the interactions between federal personnel policies and military culture. To do so, I will argue that personnel policies have a significant influence on the effectiveness of LGBTQ+ integration into the military because they shape military culture and negatively impact recruitment and retention of service members. Finally, I will emphasize the paradoxical nature of the dissociation between troops' beliefs and official policies by showing that inclusive policies do not necessarily involve inclusive integration and by highlighting how anti-LGBTQ+ policies tend to contradict most service members' beliefs.

Chapter 1 : The evolution of the integration of LGBTQ+ troops in the Armed Forces

Section 1: A brief history of personnel policies

A. From the Revolutionary War to the implementation of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

Before World War I, U.S. military policy toward homosexuality was vague, without officially excluding LGBTQ+ service members. However, since the Revolutionary War, “homosexual acts” that disrupted order and discipline had been grounds for discharge. This meant that restrictions were enforced based on behavior, referring to the act of sodomy, which was considered perverted or unnatural, and not sexual orientation per se. In 1917, the Articles of War established sodomy if committed in an assault as a crime subject to punishment by a court-martial. Three years later, the definition was extended to consensual sodomy. In the interwar period, many psychiatrists classified homosexuality as a mental or behavioral disorder, leading to discharges on medical grounds. Then, during World War II, the U.S. Armed Forces established a policy that discharged homosexuals regardless of their behavior. It was a significant shift because the focus was no longer on a person’s acts and behaviors but was now about their preferences and identity. In 1942, military regulations began listing homosexuality as an excludable characteristic for the first time, allowing the military to judge recruits’ sexual orientation, without evidence of prohibited conduct.¹¹

World War II really systematized discrimination against homosexuals based on stereotypes that were actually often unrelated to homosexuality. This meant military authorities would conduct mental health screenings to determine whether people were suitable for service, homosexuality being a crippling characteristic. Indeed, gays and lesbians were seen as sexual deviants who would disrupt military order by embarrassing heterosexual service members and violating their privacy, to the point of sexual predation and harassment. In 1949, a new regulation by the Department of Defense stated that “Homosexual personnel, irrespective of sex, should not be permitted to serve in any branch of the Armed Forces in any capacity.” This directly targeted the status of homosexuality and not just the act of sodomy.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, same-sex relations had been criminalized and cause for discharge, although it did not deter some LGBTQ+ soldiers to serve, only forcing them into silence. In 1982, because the Carter Administration started to loose legal

¹¹ Goodhart, A., & Taylor, J. (2020, May 29). LGBTQ Military Service Policies in the United States. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

legitimacy for excluding gay people, the DoD sharpened its language and enacted a policy explicitly banning gay men and lesbian women from their ranks, stating that “Homosexuality is incompatible with military service.” The military would justify this policy as necessary for “discipline, good order, and morale.” In the decade following, despite the greater tolerance of LGBTQ+ in uniforms mirroring the greater awareness of gay people in civilian society, 17,000 service members were discharged from their duties for being homosexual.¹²

In 1993, under activist pressure, President Clinton enacted a new policy called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” allowing gay and lesbian citizens to serve in the military as long as they did not make their sexual orientation public. If they kept silent, their leadership would not inquire about their sexual orientation. Additionally, the policy forbade military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted homosexual service members and applicants. For the first time, restrictions about LGB¹³ personnel were explicitly and formally written into federal law, meaning that it would require an act of Congress to end the ban. During his campaign for president, Clinton pledged to open the military to gays and lesbians, before he backtracked because of bipartisan conflicts. When asked by a Harvard student in 1991 if gay people should be allowed to service in the military, he said they should and that he would work to overturn the ban.

Right after he came into office in January 1993, Clinton started to address his pledge by writing a memorandum asking for a draft executive order ending discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, which prompted intense media coverage. However, this was met with feral resistance from military and congressional leaders like General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, who still thought homosexuality was incompatible with service. In the face of such a strong opposition from the Congress, Clinton could not issue an executive order because it would simply be reversed by the Congress who threatened to codify the ban on LGB soldiers in the military.¹⁴ In this tensed context and after having realized Congress would not back his decision, Clinton instead aimed at finding a compromise, which translated into the new DADT policy. It was designed to satisfy both parties, those who wanted to end the longstanding ban on gays serving in the U.S. military and those who felt having openly gay troops would hurt morale and cause problems within military ranks.¹⁵

¹² National Archives Foundation. (2024, 25 September). *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act of 2010*. <https://archivesfoundation.org/documents/dont-ask-dont-tell-repeal-act-2010/>

¹³ DADT did not mention the case of transgender people, hence the use of LGB when referring to DADT.

¹⁴ National Defense Research Institute. (2010). The History of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” In *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: An Update of RAND’s 1993 Study* (pp. 39–68). RAND Corporation.

¹⁵ Pruitt, S. (2018, April 25). *Once Banned, Then Silenced: How Clinton’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Policy Affected LGBTQ Military*. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/articles/dont-ask-dont-tell-repeal-compromise>

For DADT supporters, it was seen as a more liberal policy representing progress for the LGBTQ+ community since sexual orientation was presented as a personal and private matter that the military could not ask about. Although they acknowledged that it was not perfect, many thought that it was still better than what it used to be for gay personnel and that it represented improvement toward more inclusivity, allowing gay Americans to serve their country.¹⁶ In contrast, many LGBTQ+ activists condemned the fact that it forced people to hide and remain a secret without actually improving their experiences nor combatting the prejudice against them. For most activists, it was a bitter disillusion, especially after hearing so much about Clinton's initial determination to end the ban. Both sides ended up disliking DADT and they thought the ban was either unacceptable or not strict enough. On the one hand, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) advocated for military service without restriction for gay men and lesbians and called for a repeal of the policy. On the other hand, the Center for Military Readiness (CMR) backed an outright ban and considered that DADT was too conciliatory. Debates persisted in the following years during implementation because of the ambiguity of the DADT policy.

If on paper this policy seemed to grant LGB service members¹⁷ some sort of protection, in reality, DADT didn't prevent the discharge of thousands of gays and lesbians from service, nor did it protect their human rights. The policy became a federal statute passed by Congress, went into effect in February 1994 and stated that if homosexuality was openly acknowledged, it "would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability."¹⁸ This means the military as an institution stayed deeply homophobic and continued to view LGB service members as a threat to its so-called values and principles. Whether it came from anti-gay beliefs or simply a lack of education about the LGB community, it does not change the reality that they supported a policy that promoted prejudice and intolerance. Opponents of gay service, whether they were homophobic conservatives or simply military experts who were only scared lifting the ban would undermine the armed forces, all contributed to repressing the reality of homosexuality.¹⁹ The implementation of "Don't Ask Don't Tell" led to the discharge of around 14,000 service members during the almost 18 years DADT was in place, not only complicating integration but preventing it outright. As shown in the following graph, discharges followed notable trends from 1980 to 2008. Between 1982 and 1994, separations

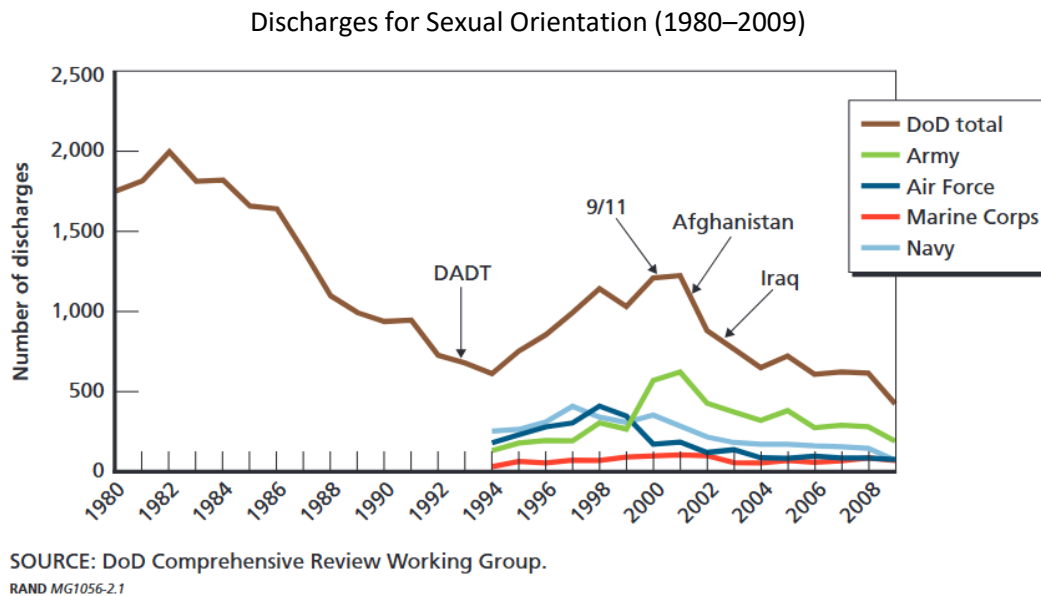
¹⁶ The White House. (2021, September 20). *10 years later: Looking back at the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/20/10-years-later-looking-back-at-the-repeal-of-dont-ask-dont-tell/>

¹⁷ DADT did not mention the case of transgender individuals, who were still not officially allowed to serve, although many still did.

¹⁸ Ibid, Pruitt, S. (2018)

¹⁹ Frank, N. (2009). *Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America*. St. Martin's Press.

for sexual orientation steadily declined before they rose again after the implementation of DADT. Since 2002, discharges have sharply fallen, coinciding with the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.



Opponents to DADT criticized the hypocrisy of military authorities for slowing down discharges when they needed troops to engage in wars. When asked about separations under DADT, Navy veteran Zoe Dunning said:

When 9-11 happened and we needed people because we entered into that first Gulf War, the number of discharges went down dramatically because it was like, “Oh, we need people.” So, we're not going to, you know because we're going to war, and we need people. And then once the combat is over, it's like people would come back from deployment and then be discharged. Or people would come out proactively and be like, I don't want to go to war. And they'd be like, “Too bad. You're going anyway.” And then when they come back from their deployment, then they're discharged.²⁰

When implementing DADT, officials were supposed to take into account Clinton’s initial distinction between sexual orientation and conduct. This specificity created a loophole in the policy and served as Zoe Dunning’s defense against a military tribunal that called for her discharge in 1993 after she

²⁰ Interview with Zoe Dunning, February 27, 2025.

publicly declared that she was a lesbian during a political rally in support of Clinton's pledge to allow LGB personnel to serve: "On appeal, her attorneys argued that since the law made no mention of sexual orientation and was structured entirely around the concept of sexual conduct, her statement related to sexual orientation and thus was not an admission that she practiced or intended to engage in same-sex acts."²¹ At first, military authorities announced that if a gay soldier made a statement about his homosexuality, it would create a rebuttable presumption that the person is engaging in homosexual acts or intent to do so, meaning they would have to find proof that they were not likely to engage in same-sex sexual acts. After Zoe Dunning won her case and thus highlighted the loophole in the policy that statement did not equal conduct, military officials did not want other LGB soldiers to use this argument to go around DADT and be able to come out. In 1995, DoD General Counsel Judith Miller closed the loophole in a policy memorandum in which she invalidated future rebuttals using Dunning's defense. LGB personnel could no longer hope to come out without risking a discharge.

Beyond the outright legal and theoretical framework of DADT, practical and real-life consequences affected the lesbians, gays and bisexuals in the military. LGBTQ+ troops like Zoe Dunning, the first openly lesbian service member in the 1990s, felt like DADT inspired a climate of fear and repression where people could undergo investigation based on assumptions about their sexual orientation, even though the policy forbade any form of discrimination against closeted members.²² LGB personnel faced a lot of pressure in their daily lives in the military because they were not allowed to mention their same-sex partner, even in complicated situations that involved injuries, recovering from trauma or mental health issues. They always had to be careful and stay on alert to make sure nothing prejudicial slipped out.

This aspect was very well depicted in E. J. Noyes' fiction novel *Ask, Tell* (2017) in which she portrays a down-to-earth experience of two women in love, serving in the Army and deployed in Afghanistan. The author spoke with a number of veterans and service members to write this story and make it as true-to-life as possible, even though the characters are fictional. She really tried to look below the surface of DADT that sets the context for the book and to show what serving under such a policy was like for LGB soldiers. For example, one of her lesbian characters went through a breakup that deeply impacted her mental health but that she could not mention to her Army doctor during consultation. Because of DADT, she either had to lie and explicitly refer to her partner using words like boyfriend or husband, or simply avoid the whole relationship talk, which eventually led

²¹ National Defense Research Institute. (2010). The History of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." In *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: An Update of RAND's 1993 Study* (p. 49). RAND Corporation.

²² Interview with Zoe Dunning.

to avoiding other topics that could be crucial to tackle the issue at hand and get better. Through fiction, E. J. Noyes gave representation to those service members who had to serve in silence by depicting their struggles like concealing their identities and not being able to share important aspects of their lives with their brothers and sisters in arms. Even though their colleagues and friends could be open-minded and have no problem with gay people, it was still a risk to disclose their identity, since they could be reported for it and then discharged. In that sense, LGB service members did not even have free speech, and they were forced to censor themselves, which means they were denied the same respect and the same human rights as their heterosexual counterparts. Despite DADT being presented as a more progressive policy for LGB service members, it did not improve their integration within the military, as they could not serve openly and share this aspect of their identities.

B. From the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” to the present day

Opposition to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” mounted over the years, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, as the United States began fighting wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. A shift occurred under the Bush Administration, who did not pay much attention to social issues within the military. Instead of focusing on how DoD implemented DADT, advocacy groups now emphasized on the need to repeal the policy, redirecting their resources to fight a legal battle in Congress and challenging the constitutionality of the ban. This battle was a long one, considering that the first series of repeal bills was introduced in 2005, only for DADT to be repealed in 2010. Although no legal change happened under the Bush Administration, LGBTQ+ advocates kept working toward the repeal of the ban, especially as they saw an opening with the election of Barack Obama in 2008. The newly elected President was being very careful in his attempt to repeal the ban after witnessing Clinton’s struggles. While waiting for the right moment to actually repeal the ban, he took measures to make the implementation of DADT more difficult, such as elevating the rank of a military officer whose authorization was required to investigate potential LGB people or discharge a homosexual service member.²³

In 2010, in the context of an important debate around DADT in Congress, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates set up a Comprehensive Review Working Group for nine months to undertake studies and surveys in order to assess the impact of a potential repeal and draft

²³ Goodhart, A., & Taylor, J. (2020, May 29). LGBT Military Service Policies in the United States. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

recommendations in case of a repeal. In an attempt to stay neutral, the goal of the working group was not to determine whether the policy should be repealed but rather understand if it could be repealed and how to implement it. To do so, the working group made of service members and civilian DoD employees engaged with advocacy groups, same-sex partners of current LGB troops, key medical associations, veterans, military service organizations, and members of Congress, confronting both supporters and opponents of the repeal. Additionally, the group surveyed 400,000 service members, one of the largest DoD surveys at the time. They had a critical role in achieving a repeal because it brought evidence that overturning DADT would likely not affect military readiness and effectiveness as most non-LGBTQ+ service members did not report any incidents or discomfort around their LGBTQ+ peers.²⁴ In that sense, despite its ambition to keep a neutral position, the working group directly worked toward better integration and acceptance in the military for LGB service members.

Aside from the Obama administration's efforts to repeal DADT, other people in both the civilian society and the military worked relentlessly to make it happen. Supporters of the repeal of the ban on LGB service constituted a large panel of actors, from service members and members of Congress to LGBTQ+ organizations and other allies like lawyers who put their expertise in aid of the repeal efforts. After serving for 25 years in the Navy and retiring at the rank of commander in 2007, Zoe Dunning stayed involved in the civilian world as a member of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network,²⁵ a non-partisan, non-profit, legal services watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by DADT. She gave public speeches, and she did a lot of lobbying on Capitol Hill to push for a repeal of DADT, after having experienced it for the majority of her career as the only openly gay service member. Her experience in the Navy under DADT gave her a very personal and intimate insight of what the policy looked like in practice for LGB soldiers, and she knew how difficult integration was, hence her determination to end the ban.

Other organizations like Out Serve, an underground network of LGBTQ+ people who are serving in the military, also fought the legal battle for the repeal of the ban, coordinating lobbying efforts and getting personal stories of people and how they were impacted.²⁶ Those service members, who could not have their names known at the time because they risked a discharge, were supported in their involvement by lawyers like Paula N. Neira, a transgender woman who served in the Navy then served as an ER nurse before she attended law school. Some other advocacy

²⁴ Letendre, L. A., & Abramson, H. (2022). Negotiating social change: Backstory behind the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. *University of Florida Journal of Law & Public Policy*, 32(2), Article 1.

²⁵ Now the Modern Military Association.

²⁶ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

groups like the Human Rights Campaign were heavily involved in the effort to repeal DADT. The organization toured cities with LGBTQ+ veterans to lobby members of Congress, identified more than 20,000 pro-repeal veterans to support their position, sent over 625,000 emails to members of Congress and more than 9 million emails to members and supporters.²⁷ In Congress, Senators like Robert Byrd, Susan Collins, Joe Lieberman, Carl Levin, Claire McCaskill, Jack Reed, and Harry Reid played a crucial role in supporting the repeal bill.²⁸

As it was still being discussed and advocates needed three more votes to overcome opposition from senators Lindsey Graham and John McCain, pop singer Lady Gaga appeared at a rally in Portland, Maine, against the state's two Republican senators. She also made a public statement to support the repeal of DADT: "Key senate vote this Tuesday on #DADT repeal. We need 60 senators. Call your senator now."²⁹ Her involvement reflected broader societal acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, especially as a Gallup poll found that by 2005, 76% of the public believed that a homosexual should be allowed into the armed forces when only about 48% thought so in 1993 before the implementation of DADT.³⁰ Since the mid-1990s, public attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community have evolved positively thanks to increased LGBTQ+ visibility - more people being out, growing number of LGBTQ+ characters on television - and thanks to policy advances toward LGBTQ+ rights like marriages equality.³¹ All these examples demonstrate the extent of the rallying for the repeal of DADT and overall the growing support to the LGBTQ+ community in the military, whose role wanted to be better acknowledge and whose rights needed to be finally respected.

Eventually, after years of debates, the Senate overturned the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy by a 65-31 vote on December 18, 2010, which President Barack Obama signed into law a few days later, although not all senior military officers agreed with this decision. This was the result of a massive legal battle led by lawyers, lawmakers, activists, and service members who advocated for the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in the military. The repeal of DADT finally allowed gay and lesbian military members to serve openly in the armed forces. This repeal reflects a deeper shift in civilian

²⁷ Human Rights Campaign. (2024, January 26). *Repeal of « Don't Ask, Don't Tell »*. HRC. <https://www.hrc.org/our-work/stories/repeal-of-dont-ask-dont-tell>

²⁸ Sarvis, A. (2024, August 16). *Standing on Shoulders : The 10th Anniversary of DADT Repeal*. Modern Military Association Of America. <https://modernmilitary.org/2020/12/standing-on-shoulders-the-10th-anniversary-of-dadt-repeal/>

²⁹ BBC News. (2010, September 21). *Lady Gaga rallies against US ban on gays in military*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-11378162>

³⁰ Flores, A. R. (2014, November). *National trends in public opinion on LGBT rights in the United States*. The Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/public-opinion-lgbt-rights-us/>

³¹ The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law. (2021, February 5). *National trends in public opinion on LGBT rights in the United States*. Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/public-opinion-lgbt-rights-us/>

society as more people became aware of LGBTQ+ related issues and started being more accepting. Somehow, DADT may have bolstered public support for LGBTQ+ rights because of the intense media coverage around legal cases and the many accounts contradicting the arguments of the opponents to gay service. Over the years, it became clear that the policy was harmful not only to LGB soldiers but also to the military as a whole for losing qualified and dedicated service members, additionally to the enormous cost of separations.



President Barack Obama signing the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Repeal Act of 2010 into law at the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C., on December 22, 2010. On the left, retired Navy Commander and LGBTQ+ rights activist Zoe Dunning. (Source: Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty Images)

Multiple studies and reports show that this policy had many negative consequences, including its financial cost. Even before the repeal of DADT, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) was asked in 2005 to consider the policy’s financial costs as well as the consequences of the loss of mission-critical service members, such as translators. According to their estimates, the cost of discharging and replacing service members fired under DADT during the policy’s first 10 years reached \$363.8 million, which is equivalent to nearly \$40,000 per discharged service member. Also, the Navy, Air Force, and Army estimated that the cost to train replacements for separated service members by occupation was approximately \$48.8 million, \$16.6 million, and \$29.7 million, respectively.³² In 2009, each separation and replacement was estimated at \$52,800, further highlighting the substantial financial consequences of DADT. Additionally, the policy also led to the

³² National Defense Research Institute. (2010). The History of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” In *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: An Update of RAND’s 1993 Study* (p. 60). RAND Corporation.

discharge of many specialists in fields of high wartime demand and training expenses.³³ Around 800 personnel who were deemed to have “mission crucial” skills, such as pilots, combat engineers, and linguists had to separate from the armed forces. For example, 55 Arabic linguists were dismissed for being gay, like Sergeant Bleu Copas, even though their roles were critical to the American war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁴ This reinforced the recruitment crisis the U.S. military has been going through, since DADT prevented the military from hiring qualified and skilled people like doctors, nurses, intelligence professionals, and linguists, all occupations that were chronically undermanned and extremely difficult for the military to recruit, train, and retain.³⁵

After the repeal of DADT, the military became a much more favorable environment for the LGBTQ+ community, even though it didn’t prevent cases of discrimination, harassment, and assaults. On the legal level during Obama’s second term, acceptance of gay service members kept improving in the few years that followed the repeal with the extension of spousal and family benefits to same-sex married partners in the military after the Supreme Court declared the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional. This law, enacted in 1996, limited the definition of marriage to heterosexual couples, thus banning federal recognition of same-sex marriage. A year later in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year, consensual sodomy was decriminalized under military law. Additionally, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has been working to reverse the harm done to all LGBTQ+ Veterans, especially as studies have shown that they experience higher rates of several health conditions, such as substance use disorders, anxiety, and depression compared to non-LGBTQ+ Veterans, including higher risk for suicide. The VA’s policy on patient care is nondiscriminatory, as all veterans deserve respect and dignity, independently from one’s sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. As an example, in a directive issued on May 23, 2018, the Veteran Health Administration committed to providing respectful health care to transgender and intersex veteran:

It is VHA policy that staff provide clinically appropriate, comprehensive, Veteran-centered care with respect and dignity to enrolled or otherwise eligible transgender and intersex Veterans, including but not limited to hormonal therapy, mental health care, preoperative evaluation, and medically necessary post-operative and long-term care following gender confirming/affirming surgery. It is VHA policy that

³³ Alford, B., & Lee, S. J. (2016). Toward Complete Inclusion: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Military Service Members after Repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. *Social Work*, 61(3), 259.

³⁴ Mason, M. (2002). Army Dismisses Gay Arabic Linguists. *Vital Voice*, 3(11), 5. Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

³⁵ Rivera, J. G. (2022). *Good Order and Discipline: The Politics of Exclusion in the American Military*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

*Veterans must be addressed based upon their self-identified gender identity; the use of Veteran's preferred name and pronoun is required.*³⁶

This policy represents an attempt from the administration to be more inclusive, even though it still excludes the funding of gender confirming/affirming surgeries, which are not included in the VA medical benefits package but can often be life saving for transgender people. More recently under the Biden Administration, more than 800 gay veterans had their discharge status automatically updated, after they were giving a less-than-honorable discharge under DADT, preventing them from accessing some benefits like home loans and health care. Additionally, the VA encourages all LGBTQ+ veterans to apply for VA benefits, as anyone can qualify, even without a discharge upgrade.

All these developments, coupled with more accepting peers, made LGBTQ+ experiences in the military more comfortable and positive. Although she had already retired at the time of the repeal, Zoe Dunning kept in touch with active duties and witnessed through their eyes the real changes it brought for the community on a daily basis. Owen, a gay man currently serving in the Army, also shares this view that the military became a much more favorable environment after the repeal: "I feel like the atmosphere as far as just the LGB goes, it has significantly changed since "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" for the better."³⁷ Owen did not go through any particularly negative experiences after he came out as gay. He explained that his colleagues and chain of command were very accepting and did not discriminate against him. Today, the rights of lesbian, gays and bisexuals in the military don't seem be directly threatened given that the policy is still in favor of open service. However, transgender soldiers are not in the same situation.

This whole time under DADT, the case of trans troops was never explicitly discussed. Similarly to homosexuality in the past, there was an unspoken consensus that they were not allowed to serve, as it would disrupt cohesion and readiness. It was not until 2016 that the Obama Administration announced that transgender individuals would be allowed to serve openly, with new recruits being permitted to enlist in 2018. The Trump Administration temporarily reversed this before President Biden announced in 2021 that transgender service members would be allowed to serve openly in their self-identified gender.³⁸ Now, under Trump's second term, trans troops are banned from openly serving again, which is equivalent to 14,707 service members (0.7% of the overall military

³⁶ VHA Directive 1341 (2), May 23, 2018.

³⁷ Interview with Owen, February 15, 2025. (Use of a pseudo because Owen did not disclose his real name on social media, where he is sharing his experience as a gay man in the military.)

³⁸ Dunlap, S. L., Holloway, I. W., Pickering, C. E., Tzen, M., Goldbach, J. T., & Castro, C. A. (2021). Support for Transgender Military Service from Active Duty United States Military Personnel. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 18(1), 137–138.

population), according to Pentagon data collected in 2018.³⁹ This important backlash on transgender service members completely went against the most recent and most progressive policies on LGBTQ+ service, showing that discrimination based on gender identity is still ingrained in the military.

³⁹ Belkin, A., & Mazur, D. H. (2018, February 13). *Department of Defense issues first-ever official count of active duty transgender service members*. Palm Center. <https://www.palmcenter.org/departments-defense-issues-first-ever-official-count-active-duty-transgender-service-members/>

Section 2: An intersectional approach to integration: joint evolution with women's rights

A. Similar historical evolution for gender and sexual minorities

The role and the integration of women in the U.S. military have gradually increased over time, along with LGBTQ+ personnel. Women are another minority who struggled to enter and openly serve in the military. In this sense, LGBTQ+ individuals and women have faced similar struggles in integrating among their cisgender and heterosexual male counterparts. Generally speaking, the integration of women into the Armed Forces was driven primarily by the need for personnel and manpower, as many historical examples show. Similarly, LGBTQ+ service members were more easily tolerated in times of war and crisis when the military was less vigilant because it needed personnel and specialists. During the Revolutionary War, women were mainly involved as auxiliaries who would grow crops, cook food, and clean soldiers' laundry, boosting morale among troops. Then, during the Civil War, women began to serve as nurses on a much larger and more official scale. Approximately 3,000 women served as nurses for the Union Army during the war, like Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, who received a special "military pass" that permitted her to drive her medical wagons directly onto the battlefield to care for wounded soldiers. The only female soldiers on the battlefield were disguised as men to be able to fight.

It wasn't until World War I that women were officially allowed to openly serve in the military, as the Armed Forces, especially the Navy, needed stateside replacements for the roles left behind, like radio operators and translators. The majority of women, around 23,300 out of 35,500, served as nurses in the Army and Navy Nurse Corps.⁴⁰ World War II saw a shift in women's integration, given the unprecedented need for service members after 16 million Americans enrolled to serve on the front lines. For the first time, all branches of the military enlisted women in their ranks to fill in non-combat roles. In total, nearly 350,000 American women served in uniform during World War II.⁴¹ Although women were discharged right after the war so that men could take over their initial jobs, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act was signed into law in 1948, officially allowing women to serve as full, permanent members of all branches of the Armed Forces. However, the policy contained many restrictive clauses such as the inability to command men or to

⁴⁰ Szayna, T. S., Larson, E. V., O'Mahony, A., Robson, S., Schaefer, A. G., Matthews, M., Polich, J. M., Ayer, L., Eaton, D., Marcellino, W., Miyashiro, L., Posard, M., Syme, J., Winkelman, Z., Wright, C., Cotugno, M. Z., & Welsler, W. (2015). The Integration of Women and Other Excluded Groups into the U.S. Military: The Historical Experience. In *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces* (p. 17). RAND Corporation.

⁴¹ DeSimone, D. (2023, February 28). *Over 200 Years of Service : The History of Women in the U.S. Military*. United Service Organizations.

access combat roles. Additionally, the number of women was restricted to 2% for each branch, and the act did not intend to treat women equally as men but only to allow their continuous presence in the military.⁴²

Later, during the 1970s, the status of women changed but only because the military was in crucial need of manpower to conduct the Vietnam War, after the establishment of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973 that ended conscription, enabling reluctant young men not to serve. In 1973, after his election as president, Carter appointed new DoD personnel who was more inclined to treating women equally in the Armed Forces. However, their integration was still hindered, especially in 1981 when the Army announced a pause in its five-year plan to increase the number of women from 61,000 to 87,500 by 1985, coinciding with the outright ban on gay service. The backlash during this period is a very relevant example to the intersection between women and LGBTQ+ integration because it involved witch-hunts that targeted women for discharge on the basis of homosexuality. Many lesbians faced investigations, especially women athletes in the softball team at the Army Academy or in the volleyball team at the Air Force Academy. A majority of women suffered from sexual and gender-based harassment in a male-dominated military where gender diversity and equality were not respected nor wanted.

With the intense media coverage of the Persian Gulf War in the 1990s and the killing of women in action, it became clear even in the eyes of civilians that they were exposed to the same danger as men and often taking on the same jobs. When Clinton pledged to end the ban on gay service during his presidential campaign, he also advocated for equal rights for women. It led to the repeal by Congress of the section of the United States Code that barred Navy women from combat ships. However, despite legal improvements, harassment and sexual assaults were still common occurrences, one of the most known cases being the physical attacks against 80 women at the 1991 Tailhook Convention of Navy and Marine Corps pilots. In 1994, at the request of the Senate, the General Accounting Office reviewed sexual harassment at the military academies and found that 50% of women midshipmen at the Naval Academy, 76% of women cadets at the Military Academy in West Point, and 59% of the women at the Air Force Academy experienced harassment at least twice a month, consisting of derogatory comments, statements about women having lowered standards, and offensive graffiti or gestures.⁴³

⁴² Thomas, P. J., & Thomas, M. D. (1996). Integration of women in the military: Parallels to the progress of homosexuals? In G. M. Herek, J. B. Jobe, & R. M. Carney (Eds.), *Out in force: Sexual orientation and the military* (p. 68). The University of Chicago Press.

⁴³ Ibid., p.69.

The involvement of women in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly in ground combat, reopened the debate around their legal integration in combat units. In 2012, Brigadier General Barry Price expressed a favorable opinion, stating that: “The last 11 years of warfare have really revealed to us there are no front lines. There are no rear echelons. Everybody was vulnerable to the influence of the Army.”⁴⁴ The same year, the Army announced that it would open 14,000 combat-related jobs at the battalion level. Once again, this coincides with a major legal shift for LGBTQ+ troops after DADT was repealed in 2010, showing how intertwined the integration of minorities is. Eventually, the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule (DGCDAR) that prevented women from engaging in those roles was rescinded in January 2013. In the following decade, the U.S. Armed Forces witnessed several historic firsts with the first female graduates of the Army Ranger School in 2015, followed by the first woman to graduate from the Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course in 2018, Second Lieutenant Marina Hierl. At 24, she became the first and only woman to lead an infantry platoon of 35 men in the Marines.⁴⁵



First Lieutenant Marina Hierl, the first female Marine officer to graduate from the Infantry Officer’s Course
(Source: Orange County Register, 2017, Sept 26)

Today, women comprise 17.7% of active-duty members (N=225,119) and 20.1% of officers. The Air Force and the Navy have the largest percentage of female active-duty members, 21.5% and 20.9% respectively, while the Marine Corps has the smallest percentage of female active-duty members with 9.7%.⁴⁶ After decades of slow and hesitant progress, women seem to be better integrated

⁴⁴ Szayna, T. S., (2015). The Integration of Women and Other Excluded Groups into the U.S. Military (p.23).

⁴⁵ Willingham, AJ. (2018, August 10). *For the first time in Marine Corps history, a woman is in charge of an infantry platoon.* CNN.

⁴⁶ Data from the DoD Annual Demographics Report of 2023.

today, at least on the legal plane, although not all gender integration efforts are successful in practice.

The legal joint evolution of women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights in the military coincided with the rise of feminism and the civil rights movement in the civilian world. Thanks to the involvement of numerous activists, LGBTQ+ service members started challenging discriminatory laws on a legal level, by using courts, just like women soldiers did. Frank Kameny, one of the most significant figures in the gay rights movement, had a central role in advocating for the rights of gay people, especially those serving in the military. He was enlisted in the Army himself during World War II before he served with the U.S. Army's Map Service as a civil service astronomer. In 1957 during the Lavender Scare, a moral panic about homosexuals working for the government, he was fired by the federal government on the basis of his homosexuality, along with thousands of other federal employees suspected of homosexuality. This happened simultaneously to the Red Scare that hunt down suspected Communists in the government. Senator McCarthy believed homosexuals were mentally ill and were more prone to Soviet blackmail for security secrets in exchange for not outing them to friends or employers. After this, Kameny got involved in the gay rights movement by creating the Mattachine Society and serving as a paralegal for gay people fighting in courts for discrimination. In 1973, he pressured the American Psychiatric Association to revoke homosexuality's classification as a mental illness with the help of other allies, which was a crucial step to change the way people saw homosexuals. The military could no longer use this argument as a reason to exclude LGBTQ+ people from serving. Later, Kameny worked toward the repeal of DADT because he firmly believed that LGBTQ+ service members should be allowed to serve openly but also that they should not receive a dishonorable discharge.⁴⁷ His involvement and achievements in the civilian world contributed to the improvement of gay rights in general but also in the military since both spheres have close ties and influence on another.

Similarly, some women fought in court to challenge discriminatory policies and promote equal treatment with men. In 1973, Lieutenant Sharron Frontiero's case reached the Supreme Court because she had been denied housing and medical benefits for her husband, which male officers automatically received for their wives. The court ruled in her favor and decided that spouses benefits would be given out equally, independently from sex. This landmarks case considerably improved women's rights in the military by ensuring equal treatment from the administration and by setting a strong precedent for change in other discriminatory policies.⁴⁸ Another relevant

⁴⁷ Hinnershitz, S. (2024, June 26). *Frank Kameny: WWII veteran, patriot, and LGBTQ+ activist*. The National WWII Museum. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/frank-kameny-wwii-veteran-patriot-and-lgbtq-activist>

⁴⁸ *Sharron Frontiero, lieutenant, U.S. Air Force*. (2024, August 21). Foundation For Women Warriors.

example is the case of Margarethe Cammermeyer, a major figure against DADT who challenged her own discharge after she admitted she was a lesbian during a security clearance interview. In 1994, she won her case *Cammermeyer v. Perry*, which also became a landmark case for LGBTQ+ troops serving under DADT. Her involvement is representative of the intersection between feminism and gay rights activism. Although she did not explicitly label herself as a feminist, her activism for LGBTQ+ rights challenged patriarchal structures and norms in the military by promoting values such as equity and justice.⁴⁹

Political leaders like Barbara Boxer and Nancy Pelosi were vocal opponents of DADT and largely contributed to its repeal. As feminist allies, they advocated for the inclusion of marginalized groups and defended principles of equity and anti-discrimination. In 2021, Pelosi passed the Equality Act as Speaker of the House, a bill that prohibits sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination and ensures justice for the LGBTQ+ community, even in the workplace.⁵⁰ Other feminist and queer theorists like Judith Butler contributed more indirectly to the integration of the LGBTQ+ in the Armed Forces, by developing ideas that challenged deep rooted binaries and prejudices prevailing in the military. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), one of the founding works on queer theory, Butler explains the existence of a system called the heterosexual matrix that naturalizes the alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and heterosexual desire. They argue that heterosexuality is not actually natural or innate but rather that it is produced through cultural norms and exclusion. In that sense, Butler was able to influence the public debate by instilling new ideas, more inclusive and progressive. Drawing on all these examples, the intersection of feminism and the gay rights movement appears obvious since they share common dynamics and fight against similar types of prejudice and discrimination. After decades of legal fights, both women and the LGBTQ+ communities were granted protection by federal law, however reality can differ as gender and sexual minorities can still face discrimination, often based on prejudice.

B. The role of stereotypes in restricting integration of sexual and gender minorities

Over the years, the Department of Defense has implemented different measures to combat gender discrimination. The most recent policy addressing this issue is the DoD Military Equal Opportunity Program that prohibits “discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin,

⁴⁹ Washington State Nurses Association. (2023, December 7). *Margarethe Cammermeyer*. WSNA.

⁵⁰ The Equality Act has not yet been enacted into federal law as of May 2025.

religion, sex (including pregnancy), gender identity, or sexual orientation.”⁵¹ Regarding sexual harassment and sexual assaults, the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) is the central authority charged with such issues in the military. By conducting comprehensive assessments and issuing reports, SAPRO can help shape the DoD's sexual assault prevention and response efforts. The DoD's policies on the matter are applicable department-wide but each service is responsible for administering service-specific policies on gender violence. For example, the Army seem to have taken a hard line on the matter through its Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention program (SHARP), dedicated to eliminating sexual assaults and sexual harassment and promoting an environment of trust and respect:

*The Command is committed to the Army policy against sexual assault and sexual harassment and will not tolerate such behavior. Sexual assault and sexual harassment have no place in the Army. These unacceptable behaviors degrade mission readiness by devastating the Army's ability to work effectively as a team. Every Soldier who is aware of a sexual assault or sexual harassment should immediately report the incident. Sexual Assault and sexual harassment are incompatible with Army values and both types of behavior are punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and other Federal and local Civilian laws. The Army implements training, education, and awareness to minimize sexual assault and harassment; to promote the sensitive handling of victims of sexual assault and harassment; to offer victim assistance and counseling; to hold those who commit sexual assault offenses and sexual harassment accountable.*⁵²

However, in the case of a joint service environment, discrimination and harassment complaints need to be processed through the complainant's service. Because the Special Operations Command operates in a multi-service environment, it fails to implement those policies consistently and does not necessarily align with DoD policies.⁵³ This example illustrates one of the multiple legal and administrative shortcomings to effectively tackle gender-based violence and discrimination. If these measures seem to grant gender and sexual minorities protection and offer them a safer environment, knowing they can report any incident, it does not necessarily mean that it automatically prevents discrimination and improves their integration. The persistence of gender stereotypes and prejudices against gender and sexual minorities has been a constant obstacle to

⁵¹ DoD Directive 1350.02.

⁵² Department of the Army. (2022, December 2). *Army command policy (AR 600-20), Chapter 7: Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP)*. U.S. Department of the Army.

⁵³ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2023, July 26). *Women in special operations: Improvements to policy, data, and assessments needed to better understand and address career barriers* (GAO-23-105556). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105556>

their integration, despite legal improvements, as Jayden, a trans man who served in the Army for 11 years, observed:

*If you were to take a gay soldier, a trans soldier, a straight soldier and not know anything about them and their background and have them execute certain tasks without having that prejudice already, they would not have these things to say, but it's because they know. That's when they have all these additional messages to put out there.*⁵⁴

A stereotype can be defined as a cognitive bias about the qualities and characteristics of the members of a group or social category. It means assuming that a group of people who share some characteristics also share certain attributes. Stereotypes are often negative and overly simplistic assumptions and generalizations about a certain group or category of people. More specifically, gender stereotype is a relatively fixed, overly simplified concept of the attitudes and behaviors considered normal and appropriate for specific genders (i.e. male, female, transgender, nonbinary, or other) in a particular culture. The prevalence of such stereotypes can often lead to prejudice, a preconceived idea that produces a negative attitude toward another person or group, formed in advance of any experience with that person or group. In the case of gender and sexual minorities, prejudice translates into sexism, misogyny and homophobia. When individuals choose to act on these beliefs, prejudice turns into outright discrimination, that is the unfair treatment of people or groups because of their identities and characteristics.⁵⁵

One of the reasons why women integration and LGBTQ+ integration in the military have followed similar historical dynamics lies in the fact that both minorities have faced similar struggles, having to fight stereotypes and discrimination for their identity. It appears that prejudice against women, sexism, and prejudice against gay people, homophobia, are deeply linked. Gender stereotypes often negatively impact job performance and career paths. Eagly and Karau defined the glass ceiling effect as “a barrier of prejudice and discrimination that excludes women from higher level leadership positions.”⁵⁶ Because of gender stereotypes associating women with specific traits such as kindness, sympathy, and nurturance toward others, it has been common belief that women are not as suited for leadership roles in the military as men. On the contrary, many think that those attributes would make women better peacekeepers.⁵⁷ Another common stereotype

⁵⁴ Interview with Jayden, March 19, 2025.

⁵⁵ Definitions from the American Psychological Association Dictionary (online).

⁵⁶ Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573.

⁵⁷ DeGroot, G. J. (2001). A few good women: Gender stereotypes, the military and peacekeeping. *International Peacekeeping* (London, England), 8(2), 24.

about women is that they are physically weak and emotionally sensitive, leading to the inability to be soldiers and perform the same jobs as men, especially in combat units. The idea is that their supposedly inherent femininity clashes with the warrior ethos promoted in the military, which emphasizes physical strength and mental toughness.

All these stereotypes have caused sexism to prevail in the military, complicating the integration of women but also the integration of the LGBTQ+ community. As many feminist and queer theorists have shown, sexism is often inextricably and deeply interconnected with heterosexism, also known as homophobia, that is the prejudice against gay people and the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm. Eve Kosofsky in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), explored how homophobia was embedded in Western constructions of masculinity, overlapping with sexist structures. Although she insists that both prejudices are not identical, the author points out that heterosexism often reinforces sexism because the social expectation of heterosexuality supports traditional gender roles like female submission and male dominance. Some of the struggles faced by gay men in the military because of their sexual orientation seem to support the argument about the link between sexism and homophobia. In many instances, some gay men have been associated with the same kind of stereotypes women face, especially about weakness. Gay men who tend to appear more feminine in the way they express their gender identity are often seen as weak men who are not tough enough to meet military standards, therefore leading to their exclusion by their heterosexual counterparts because they are categorized as incompetent soldiers.

This observation shows how sexism fuels homophobia, as they rely on similar dynamics. Retired Navy Commander Zoe Dunning emphasized the prevailing sexism in the military: “I actually experienced more outright discrimination and harassment being a woman in uniform than being suspected for being a lesbian.”⁵⁸ Serving in the 1980s and the 1990s in particular, she had to deal with both aspects, being a woman and being a homosexual. Zoe came out as a lesbian right before the implementation of DADT, after having already served a few years in the closet. During those first years, what impacted her most was this “anti-women culture” that made her feel insecure, rather than being gay, since that was not something she could publicly disclose at the time. In *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980), Adrienne Rich argues that heterosexuality is imposed on women by a sexist society. She underlines the interconnection between sexism and homophobia, explaining that heterosexism serves patriarchy because it forces women into heterosexual relationships to maintain their submission to men. This leads to a double prejudice for lesbians in the military, as they are attacked for both their gender and their sexual

⁵⁸ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

orientation. When women choose to serve, they question traditional ideas and patriarchal structures by engaging in the same roles as men. When some of them happen to be lesbians, it reinforces the prejudice and discrimination against them because men feel like they lose domination and control over them even more. On top of claiming those military roles for themselves, lesbians are also seen as a threat to male domination because they are not objects of desire that can be subordinated to men.

Military authorities have used similar rhetorics about readiness and unit cohesion to justify the exclusion of women and homosexuals. Those minorities have been seen as a threat to military effectiveness because they draw away from traditional norms. Many thought having a homosexual as your brother-in-arms was a risk to unit cohesion because of persistent stereotypes about homosexuals. Same-sex relations are perceived as immoral and are sometimes even described as a sin by fundamentalist religious groups because homosexual conducts are considered a transgression of divine law. By emphasizing the need to make children, the church condemned any sexual behavior that did not serve this purpose: “The first [factor in the sin construction] reflects the high priority placed on producing children. Because of high infant mortality, nonprocreational sexual behavior endangered the intergenerational continuity of the social group.”⁵⁹ Additionally, homosexuality was considered as sin, especially for men who were attributed the same status of inferiority as women because they took the same role in sexual relations. According to a 2019 report, around 70% of all active duty service members in the U.S. Armed Forces considered themselves as Christians and only 2% claimed to be atheist or agnostic while many young people reported no religious affiliation.⁶⁰ The stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people maintained by some parts of the Christian church can make their integration more difficult since their most religious peers might not accept their presence.

The LGBTQ+ community has also been perceived as a threat to military effectiveness because of the enduring stereotype that they are sexual perverts who have predatory sexual tendencies. It has commonly been said that their deviant behavior would make heterosexual soldiers uncomfortable and threatened in barracks and shipboard life, where all service members live closely together.⁶¹ When asked if LGBTQ+ members were treated differently, Joseph, a gay man who was a chief warrant officer in the Marines under “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” gave an answer that

⁵⁹ Sarbin, T. R. (1996). The Deconstruction of Stereotypes: Homosexuals and Military Policy. In G. M. Herek, J. B. Jobe, & R. M. Carney (Eds.), *Out in force: Sexual orientation and the military* (p. 179). The University of Chicago Press.

⁶⁰ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019, July 19). *Demographic and military service characteristics of military families* (S. Le Menestrel & K. W. Kizer, Eds.), In *Strengthening the military family readiness system for a changing American society*. National Academies Press.

⁶¹ Herek, G. M. (1991). Stigma, prejudice, and violence against lesbians and gay men. In J. C. Gonsiorek & J. D. Weinrich (Eds.), *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy* (pp. 60–80). Sage Publications.

really reflects the ordinary homophobia that was prevailing in the military and that reveals how strong this pervert stereotype about gay men could be:

*We were having a dress up uniform day and there was going to be an inspection, and I was looking across the hallway where all my Marines were and there was this young Marine that his pants were too tight. And I'd been looking at the fact that his pants were too tight, right, but because he knew I was a gay man, he automatically assumed that I was checking him out in his tight pants. So stupid. If I was a straight man he would assume oh my pants are messed up, that's why he's looking at me.*⁶²

This hypersexualization has always been detrimental to the effective integration of LGBTQ+ service members because they would systematically be excluded by their peers and discriminated against, sometimes even prior to sharing any experience together. Today, despite favorable policies, integration for both women and LGBTQ+ members can still be tumultuous, as many testimonies have shown. Indeed, deeply rooted beliefs and traditional norms within the military can still be a barrier to complete and effective integration. The example of the use of language itself is pretty relevant. Linguistic violence through “gay jokes” has always been common, reminding LGBTQ+ members of their status as a devalued minority and resulting in their delegitimization.⁶³

Despite persisting stereotypes, attitudes toward gender and sexual minorities integration have evolved positively after real-life experiences and studies showed their inclusion did not reduce unit cohesion or readiness. The experiences of both women and gay service members in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were definitely central to fighting stereotypes, as their contributions were often praised. For example, women could communicate with local women in Afghanistan more easily, facilitating the operations. Gay linguists also played a crucial role and showed that LGBTQ+ soldiers could be highly qualified people with useful skills. In those instances and many others, LGBTQ+ service members proved the stereotypes about them wrong and made their heterosexual peers realize that they were actually normal people, who simply wanted to serve their country, just like them. As explained before, theorists, activists, lawyers and congress members also contributed to normalizing the presence of the LGBTQ+ community by leading inclusive scientific and legal work. After the repeal of DADT, the military became more diverse, although it did not always necessarily make it more inclusive. Stereotypes and prejudice can still prevail in some branches of the Armed

⁶² Interview with Joseph, April 2, 2025. (Use of a pseudo because Joseph retired just two years ago and did not want to risk « going public » under the current administration.)

⁶³ Van Gilder, B. J. (2019). Sexual Orientation Stigmatization and Identity Work for Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals in the U.S. Military. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 66(14), 1949–1973.

Forces and depending on one's leadership that usually sets the tone about inclusivity and tolerance. Those stereotypes often clash with a specific military culture that tends to rely on traditional values and conservative ideas. It appears this military culture plays a specific role in shaping the integration of LGBTQ+ service members, which will be the next focus after having expanded on the legal evolution of gender and sexual minorities rights.

Chapter 2 : How military culture shapes the integration of LGBTQ+ service members

Section 1: The concept of military culture

A. Military culture and the LGBTQ+: a clash for inclusivity

The military is a unique institution with its own structure, budget, and culture. Like any other institution, it creates norms of what should and should not be and defines rules that individuals must respect. The concept of military culture has been a source of debate among scholars. Some insist there is no such thing as a military culture per se, given the disparities between different Armed Forces worldwide and, oftentimes, within various branches of one military. However, there is still a consensus around a generic military culture, embracing most militaries with common root concepts, values, and norms. However, there is still a consensus around a generic military culture, embracing most militaries with common root concepts, values, and norms. Chiara Ruffa defines military culture as "The core set of beliefs, norms, attitudes, and values that is shared by members of a national army and guides its perception and decisions about strategy, operations, and tactics."⁶⁴ She argues that military culture is deeply ingrained in the institution and its service members, making changes slower to occur but still possible over time, in response to domestic conditions.

Peter H. Wilson sees military culture as a specific form of institutional culture that shapes soldiers' experiences through shared values and norms: "Culture enables choices to be made by predisposing people to interpret situations in a limited number of ways."⁶⁵ In other words, it sets norms that reward or punish specific actions, thus shaping behaviors to fit the institution and fulfill the purpose of the military. Christopher Dandeker and James Gow distinguish between formal and informal military culture. The former is the "official" culture that represents the military's vision, and that is expressed in its mission statement. Usually, policies that guide actions and behaviors shape this culture. Informal culture is harder to grasp, as it "comprises elements of shared values and beliefs that are not necessarily evident in or sanctioned by the formal culture."⁶⁶ Consequently, it is more difficult to implement change in the informal culture, that is, the real-life culture of personnel on the ground because it is about changing deep-rooted beliefs.

⁶⁴ Ruffa, C. (2017). Military Culture and Force Employment in Peace Operations. *Security Studies*, 26(3), 393.

⁶⁵ Wilson, P. H. (Peter H. (2008). Defining Military Culture. *The Journal of Military History*, 72(1), 14.

⁶⁶ Dandeker, C., & Gow, J. (1999). Military culture and strategic peacekeeping. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 10(2), 59-76.

Building on Soeters' point that "culture is learned, not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes",⁶⁷ military culture is taught and ingrained in service members from the start of their careers during initial training that lasts from 8 to 13 weeks, depending on the service, or during their time at a military school like West Point or the Officer Candidate School, for example. They learn about the history of their service, military customs and courtesies, proper wear of the uniform, military bearing, and military values. Recruits are taught formal culture when exposed to the institution's rules. At the same time, they become immersed in the more informal culture by experiencing military life with their peers and leadership. Military culture promotes a system of values that defines how service members live their lives and guides how each decision is made and how each operation is executed. Service members obey a specific code of conduct that comprises values and principles like honor, high morality, good order and discipline, duty, patriotism, integrity, and courage.

According to Soeters, three key features shape military culture: communal life, hierarchy, and discipline. Not only do people in the military train and work together, but they also often live together, wear the same uniform, share meals, and play sports in training centers during deployment overseas. In this context, they must cultivate cohesion, loyalty, and respect to ensure military readiness and make sure that they can accomplish their mission. Recruits undergo a new socialization process to absorb military culture and fit into the organization. Hierarchy and respect for rules are other central characteristics of military culture. Service members are expected to accept the division of labor within the organization, obey their leadership, and follow the rules. These aspects are more pervasive in the military than in the civilian world because soldiers need to listen and obey orders without questioning them, even if they disagree. There is little room for resistance and protest since the military is very coercive and can easily impose sanctions and disciplinary measures. Military discipline is directly linked with hierarchy and implies that the organization's members will comply with regulations, from technical procedures to operating machines to ceremonial procedures like saluting and marching in line. What makes military culture even more specific is that it is very pervasive and affects individuals' lives outside of it.

Traditionally, the military has always been male-dominated and therefore its culture has been centered around ideas of manhood and masculinity, that is, a set of attributes, qualities, behaviors, and roles regarded as characteristic of men. Such values directly flow into the warriorlike culture that is ingrained in the military: "The warrior is a hardy, courageous or aggressive person who

⁶⁷ Soeters, J. L., Winslow, D. J., & Weibull, A. (2003). Organizational Cultures in the Military. In G. Caforio (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (p. 238). Kluwer Academic.

distinguishes himself or herself in fighting.”⁶⁸ This term conveys moral superiority, assimilating soldiers to heroes who do not fight and kill for personal gains but to accomplish their mission, i.e., serving their country and protecting their fellow citizens from an external threat or enemy. The U.S. Armed Forces have always depicted the ideal men as cisgender, heterosexual, physically strong, and brave individuals, making them the perfect warriors. Indeed, what makes a good soldier is a powerful, strong, and dominant man who can display aggressiveness and use violence. For this reason, there is a significant emphasis on male physical capabilities, which are a central component of military training and deeply valued. Being fit and strong is perceived as a true warrior, even outside the military in public perceptions. By conveying a message of power and strength, the military becomes more credible in the pursuit of its mission. In the military, recruits are being inculcated the belief that only real men are fit to defend the country by repressing the feminine inside them. Therefore, the presence of gay men questioned “everything that manhood is supposed to mean.”⁶⁹ Shilts explained that the military limited the role of gay men, who were not perceived as “real men,” to defend traditional masculine ideology. This culture centered on manhood created a specific environment made by and reserved for cisgender and heterosexual men.⁷⁰ Anyone who would draw away from these standards and beliefs was considered unfit to serve and disturbing military effectiveness.

In this male-dominated and masculinity-focused culture, heterosexism has long prevailed. Culture has a profound influence on the ways that individuals come to learn, understand, and interpret gender and sexuality norms and expectations. Military culture is based on heteronormativity, which means that heterosexuality is the norm when it comes to sexuality:

The perceived “normal” and “natural” status of heterosexuality is presumed through processes of normalization. The normalization of heterosexuality is encoded in language, in institutional practices, and in the encounters of everyday life. Thus, the normalization of heterosexuality is a social phenomenon that is actively negotiated in U.S. culture, with dominant discourses working to construct a cultural binary of heterosexual (us) versus non-heterosexual (them).⁷¹

⁶⁸ Zaretti, A., Caforio, G., & Nuciari, M. (2018). Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgender (LGBT) Personnel: A Military Challenge. In *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (p. 396). Springer International Publishing AG.

⁶⁹ Shilts, R. (1993). *Conduct unbecoming : gays and lesbians in the U.S. military : Vietnam to the Persian Gulf / Randy Shilts*. (1st ed.). St. Martin's Press.

⁷⁰ Zaretti, A., Caforio, G., & Nuciari, M. (2018). Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgender (LGBT) Personnel: A Military Challenge. In *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (pp. 391–404). Springer International Publishing AG.

⁷¹ Van Gilder, B. J. (2019). Sexual Orientation Stigmatization and Identity Work for Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals in the U.S. Military. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 66(14), 1950.

Because the military institution recognizes heterosexuality as the normal and legitimate sexuality, all other sexualities are defined as illegitimate and abnormal.⁷² Therefore, such a culture is inherently heterosexist; that is, the hostility and the prejudices against nonheterosexuals lead to discriminatory behaviors. Historically, it has been a common experience for a lot of LGBTQ+ service members to face discrimination, insults, harassment, and sometimes assault and sexual assault. Even assuming that someone's partner is necessarily from the opposite gender in the most random everyday life encounter constitutes ordinary homophobia that is harmful to LGBTQ+ service members, independently of the legal context. Under DADT, those occurrences made them feel uncomfortable and pressured because they could not simply correct their interlocutor's assumption and be open about their partner without risking their careers. They had to stay silent and bear with false assumptions about their partner's gender and their own identities. Sometimes, it went as far as pretending to be straight to fit into the heterosexual norm and avoid any accusations of being gay. It was the case for Zoe Dunning at the beginning of her career in the mid-1980s before DADT was enacted:

After I figured out that I was lesbian, at the Academy and on active duty, I dated men to try to throw off the scent, so to speak. To try to deflect any accusations that I might be a lesbian. And so that was always tricky because I didn't want to be dating the men. I would have to give the men the impression that I was interested in them and spend time with them, but try to prevent things from getting too far physically that I didn't welcome or want. And that was horrible to myself, and then also unfair to them that I was just spending time with them as an excuse to throw off any accusations that I might be lesbian.⁷³

This constant heterosexist environment has been and still is unhealthy for LGBTQ+ troops. Even after the repeal of DADT, these situations remained common and contributed to the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ soldiers whose identities were not recognized. Many scholars have underlined how deeply embedded in the U.S. military heterosexism has remained up to this day.⁷⁴ According to Rich, Schutten, and Rogers, the practices following the repeal of DADT have not fostered positive integration, but rather that "the repeal reproduces the conditions that marginalize

⁷² Robinson, K. (2005). "Queering" gender: Heteronormativity in early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 30(2), 19–28.

⁷³ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

⁷⁴ Johnson, W. B., Rosenstein, J. E., Buhrke, R. A., & Haldeman, D. C. (2015). After "Don't ask don't tell": Competent care of lesbian, gay and bisexual military personnel during the DoD policy transition. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 46(2), 107–115.

queer soldiers under DADT.”⁷⁵ The whole experience of DADT and its repeal, no matter how irrational it was, did not change the structures of male dominance and heterosexual normalcy in the military. In this context, the inclusion and integration of LGBTQ+ troops can still be hindered because it clashes with military tradition. Non-heterosexuality conflicts in many ways with the traditional values and norms of military culture centered around heteronormativity and manhood. Over time, the accentuated presence and visibility of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as that of women and other minorities, have challenged the masculine ideals prevailing in the military.

Despite undeniable progress for LGBTQ+ rights in the military, some aspects of military culture continue to exclude them or at least make their integration more difficult and delicate. Specifically, Van Gilder argued in her research that cultural communication practices prevented lesbians, gays, and bisexuals⁷⁶ from fully identifying with military culture, even after the repeal of DADT. After discussing with service members, she concluded that LGBTQ+ identities are considered to deviate from military culture. Therefore, LGBTQ+ individuals can experience feelings of identity incongruity because their professional and sexual identities seem incompatible. This is primarily due to the weight of stereotypes and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ people, which directly oppose traditional military standards of perfection and masculinity ideals. By being associated with perversion, femininity, and weakness, nonheterosexuals can be excluded by their peers who think that they do not fit military culture and standards. Another common stereotype about homosexuals is that they can only indulge in their desires, when military culture, especially in the Army, promotes selfless service and rejects individualism.⁷⁷

These stereotypes contradicting military culture contribute to perpetuating the belief that LGBTQ+ individuals are incompetent and disturbing the “normal” military order, which leads to discrimination on interpersonal levels. Although accounts of discrimination through harmful behaviors and comments were reported all over the U.S. Armed Forces, their propensity to happen can differ depending on the branches, the services, and the types of jobs. The clash between inclusivity and tradition is not uniformly harsh across the military, resulting in varying experiences for LGBTQ+ troops depending on their position and trajectory.

⁷⁵ Rich, C., Schutten, J. K., & Rogers, R. A. (2012). “Don’t drop the soap”: Organizing sexualities in the repeal of the US military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. *Communication Monographs*, 79(3), 269–291.

⁷⁶ She only interviewed service members who identified as LGB during their military time. Two of them identified as trans men after they retired.

⁷⁷ Frank, N. (2009). *Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America*. St. Martin’s Press.

B. Subcultures within the military: varying degrees of inclusion depending on the branches?

Culture has always been a complex concept because it can have many different definitions, depending on the author and the environment in which it is applied. Scholars have agreed on a general definition of military culture across different Armed Forces worldwide, which share universal values and follow similar guiding principles. Some have also nuanced this broad definition, which can differ from one military to another. As Soeters explained in his article about military culture, there are many subcultural differences within the military field, depending on the country, the branch, and sometimes even the type of jobs. Because the military is such a large organization, there are inevitably varying interpretations and practices in different bodies of the institution. If the military sets the tone, each branch and each service has room for maneuver, depending on “its own task and expertise and corresponding sets of training programs, work practices, ambitions, and even views of the world.” Soeters goes as far as to say that each service has its own organizational-culture identity.⁷⁸ Leaders will emphasize specific aspects of military culture depending on the mission of each service. Testimonies have shown varying experiences for LGBTQ+ service members in terms of integration and acceptance depending on the branch they served in. This can be explained by the different subcultures prevailing across services, which can influence LGBTQ+ experiences in the military by being more or less tolerant toward minorities. Some characteristics can affect the career, physical, and mental outcomes of LGBTQ+ service members, making certain branches more inclusive and others more exclusive.

Although they share the same common values promoted by the Department of Defense, each of the different branches of the U.S. Armed Forces focuses on its specific core values according to its mission. Historically, every service has had proper traditions that have shaped a distinct identity over time and exacerbated certain beliefs. When joining the military, people carefully review each branch, its guiding principles, and its missions to choose the service that best matches their beliefs and values. Every service member’s military experience is unique due to their personal singularities and because it is shaped by the specific environment in which they evolve. A soldier in the Army will not have the same experiences and perceptions as a sailor in the Navy or an airman in the Air Force. As illustrated in the following table, each branch of the U.S. military has its own set of core values, its distinct motto, and different missions.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Soeters, J. L., Winslow, D. J., & Weibull, A. (2003). Organizational Cultures in the Military. In G. Caforio (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*. Kluwer Academic. 262.

⁷⁹ Learn about the U.S. military branches | USAGov. (2023, December 8). <https://www.usa.gov/us-military>

Chart of the different branches in the U.S. Armed Forces

Branch	Founded	Core Values	Motto	Mission
Army	June 14, 1775	Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, Personal Courage	This We'll Defend	Fight and win our Nation's wars by providing prompt, sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations and spectrum of conflict.
Navy	October 13, 1775	Honor, Courage, and Commitment	Always Courageous	Maintain, train and equip combat ready Naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression and maintaining freedom of the seas.
Marine Corps	November 10, 1775	Honor, Courage, and Commitment	Always Faithful	Train, organize and equip Marines for offensive amphibious employment and as a force in readiness.
Air Force	September 18, 1947	Integrity First, Service Before Self, Excellence in All We Do	Above All	Fly, fight and win... in air, space and cyberspace.
Coast Guard	August 4, 1790	Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty	Always Ready	Safeguard the Nation's maritime interests.

Source: designed by the author

This table shows that some values overlap with multiple services, while others are particular to only one, specifically the Air Force. For example, every branch shares the concept of honor, except the Air Force, probably because it is the most recent branch, founded 147 years after the others. Thus, it is less traditional and more science-oriented. The Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps all emphasize courage, a central value guiding every service member's actions. Interestingly, the Army is the service with the highest number of values (7). This might be because it is the oldest

branch in the military that has had the most crucial role in protecting the country historically, with 8,267,958 soldiers serving in the Army as of 1945 during World War II, out of 12,209,238 personnel total across all branches.⁸⁰ Therefore, it has always been necessary for the service to display strong values and create a resilient team spirit and group cohesion among service members. Today, it is still the most central branch of the military, making up the largest percentage of military personnel, with 46.7% (including Active-duty, reserve, and Guard members)⁸¹ Historically, the huge emphasis on group cohesion may have made LGBTQ+ integration in the Army more delicate since stereotypes about gay people disrupting said group cohesion have always been strong. However, when asked about the culture in his branch, Jayden shared a different opinion:

*It's very toxic. It is a love-hate relationship that one really cannot understand unless you've lived it. The trauma bonding is very real. [...] The bonds that you create in the military, there's nothing that I can compare them to. [...] The bonds that you make in the military are life lasting. [...] These bonds that we create, they go beyond seeing someone's religion, someone's sex, someone's gender identity. At the end of the day, we are looking for somebody that will have our back in war. [...] I feel like for the LGBTQ service members, somehow, we all find each other.*⁸²

According to Jayden, the strong core values of the Army are precisely what brought LGBTQ+ service members together and helped them face backlash from their leadership, knowing that they had each other's backs. It is interesting to notice how the community can appropriate military culture and make it something positive for their experiences, although it has traditionally been hostile to them. The Army seems more inclusive today, despite its persisting traditional culture.

The different services in the Armed Forces focus on various core values because they have specific missions that may require their members to be particularly committed or have a greater sense of duty. For example, Builder noticed that the emphasis on duty, honor, and country was strongest in the Army, while the Navy's culture is more centered on traditions, and the Air Force holds sturdy technological beliefs due to rapid developments in science and engineering.⁸³ Additionally, the different branches have their own specific ways to conduct tasks. For example, during action, pilots conduct operations independently, whereas officers tend to be very dependent

⁸⁰ The National WWII Museum. (n.d.). *Research starters: US military by the numbers*. The National WWII Museum. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers>

⁸¹ Department of Defense. (2023). *DoD annual demographics report*.

⁸² Interview with Jayden.

⁸³ Builder, C. (1989). *The masks of war. American military styles in strategy and analysis*. Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press. 31-43.

on the rest of their unit.⁸⁴ These different operational styles can explain the varying emphasis on values.

In the Air Force, group cohesion is not as strong as in the Army, and service members are more detached since the goal is to put one's expertise in the service of the mission, and there is not so much emphasis on combat. Chrissy felt that as a trans woman working in cyber for the Air Force. Even though she is currently separating from the military because of the new ban on trans troops, she did not struggle to integrate, as her colleagues and leadership have always been very supportive. None of them said anything inappropriate, and she had a positive experience. When asked about it, she even considered that there was no authentic "culture" in the cyber realm and that this sector was not necessarily ingrained with the same traditional military culture centered around manhood. She worked with intelligent and analytical people whose only concern was their ability to perform their jobs.⁸⁵ Her experience shows that inclusivity differs depending on the branch and the type of job. Most respondents agreed that each individual has a unique and specific experience in the military that certainly depends on the type of job they work.

In the Navy, there is a significant emphasis on safety and the idea that sailors need to be prepared for the unexpected because they operate on the sea, isolated on very complex machines such as submarines and aircraft carriers, putting them at greater risk in case of an incident.⁸⁶ To reduce risks and ensure everything is in order, sailors adhere to traditions and rules rigorously, hence the three core values "Honor, Courage, and Commitment." Interestingly, according to statistics, the Navy is the most inclusive branch of the U.S. military, although it is difficult to precisely discern why. The 2015 Health Related Behaviors RAND Survey found that LGBTQ+ identities were higher among personnel in the Navy than in other services, representing 9.1% of all LGBTQ+ service members.⁸⁷

In particular, the Navy had the largest percentage of men identifying as gay and bisexual. It is the second branch with the most bisexual women, after the Marine Corps, but only the fourth branch with the most lesbians. Various hypotheses can explain the Navy's greater tolerance, such as the service offering a wider range of technical and specialized jobs, which are usually more inclusive and, therefore, more attractive to LGBTQ+ personnel. Additionally, the Navy's culture has been evolving toward more diversity and inclusion with public initiatives from leaders, contributing

⁸⁴ Mastroianni, G. R. (2005). Occupations, Cultures, and Leadership in the Army and Air Force. *The US Army War College Quarterly Parameters*, 35(4).

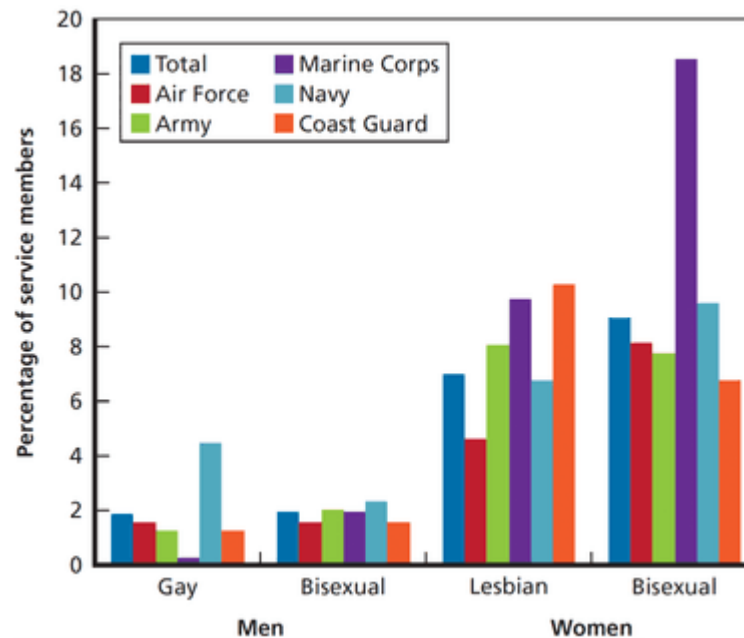
⁸⁵ Interview with Chrissy conducted on March 26, 2025.

⁸⁶ Bierly, P. E., III, & Spender, J. C. (1995). Culture and high reliability organizations: The case of the nuclear submarine. *Journal of Management*, 21(4), 639–656.

⁸⁷ Air Force : 5.3% - Army : 5.5% - Marine Corps 4.4% - Coast Guard 5.2%

to a perception of the branch as more accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially since the repeal of DADT.

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity by Service Branch



Source: 2015 Health Related Behaviors RAND Survey

Additionally, there seem to be cultural differences between elite units and conventional troops due to the differences between branches. For example, Anthony C King highlighted the hypermasculine culture within the US Marine Corps, where there is a prominent focus on physical and body culture to reach high physical standards and succeed in their missions.⁸⁸ Recruits undergo tough training with harsh exercises and drills; they cannot smoke or drink, nor can they watch TV or even have their phones. They are completely cut off from their families and friends, so their only focus and goal is to become elite soldiers with exceptional physical capabilities and cultivate strong group cohesion so they can be one with their unit. In this specific case, the subculture in the Marines is even more pervasive and dominating than military culture in general, because of the nature of their missions, more demanding and involve greater risks.⁸⁹ Joseph also emphasized the bonding aspect between brothers and sisters in arms that is particularly strong in the Marine Corps and that necessarily impacts LGBTQ+ members who had to hide and sometimes even lie under DADT to protect themselves and their careers. The pervasiveness of the Marine culture is so strong that

⁸⁸ King, A. C. (2015). Women Warriors: Female Accession to Ground Combat. *Armed Forces & Society*, 41(2), 379–387.

⁸⁹ Soeters, J. L., Winslow, D. J., & Weibull, A. (2003). Organizational Cultures in the Military. In G. Caforio (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*. Kluwer Academic. 264.

hiding your sexual orientation automatically makes it hard to integrate into your unit and leads to peer pressure:

Especially in the Marine Corps, it's so ingrained into you [military culture], especially when you first join, like boot camping, you can't go anywhere. So, for three and a half to four months of basic training, you eat together, you sleep together, you're trained. Whether you run together, you do all the things together. Because you don't have any other choice, it breeds that level of familiarity. You're always together. [...] Let's say I worked with 10 people that are all the same rank. If nine of them are going to lunches together, and they go to the movies together, and they go to a sports game together, like it's very obvious that Joseph's not there. Why is Joseph not there? That can start becoming peer pressure. Well, you guys are going on a strip club. I don't want to go to a strip club. Why do you not wanna go to strip clubs? Because you're gay? Like, no, I just don't wanna go strip club. Hanging out with other friends. Like, why are you going out with other friends? Why don't you want to hang out with us? When at the end of the day, I should have never had to hide the fact that I was gay.⁹⁰

The global focus on physical male perfection and peer bonding is most visible in the Marine Corps, but more generally speaking, in any armed combat unit, in which the leadership emphasizes even more manhood ideals to build the strongest men possible. Consequently, those combat units tend to be more macho and less inclusive of anyone who draws away from masculine characteristics, as Zoe Dunning noticed: “I think the closer you are to sort of combat arms, the more macho and more difficult the culture was, right? [...] You get into like the Navy SEALs or Special Warfare or, you know, a jet pilot and that type of thing, it was a little more threatening to them if someone came out as gay or lesbian within their community.”⁹¹ The integration of LGBTQ+ personnel might be more complicated within this branch because of stronger sexist and heterosexist beliefs. If military culture can vary depending on the branch and jobs, it is also subject to change and evolve, following general trends in the civilian world.

⁹⁰ Interview with Joseph.

⁹¹ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

Section 2: A shift in military culture favoring LGBTQ+ integration

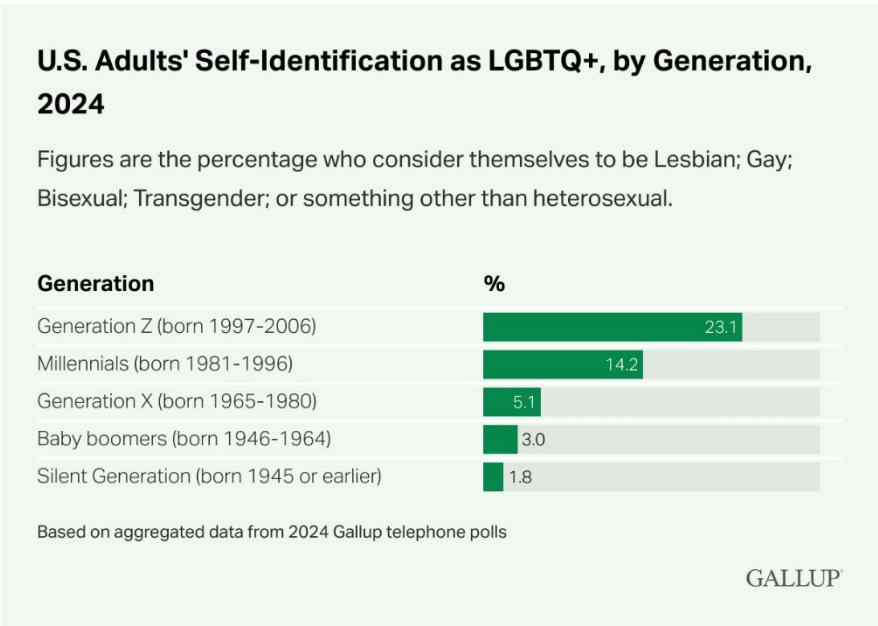
A. The role of younger generations in fostering inclusivity

A generation is a group of people born around the same time and whose upbringing is shaped by the same societal forces and experiences, causing them to share certain traits, characteristics, and attitudes. Major geopolitical events, technologies, and societal trends are formative for raising each generation. In the military, most of the senior leadership is Generation X- those born between 1965 and 1980. This generation grew up without today's technology and served before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which directly impacted their views and leadership styles. The following generation, Millennials born from 1981 to 1997, currently make up most of the military's mid-career population. The newest enlisted military members are part of Generation Z, born between 1998 and 2016, and have very different upbringings and world views compared to Gen X leaders.⁹²

As previously mentioned, 9.3% of U.S. adults now identify as LGBTQ+, which is nearly three times as many as in 2012 when Gallup, known for conducting public opinion polls, first started tracking LGBTQ+ identification. Specifically, 23.1% of Generation Z adults consider themselves to be something other than heterosexual. Gallup estimates that the rate of LGBTQ+ identification is likely to continue to grow, given the generational shifts underway.³⁰ Due to the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people in society, perceptions about the community are changing, and people of all ages are becoming more tolerant and open-minded. This conducive environment encourages more young people to come out and be true to themselves. By being more represented in movies, series, and books, and with numerous celebrities coming out or simply being vocal allies, it is common for anyone today to know someone who is part of the community and who identifies as something other than straight and/or cisgender. The same trend is happening in the military, as younger troops and new recruits are more aware of the issues surrounding LGBTQ+ people. Many identify as part of the community, feeling safer to do so today, with more favorable policies. In fact, the U.S. military happens to be the largest employer of transgender people in the country, despite unfavorable policies and hostile conservative ideas prevailing in the military institution. Studies estimate that trans men and women are anywhere from two to five times more likely to join the military than their cisgender counterparts. Many factors can explain this paradox, like the fact that the Armed

⁹² Boyer, A., Livieratos, C. (2022, June 16). The Changing Character of Followers : Generational Dynamics, Technology, and the Future of Army Leadership. *Modern War Institute*.

Forces provide transgender people with financial security or that the military uniform works as gender camouflage.⁹³



Source: Gallup

Generally speaking, the integration of LGBTQ+ service members in the Armed Forces has improved over the last few decades with the enrollment of younger generations, bringing new ideas from the civilian world into the military and challenging the leadership of the older generations. This confrontation can be harsh sometimes, as the older generations are usually really fixed on military traditions and do not wish to see the status quo changed. A survey conducted by the Army at West Point among Gen Z cadets found that these young leaders view people in Gen X as overly traditional, inflexible, and risk-averse, although loyal and resilient. In the same survey, Gen Z cadets described themselves as technologically dependent, unfocused, and socially aware and tolerant. Consequently, each generation has distinct communications and leadership preferences that tend to conflict, with Gen Z preferring more inclusive leadership styles and Gen X more traditional styles.⁹⁴

Despite this clash between tradition and inclusion, the fact that younger generations are present and raising their voices slowly instills changes within the institution. Although many scholars have explained how rigid culture is, others have shared more optimistic points of view,

⁹³ Christopher, B. (2016, September 28) *How the Military Became the Country's Largest Employer of Transgender Americans*. Priceonomics.

⁹⁴ Boyer, A., Livieratos, C. (2022, June 16). The Changing Character of Followers : Generational Dynamics, Technology, and the Future of Army Leadership. *Modern War Institute*. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-changing-character-of-followers-generational-dynamics-technology-and-the-future-of-army-leadership/>

arguing that military culture has gradually evolved, slowly shifting during civil society's evolution. As Soeters pointed out, organizational culture in the military is often linked to power. Whoever is in a position of power gets to define culture and thus dictate behavioral standards.⁹⁵ As time goes by, these newer generations go up in the hierarchy and start to take over leadership roles, and that is when they have more power and means of action to influence ideas and beliefs, thus favoring integration and acceptance of LGBTQ+ troops with a more progressive and inclusive stance. After serving for 25 years, Zoe has seen this generational shift happening in the last few decades: "I think it's a different generation. I think there's different attitudes and perceptions around difference in diversity and LGBTQ. The statistics show that a higher and higher percentage of the population is concluding themselves in the LGBTQ community. So I do think there are changing attitudes amongst those who join the military."⁹⁶ In particular, the influence of leaders is decisive because they serve as examples for the rest of the military personnel. Recalling a positive memory from his career as a Marine when he came out to his leadership, Joseph reflected on the importance of representation:

It was really the first time I had embodied my own truth and had someone embraced me. And more to the point, he [his boss] acknowledged that not only did he respect my courage and conviction of having to hide it so long, but also that I set the example and paved the way for younger people in the command to feel comfortable coming out for themselves. So it was really, really cool. I think my younger self as a brand new person in the military would have been very surprised, and I was very surprised. That contributed to pave the way for other younger kids, our queer young service members in my company, to do exactly that like 'oh if one of the platoon commanders is gay then I don't feel uncomfortable coming out myself.'⁹⁷

Once again, there was a large consensus among respondents on the positive influence of the ongoing generational change happening in the military, across all branches. Now, new Gen Z recruits have different priorities and consider other values more important than the most traditional ones of the military, like blind obedience and homogeneity. They attach more importance to work-life balance and mental health, while promoting other principles like transparency and diversity. Younger people care less about sexual orientation and gender identity, as Owen's experience shows. He has served in the Army for a few years and is still on active duty today. When asked about coming out as a gay man, he confirmed that he had a positive experience:

⁹⁵ Soeters, J. L., Winslow, D. J., & Weibull, A. (2003). Organizational Cultures in the Military. In G. Caforio (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (pp. 237–254). Kluwer Academic.

⁹⁶ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

⁹⁷ Interview with Joseph.

“As far as the military goes, I don't think... I don't feel like I've had any negative experiences.”⁹⁸ He does not recall any discrimination against himself and has felt supported in his unit, both by his leadership and his peers. Although he did recognize that things are changing within the Army, Owen also noted that some older people in the leadership tend to be less tolerant:

*I feel like they are [things changing], only because most of the people we have in the military right now are from a younger generation, like a newer generation. So they're kind of more open-minded about everything. Of course, leaders aren't that way, they're from the old Army or an older generation, and I wanna say they're kind of stuck in their ways. But, I am going to be honest, I'm not defending them at all, but the Army does like to drill things into your brain that just kind of stay there and they don't go away. So, I don't know if that's something they've had drilled in their heads over the years.*⁹⁹

His comment illustrates the pervasiveness of military culture on people's minds and beliefs. Since these beliefs are ingrained in service members as soon as they enroll and start training, they are deeply rooted and complex to change. Therefore, new generations play a crucial role because they are the ones who can bring more progressive ideas into the military. After having served for eight years, Chris agreed that a generational change is underway, favoring LGBTQ+ integration:

*Right now, I feel like the military is evolving. You know, the newer generations are coming up. The older generations tend to be a little bit more old school, you know, they're kind of stuck in maybe how the military was run maybe years ago. So maybe it's a little bit harder for them to transition to maybe the new policies and things that they're implementing. And I definitely see how the military is being a little bit more inclusive now, even by some of the regulations that they're putting out, allowing, you know, more tattoos or maybe certain hairstyles and stuff like that.*¹⁰⁰

This generational change also means that new recruits in the military are more educated, as it is a global trend for individuals to pursue advanced degrees. Therefore, most officers and enlisted personnel are people with higher levels of education and who have more influence to induce change in military culture. As Adler and Borys underlined, military organizational cultures are becoming generally less coercive despite their persistent bureaucratic character, precisely

⁹⁸ Interview with Owen.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Chris, March 15, 2025.

because of the workforce's increasing educational and professional competencies.¹⁰¹ This dynamic slowly shifts from an obedience-focused culture to a more critical and adaptive culture better suited to tackle contemporary issues. The current trend is that more people receive a professional military education, especially since the end of the draft in 1973. Today, military education emphasizes strategic thinking, ethics, and intercultural competence. Through education, people become more aware of a large variety of issues, including LGBTQ+ related challenges. Because they know more about the community, they can distance themselves from caricatural stereotypes and understand that LGBTQ+ service members are normal people, with valuable and necessary skills. Knowing LGBTQ+ people's worth makes new leaders emphasize other values, such as diversity and social justice, that they consider fundamental.

Over time, gender, race, and sexual orientation are less and less taken into account, as long as people can perform their jobs, stressing the idea that it is professionalism and practical readiness matter the most, as expressed by Chris: "I feel like all in all, if we can do what we're supposed to do as a soldier, fight, train, whatever it is, do our job, I feel like it doesn't matter what gender a person is, you know?" Whether someone can perform their job matters: service members are soldiers above all, and their other identities are not considered when assessing their abilities. When interviewed, Jayden insisted on this point, emphasizing that "at the end of the day, we're just humans." Each of the three trans service members interviewed, especially Chrissy, argued that trans people did not want special treatment or privileges but that they just wanted to be treated decently, as human beings with equal rights: "Just treat me like everyone else. I'm a human being. I don't need special privileges. I don't need, you know, to be coddled. I just want to be accepted and live my life and live in myself."¹⁰² This new focus on professionalism led by younger leaders, independently from gender or sexual orientation, largely favors a better and more complete integration of the LGBTQ+ community within the U.S. military, paving the way for a broader cultural shift. However, situations can radically differ from branch to branch, service to service, and individual to individual, leading to inconsistent and sometimes sporadic integration.

Despite the current backlash on trans troops openly serving, Jayden still concluded with some optimistic views regarding changes in the military culture: "The generational change in the military is very real and I'm excited to see when those younger generations start to assume those leadership roles and changes will happen. I'm very hopeful that the future will be much brighter."¹⁰³ According to him, it is only a matter of time before the military is more inclusive and allows every

¹⁰¹ Adler, P. S., & Borys, B. (1996). Two types of bureaucracy: Enabling and coercive. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(1), 61–89.

¹⁰² Interview with Chrissy.

¹⁰³ Interview with Jayden.

individual to join and serve openly. The integration of LGBTQ+ people in the military is a relevant example that shows how slow a process cultural change is. It takes generations to change ideas and influence minds more permanently.

B. Cultural changes in the military induced by the civilian world ?

Generally speaking, culture is one of the most challenging aspects to change and implement within a society or an organization because it involves changing mindsets and ideas, which are often fixed and deeply rooted in individuals. Shifts in culture can happen through different drivers like technological innovation, political changes, social movements, or even crises like pandemics. In most cases, cultural change reflects specific power dynamics. Scholars like Antonio Gramsci argued that culture has always been a tool for the ruling class to preserve a particular ideology and thus maintain power.¹⁰⁴ According to his argument, cultural change can only occur when subordinate groups start to challenge the status quo. When it comes to cultural change within the military, this power dynamic is even more significant because of the hyper fixation on hierarchy and the role given to leadership, who usually tend to hold traditional and conservative views. This means that military culture is resistant to change to preserve its traditions and identity. Consequently, LGBTQ+ service members can either directly challenge the status quo, although social structures in the military are not favorable to resistance behaviors, or hope to reach those leadership positions to change minds and make a shift happen in military culture. In this case, cultural change is internally driven within the institution, which has happened with the arrival of younger generations in the Armed Forces.

As Laura Schousboe pointed out, implementing change in the military takes time, primarily because these types of institutions are driven by routinization, that is, “the process by which technological innovations are implemented into the organizational practice of the military organization and thus become part of its standard practice.”¹⁰⁵ Consequently, it is challenging to implement changes in culture because those changes need to become part of the military routine. Barry Posen, the father of the Civil-Military Relations School, was the first to examine change in military organizations in *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (1984). ‘Civil-military relations’ is a broad term that refers to various links between civil society and the military. Posen argued that civilian intervention is often a necessary driver of military innovation because military organizations are

¹⁰⁴ Lears, T. J. J. (1985). The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities. *The American Historical Review*, 90(3), 567-593.

¹⁰⁵ Hollænder Schousboe, L. (2022). How innovations cease to be new: Routinizing technological innovations within military organizations. [Ph.D. thesis, SDU]. Syddansk Universitet. Det Samfundsvidenskabelige Fakultet.

resistant to change by nature. Therefore, civilians must force change upon the military, working as an external driver. Drawing on Posen's argument, Schousboe works on the assumption that civil-military relations set constraints and opportunities for routinization, which means that civilian intervention provides an external push towards or away from routinization. Although these authors apply this framework to military innovation, it is also relevant to apply it to culture because culture becomes accepted in the military in part through routinization. Indeed, shifts in culture can also be externally driven, through civilian involvement.

Interestingly, when there is greater public support for LGBTQ+ rights in society, integration and acceptance are usually improving in the military, as if the institution mirrors larger societal dynamics. If hierarchical relationships are strong within the military institution, important power dynamics are also at play in civil-military relations. Aside from the arrival of younger generations into the Armed Forces, civilian control over the military is another important aspect contributing to the ongoing shift in military culture. At the end of the 1990s, many civil society and military experts worried about the widening gap between those two worlds, with civilians identifying less and less with the military and not relating to the idea of serving. Since the end of the draft in 1973, the military faced recruitment and retention issues and became more professionalized. In that sense, having a military made of professional service members rather than conscripts contributed to shifting military culture. Despite a greater gap in civil-military relations, civilians have maintained an important control over the military, primarily through what Huntington called a 'subjective control' of the state and society, which impose their views and values on the military.¹⁰⁶ Although controversial, Huntington's work in *The soldier and the state* (1957) represents a cornerstone for the theory on civil-military relations, expanding on democratic civilian control.

Civilian control can be expressed through civilian leadership, elected officials, the general public, and the media. Ultimately, one of the U.S. fundamental principles is that the military stays subordinate to civilian leadership to protect democracy. The idea is that as long as leaders ensure effective civilian control, a powerful military will not threaten democracy.¹⁰⁷ Civilian control is codified in the law, and military personnel and civilians must support and defend the Constitution. According to Section 2, Article II of the Constitution, the President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, which means that a civilian elected official will have the final say over the use of military power. The chain of command to exercise civilian control runs from

¹⁰⁶ Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The soldier and the state : the theory and politics of civil-military relations* / Samuel P. Huntington. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

¹⁰⁷ Evans, R. (2022, September 6). To support and defend: Principles of civilian control and best practices of civil-military relations. *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/to-support-and-defend-principles-of-civilian-control-and-best-practices-of-civil-military-relations/>

the President to the civilian Secretary of Defense to the combatant commanders. Additionally, civilian control is shared with the legislative and judicial branches. According to Article I of the Constitution, Congress is granted the right to declare war, raise and support armies, and provide and maintain a navy. Judges can declare a policy illegal or unconstitutional and force the military to comply since they cannot follow unlawful policies and orders. Theoretically, civilian leadership greatly influences the military and what it is allowed to do or not. When it comes to LGBTQ+ integration, civilian officials can pressure the military to be more tolerant and inclusive, which is what has been happening since the repeal of DADT in 2010. In that sense, the abrogation of the policy largely contributed to shifting military culture toward more inclusivity and acceptance.

Civilian control over the military is also expressed more broadly through the general public, whose opinion and views have become more vocal and influential over time, especially in the information age, with the media. The military has been under greater public scrutiny due to intense media coverage and the development of social media. Today, more and more LGBTQ+ service members choose to share their experiences in the Armed Forces online, which means that anyone on social media can get a glimpse of what it is actually like to serve in the military, especially being part of a minority that may not also be welcomed in specific units. When mindsets and ideas evolve, the military cannot stay inflexible and continue to promote a sexist and homophobic conservative discourse. As Patricia Shields observed, military culture interacts closely with civilian democratic values, meaning that as societies change, military norms and practices must evolve to maintain legitimacy and public trust.¹⁰⁸ Overall, civil society can hold the military accountable more easily and undermine the legitimacy of existing norms within the military institution, thus inducing a cultural shift. James Burk, a military sociologist who analyzed how the military adapts to evolving societal norms, supports this argument, saying that democratic pressures sometimes drive cultural change.¹⁰⁹ For the U.S. Armed Forces, this issue of legitimacy is crucial, especially in a democracy and in the context of a difficult recruitment crisis. Just like with elected officials, the military is expected to be representative of the general population.¹¹⁰ Persisting in excluding LGBTQ+ members will only contribute to delegitimizing the military and portraying it as a backward institution if public opinion generally supports the LGBTQ+ community.

Looking back on her article about military culture written in 1994, Colonel Duvinin can be considered a visionary in the sense that she saw the cultural shift that was underway in the military,

¹⁰⁸ Shields, P. M., & Sookermany, A. (2020). Dynamic Intersection of Military and Society. In *Handbook of Military Sciences* (pp. 1–12). Springer.

¹⁰⁹ Burk, J. (2001). The military's presence in American society, 1950–2000. In P. D. Feaver & R. H. Kohn (Eds.), *Soldiers and civilians: The civil-military gap and American national security* (pp. 247–274). MIT Press.

¹¹⁰ Heinecken, L., Soeters, J., Caforio, G., & Nuciari, M. (2018). Managing Diversity: From Exclusion to Inclusion and Valuing Difference. In *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (pp. 327–339). Springer International Publishing AG.

even back at a time when gays and lesbians could not serve openly under DADT and women could not serve in combat arms units. She expanded on the battle already happening back then between the traditional combat masculine-warrior paradigm and a new inclusionary model of culture. She observed that historically, the military has undergone “fundamental social change” that forces culture to adapt over time.¹¹¹ Over 30 years later, it appears her hypothesis was largely confirmed, as the integration of LGBTQ+ troops, but also that of women, has kept improving, and minds have become more tolerant and accepting. However, the military as an institution has not yet entirely accepted this cultural shift in the sense that its structure and organization are still somewhat embedded in the traditional hierarchical and obedience-focused military culture, preventing full systematization of LGBTQ+ integration.

This cultural shift can bring positive consequences for LGBTQ+ service members; however, their integration is still subject to ongoing personnel policies. Interestingly, more progressive policies and legal improvements have contributed to changing military culture, but now that culture is actively shifting, policies are becoming harsher under Trump, especially for trans troops. It appears military culture and policy share a very intricate link that has them influencing one another.

¹¹¹ Dunivin, K. O. (1997). *Military culture: A paradigm shift?* Air War College, Air University.

Chapter 3 : Interactions between federal personnel policies and military culture

Section 1: The influence of personnel policies on effective integration of LGBTQ+ soldiers

A. Policies shape military culture by setting norms and rules to follow

Based on the existing research conducted by scholars in the fields of military sociology and public policy, and drawing on the interviews carried out for this research thesis, it emerges that federal military personnel policies and military culture have particular and unique interactions, compared to the links that policies and culture share in civil society. The singularity of this relationship in the military world rests upon the very culture of the institution. Because of the nature of military culture, policies are much more pervasive and powerful than in the civilian world. Culture and legislation influence one another and therefore shape the conditions for LGBTQ+ integration.

Because the military defines itself through hierarchy and discipline and sets respect for rules as one of the institution's core values, the hold of policies is heightened. As previously mentioned, military culture is deeply linked with hierarchy, and whoever holds power can influence said culture, which is partly why the integration of LGBTQ+ is dependent on the branch and the type of job one is working.¹¹² When looking at the bigger picture and applying this logic to a larger scale, it appears that the highest level of hierarchy, the Department of Defense, has the strongest hold on military culture because it can define norms through official policies, particularly in the case of personnel policies. By deciding which individuals get to serve the country and under which conditions, the DoD sets the tone regarding inclusivity and the integration of minorities. In his Institutional/Occupational thesis, Charles C. Moskos compared two models of the military. According to him, the institutional model is organized vertically with a top-down authority structure and emphasizes hierarchy and tradition.¹¹³ Given the top-down mechanism at play within the institution and civil-military relations, policies shape military culture in the sense that they dictate the rules to follow for everyone else in the Armed Forces.

¹¹² Soeters, J. L., Winslow, D. J., & Weibull, A. (2003). Organizational Cultures in the Military. In G. Caforio (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (pp. 237–254). Kluwer Academic.

¹¹³ Moskos, C. C. (1986). Institutional/Occupational Trends in Armed Forces: An Update. *Armed Forces and Society*, 12(3), 380.

In this context, with hierarchy as one of the most critical principles in the code of conduct, troops must obey orders from the DoD and stay disciplined by enforcing and respecting the policies. Somehow, military culture contributes to lending weight and credibility to policies precisely because service members were taught to follow the rules and obey hierarchy. No matter what people in the military think and what their personal beliefs are, they always must comply with the policies in place that come from above because rules and hierarchy come first. Service members are unlikely to defy authority, especially if the policy comes from the DoD, i.e., the highest position in military hierarchy. Serving the military implies following orders, even if one disagrees. When asked about military culture, Chris noticed, “We’re kind of just taking orders and we’re doing what we’re told. And at the end of the day, whether we agree with what we’re told or not, we kind of have to take orders and do it. We can either roll with it or get out. So one thing the military is, I know for sure, at least all the places that I served, as they’re pretty good when it comes to following policies from what I experienced.”¹¹⁴ Despite Moskos’ work highlighting the shift to a postmodern military after the Cold War that would be less strict on hierarchy, that would allow more interactions in between ranks and that would be overall more permissive, many troops who served in the 2010s and 2020s like Chris still feel like the traditional military culture prevails.

Technically, speaking up and resisting are always an option for LGBTQ+ personnel, but the cost of this resistance is usually too high for most of them. The institution has such a strong authority to decide what policies to implement. Most LGBTQ+ personnel will comply and not risk questioning the decisions made, simply because their careers, jobs, and salaries depend on it. Through its pervasive authority, the military has considerable autonomy in enforcing discipline and thus a greater capacity to punish service members, as Huntington emphasized.¹¹⁵ The military controls its members by constantly threatening them with discharge in case of inappropriate behavior. Owen admitted that it was not possible to speak up for LGBTQ+ rights when serving: “Especially if you’re active duty, they really don’t want you to have an opinion on anything or speak your opinion.”¹¹⁶ In that sense, policies and culture reinforce each other and work together in defining the environment in which LGBTQ+ troops evolve.

If LGBTQ+ service members speak up against an unfavorable policy affecting their rights, they risk retaliation. Members could face direct discrimination by their homophobic and/or transphobic peers or by the administration, who could discharge them. It can even go as far as getting a dishonorable discharge, a punitive discharge for serious offenses decided by courts-

¹¹⁴ Interview with Chris.

¹¹⁵ Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The soldier and the state: The theory and politics of civil-military relations*. Harvard University Press.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Owen.

martial, which is usually considered the most severe of the military discharge types.¹¹⁷ When receiving a dishonorable discharge, the U.S. government does not legally consider the person a veteran. Therefore, they generally cannot receive most veterans' benefits, such as retirement pay when leaving the service, or medical benefits.¹¹⁸ Additionally, people with a dishonorable discharge struggle to transition back to civilian life because it reflects negatively on them. For example, when looking for a job, employers generally have a negative opinion about dishonorable discharge, even though they do not know why it was given. Under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the policy did not require that gays and lesbians receive a dishonorable discharge. However, some of them were given other than honorable discharges because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status.¹¹⁹ Although it is not a punitive discharge, it is still the third type of administrative discharge reserved for misconduct like disobeying an order that made a lot of LGBTQ+ veterans ineligible for certain benefits and that contributed to their stigmatization.

Types of military discharges

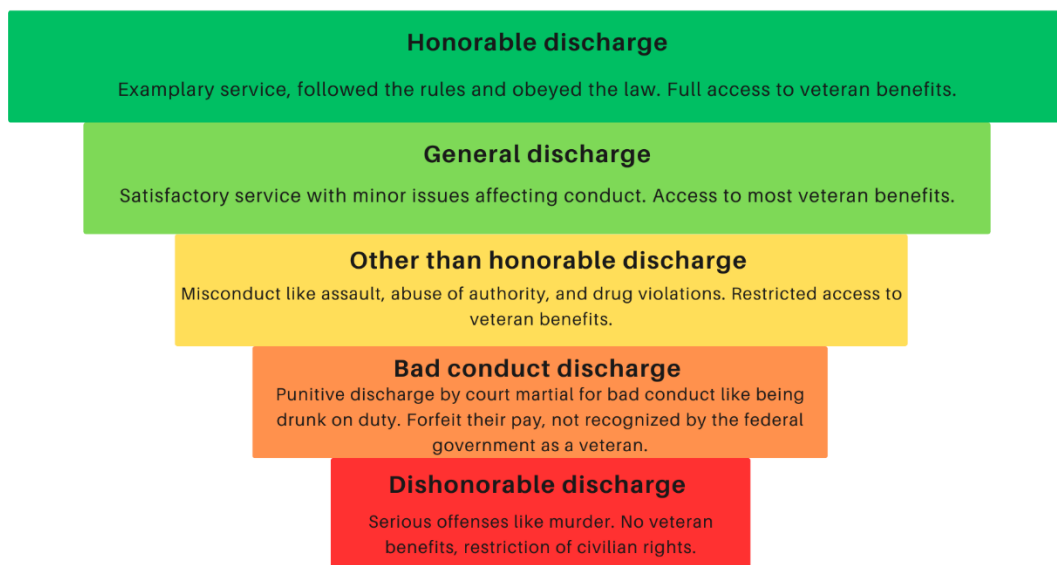


Chart designed by the author, 2025, May 9.

The military has always relied on disciplinary measures to enforce policies, which explains why it has a strong role in shaping its culture by deciding what behaviors get rewarded or punished,

¹¹⁷ Dishonorable discharges are reserved for serious offenses comparable to felonies in the civilian world such as murder, sexual assault, treason, desertion.

¹¹⁸ Lawforveterans.org. (2025, May 5). *Types of Military Discharge and What they Mean for Veterans*. <https://lawforveterans.org/work/84-discharge-and-retirement/497-military-discharge>

¹¹⁹ Zaru, D. (2021, September 20). *LGBTQ veterans discharged dishonorably for sexual orientation to get full benefits, VA says*. ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/lgbtq-veterans-discharged-dishonorably-sexual-orientation-full-benefits/story?id=80129318>

forcing all members to comply and adopt the attitudes the institution wants to instill in them. Whether service members agree, they are only left with two options: obey and be fine, or disobey and risk sanctions. Through her 25-year commitment to the Navy and after working closely with congress members on Capitol Hill to repeal DADT as a veteran and LGBTQ+ activist, Zoe Dunning witnessed the dynamics at play within the military hierarchy. She saw how decisive the senior leadership could be in defining the culture they wanted for the military:

I think the military is this unique institution where, if the senior leadership says this is how it's going to be, people snap to and salute and comply. You can set culture by what behaviors and actions and words you reward and punish. And so that is what leadership at the Pentagon today is using is, what behaviors and actions are we rewarding and punishing? And that's how they're setting the culture. It doesn't necessarily change individuals' beliefs, although it can influence it, but it will shift what is acceptable within a culture and what's not.¹²⁰

Interestingly, most interviewees used the same wording when giving their opinion on the interactions between senior leadership, policies and military culture, saying that policies and leadership 'set the tone' for the Armed Forces as a whole by drawing the line on behaviors and ideas that are acceptable and those that are not, independently from individuals' beliefs. It shows that service members are well aware of the dynamics in military hierarchy and that all of them understood the senior leadership's authority and took in the military culture. This analysis is true throughout history, especially with the implementation and then the repeal of DADT, but also today with the Trump administration setting the tone for the military with an outright ban on transgender service members. Although he started his separation process before the announcement of the new policy, Jayden really saw how legislation could negatively impact the LGBTQ+ community, specifically transgender troops:

If you go back to the Obama administration, when the first policies were put in to protect transgender service members, there really wasn't a lot of backlashes. It was just like, okay, well, you guys are here. You've already been here. Great. You know, continue to do your job. Let's put forward. But it wasn't until that Trump administration came in and started spewing hate against openly serving transgender service members. That's when I started to see more open opinions against LGBTQ being in the military.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

¹²¹ Interview with Jayden.

Going back to the example of the DADT period from 1994 to 2011, it appears clear that personnel policies greatly influence the integration of LGBTQ+ service members through their hold on military culture. This policy, which was not considered as an outright ban by its creators, led to a particular and tricky environment for LGBTQ+ troops because they could technically still serve, as long as they hid their sexual orientation and gender identity, but at the same time, hiding also meant that in case of discrimination or when hearing derogatory comments, they could not say anything nor could they report it. Indeed, they could be accused of being a homosexual, which was considered inappropriate on a legal level and not just a social and interpersonal level. In that sense, the policy strengthened the heterosexist military culture by allowing it to persist. Straight service members could be openly homophobic without risking any sanctions. The law did not punish homophobia, so why would it be removed from the culture? Somehow, it looks like policies have a binding effect on culture. Under DADT, the law and the leadership allowed a culture of fear and hostility toward the LGBTQ+ community, seriously hindering their integration. If the military appeared to be more diverse thanks to the so-called progressive DADT policy, in reality, it did not mean that the institution was more inclusive, since there was no mechanism to punish homophobia and protect gay and lesbian service members serving in the Armed Forces.

This logic of policy setting the tone for acceptable culture works both ways, whether with hostile or supportive leadership. In that sense, the repeal of DADT was a turning point for military culture, because top senior officials decided 'no more' and realized that they could no longer pretend there were valid reasons to discriminate against homosexuals. Therefore, it translated into actual changes toward better integration of LGBTQ+ service members. For example, the leadership organized training for service members to ensure they would be ready to integrate their LGBTQ+ counterparts. That type of training would not change the culture overnight, but it was still a crucial step forward in a long-term perspective, to influence ideas and mindsets. If that kind of training became durable, all recruits and the following generations would be exposed to a much more inclusive discourse by the military institution. This shows how binding law is and how crucial it is to have policies that favor LGBTQ+ integration, because long-term, it will contribute to shifting the traditional heterosexist military culture. As she actively advocated for the repeal of DADT, Zoe Dunning saw those dynamics at play at the time:

Having Admiral Mike Mullen as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff¹²² say that he was supportive of repeal, that set the tone that, you know, we're going to repeal this, and we're going to respect everyone. And they did training about that nine

¹²² The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the United States' highest-ranking military officer and the principal military advisor to the president, the secretary of defense and the National Security Council.

*month period between the repeal legislation being passed and the actual enactment of it was supposedly so that we could conduct training, so that people could prepare for, you know, having openly gay service members alongside them, and essentially the training just boiled down to respect, you know, treating false juries members with respect.*¹²³

It is important to note that if policies can influence military culture by defining what is acceptable and what is not, military culture also influences policies because it is very pervasive and deeply rooted in minds, behaviors, and habits. It took decades for inclusive policies to be enacted and implemented, precisely because of the persisting heterosexist military culture, committed to tradition. In the end, when policy changes happened, the institution was at least partially ready to accept cultural change.

B. How personnel policies worsen the recruitment crisis in the U.S. military

After the end of the draft in 1973, serving in the military became a career choice rather than an obligation. According to historical trends, recruitment has continuously risen and fallen since the establishment of the all-volunteer force, partly depending on the state of the U.S. economy. Americans tend to enlist more when military wages compete with civilian opportunities, which usually coincides with a poorer economy. When the economy is strong, fewer people volunteer.¹²⁴ In recent years, the number of young people volunteering to serve in the military has decreased. In 2023, data underscored the severity of the recruitment crisis with the military services falling short of their recruiting goals by more than 41,000 new personnel. Additionally, a 2020 Pentagon Qualified Military Available Study showed that 77% of Americans aged 17 to 24 would be unfit to serve in the military because of mental and physical health problems, as well as drug use and criminal records. Some people have been discussing reinstating the draft, like Lt. Gen. Richard Newton, a former assistant vice chief of staff in the Air Force, who referred to the situation as a “national security crisis”. However, he expressed concern about forcing people to serve in the military.¹²⁵

¹²³ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

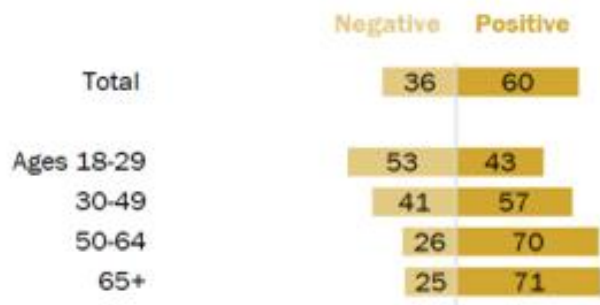
¹²⁴ Hydock, V. A. P. B. E. (2025, April 27). *Is the Military Recruiting Crisis Over ? Not quite*. Georgetown Security Studies Review.

¹²⁵ Wingard, J. (2025, February 17). *Reinstate the draft ? an alternative to the military recruitment crisis*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonwingard/2025/02/17/should-the-draft-return-how-to-solve-the-military-recruitment-crisis/>

Over the years, the military-civilian gap has widened, with civilians disconnecting more and more from military service because of misperceptions and an inability to identify with the institution.¹²⁶ This is due to varying factors like changing demographics, cultural shifts, evolving perceptions of risk, and the unattractiveness of the military, compared to the civilian world. Indeed, civilian careers and wages can sometimes be more attractive and competitive, leading to retention issues within the military since many people do not want to stay in the profession for too long, fearing they will miss other opportunities. Moskos had already noticed in 2012, “In the post-Cold War era, the public mood toward the armed forces becomes more one of indifference. The end of conscription makes military service less salient to the general populace. The likelihood of volunteer recruitment drawing upon future elites and opinion leaders becomes increasingly remote.”¹²⁷ Thirteen years later, Dr. Katie Helland, Director of Military Accession Policy for the DoD, agrees with this trend, which is still ongoing and stronger than ever because the public lacks familiarity with military service more and more. Only 15% of young adults have a parent who served, compared to 40% in 1990. In 2021, only 9% of young Americans expressed an interest in serving in the military.¹²⁸ In addition to this lack of interest, younger people also tend to think negatively of the U.S. military, as the following graph made by the Pew Research Center highlights:

Americans ages 18 to 29 more negative than positive toward the U.S. military

% who say *the military* has a ____ effect on the way things are going in the country these days



Pew Research Center, Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted January 16-21, 2024.

¹²⁶ Garamone, J. (2019, May 16). *DOD official cites widening Military-Civilian gap*. U.S. Department Of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1850344/dod-official-cites-widening-military-civilian-gap/>

¹²⁷ Moskos, C. C., Segal, D. R., & Burk, J. (2012). Toward a Postmodern Military: The United States as a Paradigm. In *Military Sociology* (Vol. 4, pp. II51–II51). SAGE Publications Ltd.

¹²⁸ Hydock, V. A. P. B. E. (2025, April 27). *Is the Military Recruiting Crisis Over ? Not quite*. Georgetown Security Studies Review.

In order to address the decline in enlistment and meet the workforce needs, services in the Armed Forces have implemented other strategies to attract recruits and retain them long-term. For example, in 2024, the Army increased its marketing and advertising budget by 10% and dedicated \$675 million to enlistment bonuses, while the Navy added a robotics specialization to its ranks to attract younger tech-oriented people. These initiatives have shown some positive results so far, as all branches of the U.S. military except the Navy reached their recruiting goals in Fiscal Year 2024.¹²⁹ However, challenges persist because these efforts depend on military policies, especially personnel policies that define recruitment requirements and conditions.

Personnel policies have a significant influence on LGBTQ+ integration, but also on recruitment and retention, which have long been in crisis since the military struggles to draft people and to keep them long-term. When it comes to anti-LGBTQ+ policies, in addition to complicating their integration, they negatively impact recruitment and can even worsen the recruitment crisis. Whether it leads to the expulsion of current service members or prevents new recruits from joining, exclusive policies hurt military readiness since they represent a loss of manpower and can even deter potential volunteers. With unfavorable policies, there is a critical deterrent effect for some people who will not enroll despite their initial desire. For example, Owen joined the Army five years ago but admitted that he probably would not have enrolled if DADT were still in place. Even though the military would still have been a good opportunity for him professionally, it would not be worth living in a lie and in secret:

Oh, if Don't Ask, Don't Tell was still in place, I probably would not have joined. Because I just don't, like, that doesn't make sense to me. "You can be gay, whatever, just don't tell anyone or don't ask anyone about it" that makes no sense to me. I actually met someone who used to be in the Coast Guard, and he got kicked out because they found out he was gay.¹³⁰

Many people, whether active service members or veterans, have stressed how harmful anti-LGBTQ+ policies are for the military. On top of reinforcing the heterosexist military culture, those policies also exclude people with valuable skills that the military desperately needs, especially when struggling with recruitment and retention. Zoe Dunning explained why she came out so publicly in January 1993 during Clinton's presidential campaign: "I wasn't trying to shame the Navy; I was trying to shame a policy that was hurting the Navy because it was discharging fully qualified

¹²⁹ Asch, B. (2025, April 8). *Navigating a Changing Military Recruitment Environment*. RAND. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/04/navigating-a-changing-military-recruitment-environment.html>

¹³⁰ Interview with Owen.

people and preventing those from joining who might want to join because of the policy.”¹³¹ By publicly coming out, she wanted to raise awareness and show that the ban on homosexuals serving was just a massive loss for the military. Although DADT was supposed to be a more progressive policy allowing homosexuals to serve as long as they remained silent, it was still harmful to military readiness. As previously mentioned, about 14,000 LGB service members were discharged for their sexual orientation during DADT, impacting the military's workforce, especially in special fields like linguistics. A study conducted by the Williams Institute in 2007 found that “If the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy had not been instituted, an estimated 4,000 lesbian, gay, and bisexual military personnel would have been retained each year since 1994.”¹³² Under DADT, the military struggled with recruiting and retaining well-trained and high-qualified service members.

The other way around, after the repeal of DADT, when LGB troops were allowed to serve openly, LGBTQ+ people were generally more inclined to join the military. They would feel more comfortable just being themselves because they knew that in case of discrimination or assault, they could report it, and the law would be on their side and should protect them. Overall, the LGB community has felt safer when serving because the federal policy has ultimately been on their side, and homophobia could theoretically not be left unpunished.¹³³ A lot of LGBTQ+ who served under DADT and continued serving post-repeal reported that the end of the ban did not necessarily make them more vocal, simply more comfortable with their identities. Joseph felt this way, having served under DADT for 14 years, out of his 26-year career in the Marine Corps: “[...] just because I'm gay during ‘Don't Ask, Don't Tell’ and you know, post repeal the first couple of years, doesn't mean I want to waive the HRC flag¹³⁴ at every moment. Like I just want to do my job. All these people are straight, and you don't bring up the fact that they're straight.”¹³⁵

The specific case of transgender troops’ integration also has an impact on recruitment and retention. Transgender individuals in the military have been going through a continual back and forth regarding their integration and their right to serve accordingly to their gender identity and not their sex assigned at birth. Transgender service members have only been allowed to serve openly for a few years, from 2016 to 2019, thanks to the Obama Administration's efforts to end the ban, and from 2021 to 2025, thanks to the Biden Administration. In between those two time periods, Trump ordered a new ban on transgender people serving in the U.S. military, despite the

¹³¹ Interview with Zoe Dunning.

¹³² Gates, G., J. (2007, March). *Effects of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” on Retention among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Military Personnel*. Williams Institute.

¹³³ Until 2016 when Obama first discussed opening the military to transgender people, there were no policy explicitly banning trans troops, their identities were simply silenced, just like it had been in the past for gay people.

¹³⁴ Referring to the Human Rights Campaign advocacy organization.

¹³⁵ Interview with Joseph.

recruitment crisis. Sarcastically enough, Trump insisted that the decline in military recruitment is only due to the Biden Administration's efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, claiming it chased away potential recruits.¹³⁶ The two times Trump decided to revive the ban on transgender troops, including the recent 2025 ban, it had negative consequences for the military, which lost valuable, skilled, and devoted service members in times when the military cannot even attract enough recruits.

The veteran community is currently opposing the administration's most recent decisions to ban transgender service members from serving, advocating that these repeated attacks toward the LGBTQ+ community will only negatively affect recruitment and demoralize minorities already serving. Veterans and active duty service members also highlight the fact that diversity is not just a moral imperative but also a very practical issue in terms of recruitment and retention. Hydock stated in his paper that "if the military is the nation's preeminent institution for preserving the Constitution and protecting the American people, it must embrace a diverse talent base."¹³⁷ Indeed, a military that is not more diverse and accepting will not reflect positively in the civilian world. Under such conditions, Americans who struggle to identify with the military will not develop any sense of belonging in the Armed Forces, thus worsening the recruitment crisis. By forbidding qualified transgender troops to serve, the administration is actively hurting military readiness and even endangering national security.

Two trans men, Chris and Jayden, who served in the Army, decided to part ways for their safety and to keep true to themselves, despite their affection for the military and their aspirations to continue their careers within the institution. Chris explained: "My contract ended December of 2020, and then I knew the new President was coming in, set to come in January. So I was actually in between, like, I was kind of in a spot, like, do I want to take a chance and stay in, or do I want to get out? And I didn't want to kind of gamble with my happiness. So I just got out just to be safe."¹³⁸ Chris went on to clarify that if the policy towards trans people had been favorable back when he served, he would have stayed in the Army, because he genuinely wanted to continue his job, especially overseas. However, his desire and, above all, his need to transition were more important. After serving for 8 years and not being able to medically transition, although he had been using his preferred pronouns at work, he felt it was time for him to separate to be able to live his truth. Jayden echoed the feeling when discussing the possibility of staying in the military:

¹³⁶ Filkins, D. (2025, February 3). The U.S. military's recruiting crisis. *The New Yorker*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/02/10/the-us-militarys-recruiting-crisis>

¹³⁷ Hydock, V. A. P. B. E. (2025, April 27). *Is the Military Recruiting Crisis Over ? Not quite*. Georgetown Security Studies Review.

¹³⁸ Interview with Chris.

If I were given the opportunity to stay in the military right now, if I wasn't going through the med board, I unfortunately would not. I would choose to part ways with the military. Being true to myself is one of my biggest values. I have two young sons, and I have to be that example for them. That we have to continue to choose ourselves day in and day out because most times others won't. [...] As much as I loved the military, I loved a lot of the values, and I loved the family that it gave me and the experiences, unfortunately it's something that I would not continue to choose. I would have to put myself and my family first.¹³⁹

By enforcing this new ban, the DoD gives up on thousands of skilled people, creating a significant knowledge loss, as Chrissy underlined. Although she would have liked to stay in the Air Force, she had to voluntarily separate so that she would not risk losing her veteran benefits. When discussing the current political context and the recent news, Chrissy felt disappointed but also annoyed because she thinks that the new ban on trans troops is “a loss of knowledge, it's a loss of manpower, a loss of resources, and a loss of money.”¹⁴⁰ Joseph, now a veteran, agrees with her analysis:

They're trying right now to isolate and identify all these trans people and start kicking them out like at a time that America is really struggling to recruit people. You want to kick out people who actually want to serve? Like it doesn't make any damn sense. [...] I feel like this administration is going to make a potentially really, really detrimental impact on military readiness because a lot of people, straight, gay, otherwise, and just allies in general, may not wanna join with all this stuff going on.¹⁴¹

Both the historical example of DADT and the current news with the revival of the ban on trans troops show that anti-LGBTQ+ personnel policies worsen recruitment and retention issues and that they eventually hurt military readiness.

¹³⁹ Interview with Jayden.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Chrissy.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Joseph.

Section 2: Dissociation between troops beliefs and official policies

A. Inclusive policies do not ensure total absence of discrimination

Policies and culture interact in such a way that there is sometimes a dissociation between what service members think and what official policies promote. Although personnel policies have a massive role in influencing military culture and shaping LGBTQ+ experiences, they are not the only component at play when integrating into the Armed Forces. Other service members, as individuals, can significantly affect one's practical experience as an LGBTQ+ soldier. Sometimes, inclusive policies do not ensure a total absence of discrimination because military culture is not the same throughout the military. Some people are attached to traditional values or simply homophobic or transphobic, which is proof that the heterosexist military culture persists among specific units. Meaning, that even if the institution is supportive on a legal aspect and promoting diversity, LGBTQ+ experiences can still be negatively impacted and struggle to be included. In that sense, the dynamics within the military can mirror those of the civilian world. One can have the best experience if surrounded by open-minded people, or face discrimination if working with a homophobic colleague.

Just like any other environment, discrimination can still happen even if the military as an institution is more supportive and diverse. The repeal of DADT clearly showed that diversity was promoted in theory in official laws and statements, but in reality, inclusivity was far from achieved. Progress takes time, even after enacting favorable policies. The different people who make up the organization can make LGBTQ+ experiences less inclusive. Those who hold the strongest and sturdiest views, either instilled or strengthened by military culture, often disregard instructions about including their LGBTQ+ counterparts. Despite inclusive policies, military culture persists in the minds of people, and it leads to poor integration of LGBTQ+ service members. For example, with the DoD's Equal opportunity policy that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, one would think that LGBTQ+ troops should be better protected; however, things can be different, as Owen noticed:

I think Equal Opportunity is a good policy to have in place. And I think that having the training on it monthly is a good thing, too. But I just feel like some people kind of don't take in the whole thing. They still discriminate people based on certain aspects of their life. And I think if people were to pay more attention to the Equal Opportunity training and apply it more to their lives, it would be 100% no changes needed. But I just think some people, I don't like using the term set in their ways,

*but I feel like in this case, people are set in their ways, and they just really don't pay attention to the training.*¹⁴²

Talking from experience, Owen thinks that some non-LGBTQ+ service members do not pay attention to training when it comes to inclusivity and acceptance. As mentioned, minds are the hardest thing to change because ideas and concepts can sometimes be deeply rooted in people. Such policies are crucial to improve LGBTQ+ integration because they set the tone for what the military should be, but they are not infallible. Even with pro-LGBTQ+ policies and actual measures toward their integration, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity can persist. Change takes time.

Once again, inclusive policies do not eliminate discrimination, as situations can vary depending on different duty-station locations. Although there is not much literature about this issue in a military context, multiple studies have looked at the geographical acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community around the world and within the U.S. Globally speaking, the average level of acceptance for LGBTQ+ people has increased since 1980. During 2017-2020, the United States ranked 23rd worldwide for social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.¹⁴³ According to Owen, location has a considerable role in LGBTQ+ experiences, especially overseas. Although he had a great experience within his unit in the Army, Owen could feel the difference when deployed to countries where LGBTQ+ people are not well perceived: "We were deployed to Qatar a few months ago, and Qatar, like their culture is, they don't like that stuff. Like they don't like any LGBTQ, anything." He admitted that sometimes things could be more difficult when deployed outside the U.S., "but only because of the culture around, like the culture of that country." He recalled a memory from his deployment in Qatar, where he could feel that LGBTQ+ identities were not welcomed: "We were sitting in a steakhouse one time, and they started playing this song. I don't remember what song it was now, though, the song that I really like, and I was singing along to it, just being all flamboyant and stuff. The manager of the steak house was just standing in the corner giving me like the evil eye."¹⁴⁴ This example shows that sometimes, experiences can be influenced by other factors outside of the military. Even in times of inclusive policies and when serving in an open-minded unit, LGBTQ+ individuals can feel less safe serving in specific areas. Indeed, the same study found that Qatar ranked 111 for social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.

¹⁴² Interview with Owen.

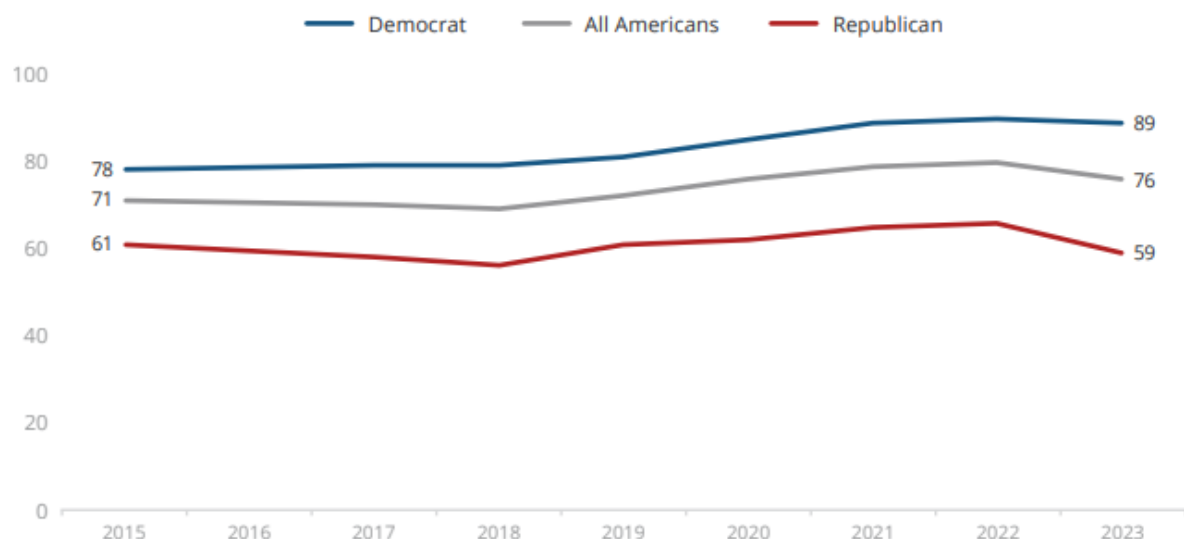
¹⁴³ Flores, A., R. (2021, November). *Social Acceptance of LGBTI People in 175 Countries and Locations* - Williams Institute. Williams Institute.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Owen.

When looking into different geographical locations within the U.S., it appears that attitudes toward the community can change due to various factors, impacting their integration into the Armed Forces. First of all, the geographical distribution of the LGBTQ+ population plays an important role. A study conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 35% of LGBTQ+ Americans live in the South, 27% in the West, 20% in the Northeast, and 19% in the Midwest. The states that have the highest proportion of LGBTQ+ residents are New Mexico (16%), the District of Columbia (15%), Nebraska (14%), Nevada (14%), and Oregon (14%). In contrast, the five states with the lowest proportion of LGBTQ+ residents are Alabama (4%), South Carolina (4%), Louisiana (5%), Iowa (5%), and Hawaii (6%).¹⁴⁵ In states where the LGBTQ+ community is more present and visible, the general population tends to be more accepting. This geographical distribution is partly linked to the states' political affiliations. Indeed, LGBTQ+ individuals tend to feel safer and better accepted in Democratic states compared to Republican states. The following graph clearly shows this trend, with a larger percentage of Democrats favoring pro-LGBTQ+ policies compared to Republicans.

Support for Nondiscrimination Protections for LGBTQ+ people, by Party Affiliation, 2015-2023

Percent who favor laws that would protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people against discrimination in jobs, public accommodations, and housing:



Source: PRRI, American Values Atlas, 2015-2023.

¹⁴⁵ PRRI. (2024, March 12). *Views on LGBTQ rights in all 50 states: Findings from PRRI's 2023 American Values Atlas*. PRRI. <https://www.prri.org/research/views-on-lgbtq-rights-in-all-50-states-findings-from-prris-2023-american-values-atlas/>

Attitudes can also change depending on the area, whether rural or urban. In his article about rural identity and LGBT public opinion, Jack Thompson found that rural identifiers tend to be less supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, compared to those who do not identify as rural.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, the location where LGBTQ+ service members are stationed across the country can directly affect their experiences, making their service more complicated for those who do not encounter the same support. Chrissy saw the importance of location in shaping the integration of the community, although she did not experience it herself: “Even for my gay friends, it's been a battle, right? I know some people serving in El Paso, or out in Georgia, and where it's a little bit more rural and a lot more conservative.”¹⁴⁷

B. Repressive policies contradict with most service members beliefs

In times of inclusive policies, such as after the repeal of DADT, some service members can still hold anti-LGBTQ+ views, impacting their integration negatively. Conversely, when repressive policies are implemented, they often contradict most service members' beliefs. It was the case under DADT, especially in the last few years of application, when it became clear to most that having an LGBTQ+ soldier in the military ranks was not a problem, and it is also the case today, with the revival of the ban on transgender troops. In 2007, even before the repeal of DADT, a poll proved that only 5% of military personnel said they were “very uncomfortable” interacting with homosexuals, contrasted with 73% who were somewhat or very comfortable in this regard.¹⁴⁸

Numerous scholars and experts have researched civil-military relations, focusing on the interactions between both worlds. In particular, Moskos argued that the military has developed greater permeability with the civilian society over the years. According to him, this increased “interpenetrability” of civilian and military spheres, both structurally and culturally, is one of the main characteristics of the postmodern military, corresponding to the end of the Cold War and onward.¹⁴⁹ The interactions between both spheres have intensified since Moskos theorized the postmodern military in the 1990s. Today, the mirroring effect between the military and society appears firmer, as the new generations enroll in the Armed Forces and influence military culture. Some logic and dynamics observed in the military are similar to those of the civilian world. For

¹⁴⁶ Thompson, J. (2023). Rural Identity and LGBT Public Opinion in the United States. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 87(4), 956–977.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Chrissy.

¹⁴⁸ Zogby, J., Bruce, J., Wittman, R., & Rodgers, S. (2006). *Opinions of military personnel on sexual minorities in the military*. Zogby International.

¹⁴⁹ Moskos, C. C., Segal, D. R., & Williams, J. A. (2000). *The postmodern military : armed forces after the Cold War / edited by Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, David R. Segal*. Oxford University Press.

example, the experiences of LGBTQ+ service members will depend on their unit and the people they work with, similarly to a civilian job. One can have a great experience if surrounded by open-minded people who are well-educated on LGBTQ+ issues. On the other hand, one can be unlucky and face discrimination because of a toxic work environment with homophobic and/or transphobic colleagues. In the military, this logic can even be more pervasive because of the closeness of the job and the inherent community life. In a civilian job, managers define the environment in which their employees work, and thus they contribute to shaping their experiences in the same way officers do in the military. When discussing the similarities between the military and the civilian world, Chris was pensive:

I guess you would say like a civilian life, you go to a job, and you can have a boss that's like really horrible. And they make the culture at that job really bad. And then someone else comes in and turns it around. So, it's kind of the same with the military. You can have a leadership, a leader that's really horrible and make the culture of your company and your job environment really shitty, just because, you know, they're that type of person. And then soon as someone else comes in, they can turn around. So, it's kind of hard to pick.¹⁵⁰

After exchanging with multiple LGBTQ+ service members, it appears that the leadership style impacted their integration. Although it might come as a surprise, most interviewees had a positive experience with their leadership, even trans service members who served under unfavorable policies. Owen, Chris, Jayden, Chrissy, and even Joseph, at times throughout his career, had a supportive chain of command. Owen even recalled his leadership's reaction to his coming out: "You've got family here. You've got all of us to support you. You ain't got nothing to worry about." He acknowledged that the chain of command one is under shapes one's experience in the military. It will determine whether LGBTQ+ people feel safe and benefit from an inclusive environment, which was his case after he had a leadership change. He expressed his opinion on whether he thought the Army was a safe environment in general:

Yeah, I feel like it is. With the change of command that I've had since I've been in the Army, I mean, they pretty much have an open door policy. So, if you go to your first sergeant about something and nothing gets done about it, like a week or two later, you're advised to go above your first sergeant. Like to the sergeant major or even the colonel or whatever. I feel like reporting incidents does go

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Jayden.

*somewhere. And of course, we've been taught how to report and how we should report things too.*¹⁵¹

The dissociation between policies and service members' beliefs was already noticeable in the past, particularly under DADT, since not all military personnel agreed with the policy. Most did not care about having gays and lesbians in their unit if they knew their colleagues were competent and would have their backs. The fact that LGBTQ+ service members had to hide important aspects of their lives and identities to abide by the law negatively affected group cohesion and trust among service members. Joseph noticed it firsthand during his service under DADT, especially in the Marine Corps, where people develop an intense bond. He explained that when his peers would find out he was gay, most of them would be upset that he did not share it with them, because they perceived it as a lack of trust between brothers-in-arms. Joseph had to justify himself: "Nine times out of 10, they were hurt. They weren't offended. They didn't change their opinion on me. They were hurt that I didn't trust them. It's like, well, with all due respect, it's not about trusting you. It's my career. I will get kicked out if you react poorly to this fact."¹⁵² While DADT was implemented to ensure military readiness and unit cohesion, multiple instances prove that it was not only hurting LGBTQ+ personnel but also the things that it intended to protect.

Right now, the situation for trans service members is paradoxical. In many cases, they are primarily accepted by their peers, who do not see a problem with their identity. At the same time, they face repressive policies from the highest authority of the institution they decided to serve, which is now rejecting them. Once again, it comes into view that there is a dissociation between official policies and troops' beliefs, the former contradicting the latter. It was particularly the case for Chrissy, who eventually had to decide to separate from the Air Force, even though she had a great experience working with her peers. When asked about the reaction of other service members, even leadership positions, to the executive order banning trans troops, Chrissy said: "Angry. They were angry. Very angry. They don't want to lose us, they don't want to see me go."

Indeed, a lot of non-LGBTQ+ service members, including people in the leadership, are supportive of their trans colleagues and do not treat them differently. Some people are still transphobic and perpetuate discrimination, but it is not the majority anymore, given the cultural shift underway. Some trans service members can have a positive experience in the Armed Forces, as was the case for Jayden, who explained: "So with my direct co-workers and things like that, we all had a great relationship. They honestly didn't care one way or another. As long as I showed up

¹⁵¹ Interview with Owen.

¹⁵² Interview with Joseph.

on time, I was in the right uniform with the right attitude ready to do my job. [...] I really have had no issues being trans and serving.” He cared to expand more on this issue, arguing that the very essence of the military is only about serving and being dedicated to do so, no matter the rest: “I truly feel that at the core of the military, no one in the service truly cares about a person's gender identity or their sexual orientation. As long as I know that we get into the heat of it, I can depend on you to get me back home to my family. That's all that matters.”

The previous argument made about policies setting the tone and especially leadership playing a big role in LGBTQ+ experiences is proven by Jayden's experience as a trans man. When asked about his relationship with his leadership, he elaborated: “I have had great leadership over the years that once I had that conversation with them, that I was transgender, they immediately told me if anyone were to ever say anything that made me feel a certain way you know, I felt discriminated against, to bring it to their attention immediately.” Chrissy underlined a similar positive experience with her peers and her leadership: “My leadership, all of my office coworkers were very supportive and very understanding and make a smooth transition for me.” All these accounts of transgender service members show that official policies do not necessarily reflect the beliefs of military personnel. A lot of them disagree with the current administration's measures against inclusivity.

Conclusion

This research thesis investigated how policies around LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. Armed Forces translated into effective changes within military culture. Specifically, this project aimed to understand the interconnection between personnel policies and military culture and how their shared dynamics shape the integration of LGBTQ+ service members. The integration of the LGBTQ+ community in the U.S. military ranks has evolved rather positively over time, alongside the integration of women, and it is still an ongoing process today, with multiple legal battles back and forth. Military culture plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of LGBTQ+ service members, as many traditional values and beliefs, coupled with a lack of education about gender issues, often conflict with diversity and inclusivity. The military is a unique institution where policies and real-life practices seem to interact in a way that's different from the civilian world because of its specific culture, influencing one another and sometimes contradicting each other.

One of the main starting hypotheses was that inclusive personnel policies did not have such a positive impact on LGBTQ+ integration. However, the results of this research underscore the strong prevalence of legislation in shaping LGBTQ+ integration by inducing cultural shifts in the military. Indeed, the second hypothesis about the persistence of a traditional military culture hindering the inclusion of LGBTQ+ personnel was largely confirmed. Based on the analysis of qualitative interviews coupled with other various primary and secondary sources, it can be concluded that personnel policies have a much greater influence on LGBTQ+ integration than anticipated. This can be explained by the strong hold legislation has over military culture. The results indicate that LGBTQ+ service members generally have more positive experiences in the Armed Forces under inclusive policies, and especially policies that influence the norms and beliefs prevailing in the military institution.

Despite the limited number of qualitative interviews conducted, the diversity among respondents in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, age, location, branches of the military and jobs ensured a more representative sample of LGBTQ+ experiences. This method allowed for a general overview of the situation and it has brought out cross-cutting issues and themes regarding LGBTQ+ integration. This research clearly illustrates the similar experiences and shared opinions of LGBTQ+ service members, vis-à-vis federal policies and cultural norms in the military. Although queer service members are better accepted and integrated today, the volatility of the current political environment does not shield them away from a potential legal backlash. Policies can quickly change depending on who holds leadership, which can affect LGBTQ+ lives and experiences, as the recent ban on transgender troops shows. LGBTQ+ rights can never be taken for granted.

The conclusions of this research thesis add up to the existing literature on the LGBTQ+ in the U.S. military by challenging the mainstream idea in gender studies that policies do not ensure effective integration for LGBTQ+ military personnel. By emphasizing the interactions between federal legislation and military culture, this project underlined the crucial role of policies in fostering inclusivity for minorities in the Armed Forces, for the sake of both LGBTQ+ personnel and the military itself.

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Annexes

Annex A: Interview with Owen (pseudo) conducted on February 15, 2025

Can you introduce yourself ?

Born in Birmingham, Alabama. And then after joining the army, I got sent to Fort Bliss, Texas, and I've lived here for like five years now.

Okay so are you still in the army, like serving, or are you like a veteran?

No, I'm still in right now.

What's your branch and rank?

So I'm in the Army, I'm an A5 sergeant, and I work, I'm a 14 Echo, which is my job, which is air defense, so I work with the Patriot missile system.

How do you identify ?

I identify as a male, I'm gay.

What's your level of education?

So I graduated high school, and I started culinary school, but halfway through culinary school, I realized that I absolutely hated it, so I dropped out.

Okay, so that's when you joined the army? Like after that?

Yeah, yeah, I didn't decide to join the army until I was like 24, and I was like, the main reason, honestly, was to get out of Alabama, because I just, it was so, like I was raised there, and I was just ready to get away from there.

I guess I'll just start by asking you, why did you choose to serve in the military in the first place?

I don't know, like growing up, I always felt a strong connection to serving the military, and I was very patriotic, if that's what you want to call it. And originally, this is kind of a long story, but when I was in high school, I intended to join the Marines, and I was talking to a recruiter, and I was going to PT with the Marine recruiters every Thursday, and after they made me run with a Marine recruiter on a bicycle behind me, saying if I stopped, he was going to kick me in the ass, I was like, yeah, never mind, I don't want to join the Marines anymore. So, and then I waited a few years and joined the army. I mainly joined to make a better life for myself, because I was working at Walmart, and that was not it. But also, then again, being in the military has been kind of like mentally taxing, because I've made, I know you've probably heard this before, but I've made some of the best friends in my life in the military. And then they move somewhere else, or get stationed somewhere else, and they just get ripped away from me, and I'm like, well, dang.

So more specifically about your experience as a gay man in the military, how did that go? Were you already out before you joined?

No, I was not out before I joined. I came out when I got to my first unit, and I really haven't had any negative experiences. I've had a few people that kind of looked at me different because I was gay,

but then they just ended up asking me a lot of personal questions I really did not think was appropriate to answer. But I answered them anyway, and they're like, we really didn't want to know that. And I'm like, well, you should have asked the question if you didn't want to know that. As far as support, when I first came out, the chain of command that I had at the time, which is completely different now, but the chain of command I had at that time was, they were very supportive. I mean, it really didn't look too good on me that I was married, before I came out. But that's a whole other story. But yeah, I feel like I've been mostly supported throughout my military career. And most everyone told me when I came out, they're like, yeah, we already knew. And I'm like, what do you mean you already knew? And they're like, dude, just being around you, we could tell. And I'm like, oh, my God.

Okay, so like, yeah, the process of coming out was not like something that was harmful to you or? it wasn't like a negative experience to come out?

No, I don't believe it was. And the main reason I didn't come out before I joined the military was because I was raised in a Christian family, Southern Baptist, all that good stuff. And I really didn't want to come out to my family. Well, they wound up finding out anyway, not by me, but by someone else. But as far as the military goes, I don't think I don't feel like I've had any negative experiences.

Then what made you want to come out in the military, if you had not, you know, came out before, especially to your family or anything like what made you make that decision?

So when I got to my first duty station, I was like, thousands of miles away from my family. So I'm just like, you know what, I'm going to experiment. And I realized that being myself and who I really was made me a lot happier than pretending to be something I wasn't. So I'm like, you know what, I don't even care what anyone else thinks. I'm happy. So I don't even care anymore.

How did you come out exactly? Did you just tell others like, yeah, I'm gay and like, make it like explicit, I guess? Or was it just mentioning a partner or something like that?

My first like coming out little spell was when I was deployed to Jordan. And I was freaking out because the girl I was married to at the time, that's when I first like "we needed to get a divorce." And she's like, "I know why." And she threatened to out me to my family. And I'm like, for one, that's not cool. And so I'm freaking out. And I actually went to my squad leader at the time. And I was explaining to him what was going on. I'm like, look, I'm like, I'm gay. And my, the person I'm married to right now is threatening to out me to my family. And I can't remember the exact words he said to me. It was something like, "you've got family here." Like, "you've got all of us to support you. You ain't got nothing to worry about." And I'm like, well, that makes me feel better. But y'all aren't really my family. So that was like the first time like I said it out loud. And then after that, and my mom found out from my sister, because of course I told my sister. And then my mom found out that I just didn't care anymore. So I made a post on Facebook about it. Not the best idea, but it got the job done.

So then how did you feel after you came out? On a professional level and also on a personal level, maybe ?

On a professional level, honestly, well I guess this could be both personal and professional. It really drove me to be more active and get more fit. Even though now I've had an injury this past year and

it's, I've gained some weight. Let's just say that. And I need to get back into being physically fit again. But it really drove me to run more and to lose a lot of weight. And which was not only good personally, but also that's also professional because we have to be a certain weight and maintain a certain level of physical fitness for the military anyway. So I think that's where it helped me the most, but also on a negative, I think after coming out, I really started to go through a one big party phase where if you wanted to know where I was on the weekend, go check the club. Cause I was definitely at the club.

Do you feel like it influenced your relationships with your colleagues or even your superiors?

I'm not too sure about that. I don't think our relationship changed too much. My first sergeant, because we were deployed to Qatar a few months ago and Qatar, like their culture is, they don't like that stuff. Like they don't like any LGBTQ, anything. And so me and one of my friends who was by, we were talking about going out and going to the steakhouse in Qatar. And I don't know why my first sergeant was walking by at the time that I said this, but I was like, oh, we're going to go out and they're going to just know that I'm gay and they're going to kidnap me. And I'm going to get like tortured or something. And then my first sergeant was just like, we're not going to let anything happen to you, which was kind of a like nice remark. But then again, he wasn't going to be there. So like, how could he control what did, didn't happen to me?

So it did feel like things might be more complicated sometimes when you were like deployed outside of the U.S. ?

Yeah, but only because of the like culture around, like the culture of that country. And we were sitting in a steakhouse one time, and they started playing this song. I don't remember what song it was now, though, the song that I really like, and I was singing along to it just being all flamboyant and stuff. The manager of the steak house was just standing in the corner giving me like the evil eye, and I'm just like, and everyone around me is like, Dude, you should stop. And I'm like, No, I don't care.

Do you know other people? Did you have like colleagues who were also out?

Well, there was only one other person in my unit at the time that was out. He was a specialist. So he wasn't like a leader or anything, but he was out. So I did have someone that I could talk to that I had something in common with. But now I'm looking at going back to my unit from a soldier recovery unit from my injury, and now no one that was there before is even there now. That's like all new people.

Oh, okay. So do you feel like in that case, do you feel like you have to come out again? Is it something you do or...?

I'm not sure. Leaders are usually pretty good about passing on information about soldiers. I don't think I'll have to come out again. But if I do, I really don't care because I don't like the commander anyway. But the commander is a completely different person. The first sergeant now, he actually used to be my platoon sergeant so I do know someone in the chain of command. But the commander is a completely different person.

So you don't feel like, have you ever experienced discrimination because you were gay?

Um, I don't think so. I don't really feel like I have. I feel like everybody's been, for the most part, accepting of it. I don't feel like I've been discriminated against. Yeah.

Well, it's nice to hear about a rather positive experience for sure. And then regarding federal policies, if you know a bit about, you know, what's going on for LGBTQ+ service members, what do you think about those, like the current legislation?

I mean, I honestly think it's stupid that they want to kick transgender soldiers out now or any transgender service member, because they allowed it for a reason in the beginning. So why, I just don't understand what the situation is, why they decided to just do the complete opposite because they were providing care for these service members. And now like that care is not allowed. They're not allowed to join. And if they're in the military already, they're going to be kicked out. And I honestly, I don't understand it because why allow it to begin with if you're just going to turn around and not allow it anymore.

Regarding LGB service members only, do you feel like it's been better for them to be in the military after the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell in 2011?

Oh, a hundred percent. Because during Don't Ask, Don't Tell, I mean, if they did find out you were gay or bi or lesbian, like if someone did find out in your chain of command, it was like you're being processed for separation. Even though you were, you weren't allowed to tell anyone about it or that you weren't allowed to be asked about it. Like, I feel like the atmosphere as far as just the LGB goes, it has significantly changed since Don't Ask, Don't Tell for the better.

Is it something that influenced your decision to join? Like if it was still in place or, you know, because you did not serve under.

Oh, if Don't Ask, Don't Tell was still in place, I probably would not have joined. Because I just don't, like, that doesn't make sense to me. "You can be gay, whatever, just don't tell anyone or don't ask anyone about it" that makes no sense to me. I actually met someone who used to be in the Coast Guard and he got kicked out because they found out he was gay.

Under Don't Ask, Don't Tell?

Yeah, it was under Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

On a more concrete level, are there any actions taken by the administration, like the military administration, regarding LGBTQ+ service members, like, you know, to help integration or anything like that?

I mean, we do have SHARP and Equal Opportunity regulations put into place. I'm just going to stick on the Equal Opportunity because SHARP is sexual harassment and all that. Equal Opportunity, where they highly encourage everyone not to discriminate on someone based on their sex, age, religion, sexual preference, gender, any of that. And that's something we're honestly taught from basic training forward.

So how do you feel about that? Do you think it's a good thing, is it effective ?

I think Equal Opportunity is a good policy to have in place. And I think that having the training on it monthly is a good thing, too. But I just feel like some people kind of don't take in the whole thing. They still discriminate people based on certain aspects of their life. And I think if people were to

pay more attention to the Equal Opportunity training and apply it more to their lives, it would be 100% no changes needed. But I just think some people, I don't like using the term set in their ways, but I feel like in this case, people are set in their ways and they just really don't pay attention to the training.

And even though you have not experienced that, would you feel safe reporting to the administration in case any kind of discrimination happened? Do you think it's a safe environment in general?

Yeah, I feel like it is. With the change of command that I've had since I've been in the Army, I mean, they pretty much have an open door policy. So if you go to your first sergeant about something and nothing gets done about it, like a week or two later, you're advised to go above your first sergeant. Like to the sergeant major or even the colonel or whatever. So I feel like as far as reporting things goes, it's pretty, I'm trying to think of the word, I cannot think of the word to say right now. I feel like reporting incidents does go somewhere. And of course, we've been taught how to report and how we should report things too. But I really haven't personally witnessed a case that was being investigated or solved as far as equal opportunity goes.

I've known some people that have had to do some SHARP cases. And I'm going to be honest, the judgment really didn't go in their favor. But with those cases, it goes like up to the brigade commanders, and they make the final decision really on if someone's guilty of something or not. There is a whole investigation open and they get evidence or whatever, and that's presented before whoever the brigade commander is. But he in the end makes the final decision on if that person's actually guilty of what they're being accused of or not. But that was just sharp, I really haven't witnessed any equal opportunity cases.

In terms of political involvement in general, what do you think about having any kind of political involvement?

Like are we talking if I got out of the military?

Yeah just in general. But I'm guessing it's hard to be an activist for LGBTQ+ people rights when you're active but maybe I'm mistaken, you can tell me more.

No, you're right. Because when it comes to politics and stuff, they really don't want you in the military. Especially if you're active duty, they really don't want you to have an opinion on anything or speak your opinion. So yeah, you're 100% on that. Um, if I was out of the military, though, I don't really, like honestly, being in politics just scares me. And I've even heard that if you get up to a certain rank in the army or the military, it just becomes politics, honestly. And I do not want to get up that high. I just would rather stay out of politics. But if they were having an activist movement for LGBT in the military, I would totally attend that. Because I don't really see the importance of us not being able to serve in the military if that's what we feel that we should do. Like, it just annoys me that some people are so backwards in their thinking sometimes.

And so how do you feel in general about the future of the community in the military?

Honestly, I'm not too sure because I've had people say to me that, oh, they're not allowing transgender people to join anymore or serve in the military, they're coming after y'all next. And I'm like, for one, I've never even heard in a couple of years the mention about any lesbian, gay, or

bisexual people not being able to join or serve. So I don't know how they even got that idea. But it kind of made me mad because it was one of my friends I went to high school with and he's like, "you're next, you're going to be kicked out." And I'm like, oh, my God. Why would you even say that to me?

So the current news can be impacting even other people who are not transgender in the military. Just having those comments, I guess, just shows that the outside world impacts the military and how maybe it impacts your experience ?

Yeah. And I'm going to be honest. They were kind of slob with how they're kicking out soldiers who are transgender. They're medically discharging them, claiming they're not medically ready to serve in the military, which I think is just stupid. I think they just found that as an excuse to be able to kick them out of the military. And I really, because the government knows if they ban lesbian, gay, or bisexual people from being able to join or serve, they're going to have riots on their hands. They're going to have protests on their hands. I honestly believe they don't even want to go that direction because they know all the hell that will break loose from it, which there's already some breaking out because of the transgender decision. I just don't understand it.

Outside politics, are things changing within the army? Like, you know, how people think?

I feel like they are, only because most of the people we have in the military right now are from a younger generation like a newer generation. So they're kind of more open-minded about everything. Of course leaders aren't that way, they're from the old army or an older generation and I wanna say they're kind of stuck in their ways. But I am going to be honest, I'm not defending them at all but the Army does like drill things into your brain that just kind of stay there and they don't go away. So, I don't know if that's something they've had drilled in their heads over the years.

What about you on a more personal level, do you have career plans ?

A year ago I had a traumatic brain injury. I've had to go through rehabs and they sent me to the soldier recovery unit and I actually had to do post-traumatic training while I was there. We did this game where you put papers with ages on the floor and you have to step on one and predict what you're gonna be at that age. This was before I found out I was going to be able to continue to serve so my first step was like 30 and I think I was like "I'm gonna be found fit to serve and I'm gonna be going to sergeant major again." Now honestly, because I've gained so much weight since my injury and I'm above my weight requirement for the Army, my main focus is just losing weight and getting back physically fit where I can pass a PT test and then I'll see where things go from there. It's been a rough year.

Ok so overall a pretty positive experience for you ?

Yeah, I feel like it has been.

I wanted to ask why did you agree to do this interview ?

I gotta be honest with you, I think it was honestly a spur of the moment decision. And I got to thinking more after I agreed to do the interview that there would be a part of my story that would help someone somewhere. That's really it.

Annex B: Interview with Chrissy conducted on March 26, 2025

Can you introduce yourself, where you're from, how you identify, and then about your work in the military ?

Okay, so my name is Chrissy. I was born in Virginia but raised in Dallas. I currently live in Maryland. I am, I don't know if I'm still active duty, but I am in the Air Force. My first station was over in Elmendorf, Alaska, and then I was stationed in Las Vegas, I think in 2021, and then I was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland. And I identify as she, I am a transgender woman.

Why did you choose to serve in the military in the first place?

I was craving structure. Both my parents, so my entire lineage is military, from my grandfather, great-grandfather, my father and my mother, cousins, everyone's military. And so, but that isn't really what motivated me to join, I just joined because I craved that structure and I felt like it was really the best way to get out of Texas and to really see the world through my own lenses.

So how did that coincide with your journey as a trans woman, in terms of timeline and everything, coming out, stuff like that?

So, I'd always dreamt and wanted to be a woman since I was a kid, pretty much. And of course, I came out as gay, I think around in the eighth grade, which is middle school. But I've always been very feminine, even as a child. And, you know, whenever I was stationed in Alaska, I started getting into makeup more. I was stationed in Las Vegas, and I was just a femboy, you know, it's really just me finding myself. But as I became more immersed in the culture and into the community is whenever I began to find myself. But I didn't come out as trans. Well, I kind of come out as trans a little bit towards the end of my station in Las Vegas. But then I quickly went back in the closet.

And then I moved to Maryland and about a year here, I came out as trans and went through the medical process, the talking with mental health, going to therapy to figure out... not what caused this, but when it started to develop, I guess. But what was really the turning point for me was having dreams and visions of me being a woman, of me waking up as a woman having a husband, having a family. The dreams kept becoming more and more, you know, rampant, like I need to do something about this. So the very next day, I went to mental health, and I talked with my family, my friends. And I was like, you know, I think this is who I'm meant to be. And shortly after, I think around three months, I got my first prescription of hormones.

So did you openly come out in the military? How did that go?

Yeah. So with that, I spoke with my supervisor at the time in my office, just saying to them that I am trans, and this is always something that I've wanted to be. And, you know, they had just really begun the process on it, right. So at the time, we were able to put she/her in our signature box. I don't know how much up to date you are on this current administration, how they took away the signature blocks pronouns. So that was interesting. But, you know, I just spoke with my leadership about it. And I told them that I want to start this process. And that it's always been there, but now I'm finally living in my truth. Because I was I was starting to get more and more in trouble for wearing makeup to work, right? Because I feel as pretty at work as I did outside of work, that was really important for me. And, you know, I was just feeling kind of uncomfy. And then of course, the

dreams and things like that, it was starting to affect reality. Right. And so I was like, okay, I need to do something about that. But after I went and spoke with mental health, and started seeing my counselor, they sent me an exception to policy waiver. And that is basically your medical waiver. But I went ahead and brought those up to my leadership channel. And they went ahead and approved it. And then it had to be sent over to San Antonio, Texas, because that's where the THMEU is and that's basically where the hub is, where you kind of have to go in order to be put on hormones. But I was able to bypass that because of my PCM, my primary care manager was able to just bypass that entire route, because it would have taken me a little bit longer to go on hormone. I was ready to, I was ready to go.

So, but that's kind of how it went for me. My leadership, all of my office coworkers were very supportive and very understanding, and make a smooth transition for me. So that's also kind of what I've been battling with as well, in terms of the transgender ban. It's like, I have amazing frontline and above leadership, whether from my squadron to my groups, my wing, they don't want to see me go. But, you know, I was like, should I stay? Should I get out? But yeah.

How long have you been serving?

I've been in the Air Force for seven years, soon to be eight.

So did you come out as trans when Biden allowed trans troops to serve openly? Or when was that?

I came out as transgender on January 2024.

How did it influence your experience? Because you had already been serving for quite a while before you came out?

Yeah, it didn't really affect anything. Like I said before, I was already very feminine. And I never shied away from who I was. And so whenever I came out, it kind of wasn't really a major shock to people, because they'd already seen me out and about or after work, and things like that, or they followed me on Instagram. And so it was kind of like, oh, okay. It just wasn't a surprise for a lot of people when I came out as trans, because I was already wearing dresses, my makeup. Whenever I went on trips, I always had nails. So they were like, okay, well, we're already used to it. So I was androgynous, right? I'd say femboy or gay. I was more so androgynous, floating the spectrum of gender. And so as trans, it wasn't really that big of a surprise to people.

Before trans troops were allowed to serve openly, it wasn't a problem that you did not comply with male's regulations regarding clothing, haircut, and stuff like that ?

Yeah, it wasn't. And that's what the acceptance of policy waiver was for, to not abide by the male uniform standards. So I had long hair, I had my lashes done, you know, I was wearing makeup. But yeah, I got a little bit stressed out, so I cut my hair, but I'm kind of liking it. I've always been bald before my transition. And this makes me a little bit happier.

Do you know other people from the community within the army? And what about their experiences? Is it different from yours?

Yeah. So I've had the fairytale experience serving in the military. I don't know if that's because I work in cyber. And so I think that might have tailored my experiences a little bit more. But even for

my gay friends, it's been a battle, right? I know some people serving in El Paso, or out in Georgia, and where it's a little bit more rural and a lot more conservative. I do know some people that were struggling with their sexuality and their gender, and just not as overall supported as I was. And yeah, so my experience is very different than other people, but that also tailors to our jobs. And so it's like, if you're working in maintenance, or you're working in military police, or you're working in admin, but you happen to be in a contracting unit, you know, wherever there's more testosterone levels, it's sometimes not going to have that fairytale ending. And there were some times when I felt a little bit targeted, but I had a group of other people, you know, shield me and that member was no longer allowed to really speak to me, or treat me any kind of way that I should be treated.

Yeah that was my next question, actually. How do you think the chain of command you're under, or like, just the leadership in general, how do you think they deal with any form of discrimination against the community?

Every time that, or whenever I felt like a little bit uncomfy, my leadership told me to simply just give them the word, and they'll handle it. So I don't know how they dealt with those people that were transphobic, homophobic, microaggressive. I don't know how they dealt with it, but I know that I was never affected negatively. Because, you know, that's really just our biggest thing, right, being trans, just treat me like everyone else. I'm a human being. I don't need special privileges. I don't need, you know, to be coddled. I just want to be accepted and live my life and live in myself.

So you did feel safe reporting anything negative that happened, independently from the federal policies ?

Yeah, my leadership is very vocal about how they didn't agree with this, mostly because we're just human beings, you know, like, we're human. Why are we being marginalized and targeted against, you know? And I've made a lot of connections with my leadership and with my unit overall. And so there's that happening, right? Loss of a friend, a good co-worker, loss of knowledge as well. I think that's another big component that they're currently struggling with and going to continue struggling with, you know, loss of manpower. If we were to, knock on wood, but say we were to go to war, say we were to have something awful happen, right? And you have to recall troops or... I work in cyber, so it's a little bit different than boots on the ground. But I mean, still, it's a loss of manpower, a loss of resources and a loss of money. And I think that the people that are affected, when I say people that are affected, like boots on the ground, I mean like my unit, my squadron, my wing, they're the ones that are going to be failing it more than the higher headquarters.

When you first entered the military, were you aware of these differences in terms of acceptance of the community depending on the job you're working? Is that something that you were aware of and that maybe influenced your decision to work a certain job or not really?

I didn't, I wasn't aware of that. I wasn't aware that it was "pick your rate, pick your fate" right? That's a common thing in the Navy or in Marine Corps. But, you know, pick your rate, which is your job, pick your fate, which is how you're going to be treated, your work life, life balance. I had no idea. But I think it was just, you know, the angels, my ancestors protecting me and looking out for me because I know that I probably would not have survived and I would have contracted and my mental health would have been in the gutter.

But I think that, you know, when this new administration comes in and hopefully, you know, we have more trans service members and more queer service members joining with us being eligible, I do hope that they're able to do their research and, you know, think about this long term. Is this career transmittable for the civilian world? Like, can you take your skills and make a living out of it? And yeah, that's my biggest hope is that people realize that, because it'll be a very hard and long four years if you don't choose smartly.

What would you say are the reactions right now within the military to the most recent announcements about trans troops?

To the injunction or to the administration with the executive order?

Yes with the executive order. How does that translate in real life? How do people react to that?

Angry. They were angry. Very angry. They don't want to lose us.

Do you feel that's something that's shared among branches and jobs or specific to yours?

I would say so. I posted a few videos on TikTok that did very well and the common senses that I've been getting is that this is silly, but then also I've gone viral on other platforms where they're all right, like full on get out, get out of my military. I'd say it's pretty evenly balanced and it depends on the algorithm that you're on because those people are there. But luckily with my algorithm, I have not seen anything of that. Only whenever people tag me that my videos have been shared across negative platforms.

About military culture, if you consider that a thing, how would you describe the culture in your branch in terms of values, stuff like that?

I feel like this may sound silly, but in the cyber sector, I feel like there really isn't much of a culture. I feel like if you're piloting flying crafts or drones, planes, construction, civil engineering, I feel like they have more of a culture than we do. I feel like for us that work in the cyber realm, there wasn't much of a culture there. They're really smart, analytical in my cyber realm. Other than that, not much of a culture.

Okay. Yeah. Because I'm asking people from the community who are serving if they feel like the military culture kind of contradicts with their identity and their experience as soldiers. So it's not really your case then?

Not in my career field, no. It's really similar to the civilian sector. At least in my realm.

So overall, how do you think the federal policies really impact practical life for the community? Do you think it has a big impact or not necessarily?

I think it's had a huge impact. I think that it sent us into disarray, though we were preparing for it. I wasn't prepared for it to happen this soon. I do feel like a lot of us have been kind of caught off guard a little bit. We were expecting it to happen, but not about a month in. That was really fast. But luckily, with the overall legal team combating against the Talbot versus Trump case, Judge Reyes' injunction, things like that, it's impacted us heavily. But I feel like in times of adversity and hardship, that's where that solidarity and community comes into effect heavily. There's groups on Facebook like Sparta Trans, which is for service members that are of trans experience. And so it's affected us negatively. But I also think that this kind of brought us back together a little bit more.

If you don't mind me asking, how is everything going for you after the announcements?

So I filed for voluntary separation yesterday because today is the last day to do so. I've been... Honestly, my mental health has been a little lower recently. I've noticed myself like, I haven't been cleaning up my space. I haven't been working out. I've kind of been stressed. It's hit me like a truck. But my friends and family, I have a very large support system. And for that, I'm eternally grateful. But yeah, it's taken a toll on me, for sure.

But I'm trying to bounce back and I'm trying to smell the roses. And luckily, there are a lot of job opportunities for me, which is what I was talking earlier with making sure that your job can translate into the outside world, just by networking and connections that I've built along the way. So I'm not really too worried about that. And I know that whenever my separation is complete, I'll be able to file for disability and TRICARE for 180 days, which makes me really happy. But yeah, it was a lot. It was a lot. But also, looking at what the grass is greener on the opposite side perspective, right? Overall, I'm just really happy that I'm able to bounce back on my feet. And I'm 25. So I'm very happy that, you know, I have a plan in place. Yeah, I have Ironman savings. I have, you know, a lot of things signed up that I'm able to bounce back on to really get regain my footing.

Maybe it's very naive of me, but do you think there are going to be trans service members who will stay and kind of like defy the order?

That was not naive of you at all. Absolutely. There are people that are still urging us to stay in and not voluntarily separate. There's quite a few of them, actually. But with my perceived knowledge, if you do get involuntarily separated, I don't know if you can still get an honorable discharge. And that's what the civilian world is really looking at. Do you have an honorable discharge? Right? Why were you kicked out?

And then if you don't get an honorable, you don't get a lot of things that you would be eligible for, like disability, veteran affairs, different resources like that. Very hard to kind of bounce back with that, though, you can appeal for a higher discharge, like an honorable, but it'll be a little harder. And then like the quick turnaround, you know, if you are involuntarily separated, how fast do you have to get on there? Like, how soon will you be kicked out? You know, like, do you end up? What about next month's rent or mortgage? That's kind of where my mind was leaning towards, which really influenced my decision to voluntarily leave.

Yeah because when I talked to Jayden, who gave me your contact information, he told me that he would have separated from the military just because it would not like he wouldn't be able to be true to himself. So that's why I wanted to know your stance on this. But I guess the practical reality just takes over the rest for sure.

I'm very numbers based and calculated. It's just gotta make sense. And, you know, with my lifestyle that I live, I need that stability, that structure that I don't think that I would have if I was to stay in, right? Because until June, I think that's how long they have those that are staying in until, you know, they're involuntarily separated. But with the recent court rulings, I don't know how that's going to play into it. But I also am aware that like, you know, with each new administration that comes into office, transgender troops are on the chopping block because this is the newest thing at the moment, the newest target.

So how do you feel about the future of the community within the military?

I think it's going to keep dwindling. I mean, unless we get a liberal president in there that can really ensure our safety and that we aren't going to be going anywhere. I don't know about the future. I really don't know. I know numbers were already small, were less than like around 1% in the military. I think there are around 10,000 troops. But I mean, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

I don't think we're going to feel encouraged to serve unless if they begin like higher wages or better quality of life. They have to make it more competitive with the civilian sector in order to really encourage more retention and troops.

Yeah I saw that's definitely an issue, just recruitment and then retention. I feel like maybe some trans service members now are just like, well it's a shame really, because you're giving up on very skilled people who can take on difficult jobs.

And that was my argument, I made a video about this on TikTok too, just basically that we have the most clearances. We join at a quicker rate than the heterosexual, cisgender people. And it's just going to be a huge knowledge loss because so many of us work in Intel or cyber, you know, we're working with critical positions. And with this, it's like, do you know how much money that you're wasting right now on banning us out? Do you know how much resources that you're losing right now? It just isn't making sense. And that's why I was saying like, you know, the people in our units and our wings, they don't want us to go.

Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't talked about maybe?

I would just say I've had a great experience in the military. I wouldn't change any of it for a second. You know, came out as a kid, living as a woman. I'm very happy with everything that's transpired. This isn't the way that I wanted to leave, but I'm looking forward to what's on the outside and all the possibilities that are readily available for me.

Why did you agree to do this interview with me?

I think his name was Jayden and he had just mentioned that you had a few questions and that you would like a trans woman's perspective on things that have happened. And I was like, sure why not? I'd love to. And so, yeah, I'm always available for talks that help give out more information and a little bit of a peek into what's been happening.

That's much appreciated. Thank you for that.

Annex C : Interview with Jayden conducted on March 19, 2025

Can you introduce yourself ?

Yeah, no problem. So yeah, my name is Jaden. I'm 28. I'll be 29 next month. I am an openly serving transgender service member in the United States Army. I've been in the Army for a little over 11 years now. I started my transition back in 2016 under the Obama administration. When I first started my transition, I was in the Connecticut National Guard. So I started off...because I was in the Guard, a lot of stuff that happens for both the Guard and the Reserves, at least for the Army, I can't speak on the other branches, a lot of it goes through your civilian medical providers so I went through behavioral health. I did six months of therapy there, basically checking all the boxes. I hate to use this term, but I don't know how else to state it, but basically checking to make sure that I actually was trans enough to start medically transitioning. At the completion of my six months of therapy sessions, I went to see an endocrinologist and started my hormone replacement therapy. April 26, 2016 was my first dose. After starting my medical transition, I had started working on changing my name legally, all of those things. And by June of 2016, my name was legally changed.

During that time, the Obama administration was working on lifting this trans ban and making it where we could openly serve. We weren't necessarily under a ban previously, but there was no policies or anything stating that we could serve and being able to medically transition. There were no policies in place to protect us. So that was around 2017. I was the first openly serving transgender service member in the Connecticut National Guard. I put on workshops and different briefings to help my organization that I was a part of in providing that very necessary education for the rest of the service members. There were a lot of questions asked. It was a very open forum, and I believe that it was very effective. A lot of things, a lot of misconceptions that individuals had were easily taken care of and addressed during those briefings.

So yeah, that was around 2017. I ended up going from the Connecticut National Guard to the IRR, which is the Individual Ready Reserve, basically where you sit and you're still in an active status, but you're not drilling, you're not going to the unit anymore, but you could be called on for deployment purposes. I stayed there for about almost two years, and then I transferred into the Army Reserves, where I was for another two years before going AGR, which is Active Guard Reserve, or the Reserve, so Active Duty.

Then I moved from Connecticut to Florida during that time, and then from Florida to Montana, Montana to now El Paso, Texas. So this is where I currently am, and I am going through the process of a Med Board, which luckily for me, the stars aligned perfectly, and my Med Board was initiated prior to all of these policies that have recently come down to start removing openly serving transgender service members.

I want to first ask you, why did you choose to serve in the military?

I mean, it's a family business, honestly. Everyone in my family has served, with the exception of my father. He wanted to serve, and he had a hernia at the time, and he was turned away. But he has worked for the Department of Defense through Pratt & Whitney for the last 45 plus years. So literally, the day after he was turned down from joining the Army, he got a job working for Pratt & Whitney, and he's been there ever since. So it was just ingrained in me that that was something

that I should do. Serving my community has been ingrained in me since I was a small child, and this was my way of serving more than just my immediate community.

How did your identity as a trans person influence your decision? If you already knew, I don't know, the timeline exactly, when you first started serving?

Yeah. So when I first started serving, so I joined at 17, I grew up in a very religious household. So, you know, LGBTQ terms weren't used in my house whatsoever at the time. I really don't like labels, but if I had to put a label on it, I identified as a lesbian. And so I just saw the military as being the place where I could really be myself and not have to be questioned. There are no really women jobs versus man jobs in the military. Everybody has a job to do to serve the greater purpose of the military. And that was something that I really enjoyed. And I felt like I didn't have to ostracize myself or hide this part of myself to be able to give back to the community.

Once I found the language to come out as transgender, I really wasn't afraid still, because again, there's no sex in the military, I feel like. Everybody just has a job to do. Obviously, we're all still human and we all have our personal opinions. But one of the things with the military is having to put those personal opinions to the rear and just focus on the mission. And so again, I really didn't feel afraid at all during that time of, you know, first coming out as a transgender service member.

Yeah you read my mind, because that's what I was about to ask you about the coming out process. How did that go? And then how it influenced your relationships with either colleagues and/or hierarchy?

Sure. So with my direct co-workers and things like that, we all had a great relationship. They honestly didn't care one way or another. As long as I showed up on time, I was in the right uniform with the right attitude ready to do my job. Throughout my time, though, I have come across individuals who didn't know that I was transgender. I don't typically go around exposing that. It's not a secret, but that's something near and dear to my heart. And I only tell at least one individual per duty station for my own safety. And this is someone that I have grown close to over several months or weeks or whatever the case is. And I feel comfortable enough to let them know in the event that we were ever in a situation where I felt like my identity was going to be compromised and then my safety compromised as a result. But in the instances where I was approached by individuals that did not know this about myself, they were saying hateful things about transgender individuals, not knowing that I was trans. And I simply would ask them, "have you ever met a transgender person?" And their immediate response is always, "well, I'm sure I would know. And if I did, you know, I'd beat the bricks off of them or whatever the case was." And I'm like, well, little do you know you're talking to one right now. And the immediate reaction to that was always, "oh my God, I had no clue." And I'm like, that's the point. That's the point.

We are here to serve a purpose just like everybody else. We don't want special treatment. But other than those few off instances, I really have had no issues being trans and serving. My most recent interactions with a "friend" that was also a supervisor, I don't think he had ill intentions, but to me they were backhanded compliments. As these policies were coming out, we were having multiple conversations and he would say, well, you're the exception to every rule. And I'm like, well, what do you mean by that? He's like, well, you're not like the individuals that are representing trans service members going to these meetings. They're unprofessional. They're very, what was the word that he used? Just very, just eccentric and just out there. And I'm like, well, okay, so let's have this

conversation. And you're saying they're unprofessional, right? I've worked with several cisgender individuals that are very unprofessional, disrespectful, and they are not able to accomplish the mission. Would you say with those individuals, had they at least been able to complete their job, their task without needing direct supervision, would you have as many issues? And the answer was always no. I'm like, so that's the issue. The issue isn't openly serving transgender service members. The issue isn't sexual identity. The issue isn't any of those things. The issue is, are you able to do your job? And I can wholeheartedly tell you that every organization that I have been a part of, no one has ever had to question my capabilities as a soldier or as a man. I have never had those issues. And to this day, I could call on any of my supervisors from previous organizations and they would put themselves on the line to say this exact same thing I just said.

Yeah I always find it ironic how this is always the main argument used by, you know, people who are against trans troops openly serving. And I don't really understand, especially after listening to you, how this argument can persist so much, you know, even though there are so many counterexamples.

Exactly, exactly. And it's, I don't know, it's just targeted hate, unfortunately. I have known several trans individuals across the branches that are excellent at what they do. Now, the whole argument that we have a mental disability and all these things, the only mental issue that I would see with a transgender service member is the added pressure on us to be perfect. That is real. The fact that at any point in time, if my identity were to be found out by somebody that I did not trust with that information, they would immediately begin to connect dots and they would say, oh, well, okay, that's why he wasn't able to do that because he's trans.

So there is an added level of pressure to perform and outperform our counterparts. So for instance, here at my organization that I'm part of here, one of the issues that I've had with some of my co-workers is that I do too much. I'm like, little do you know, one, this is just who I am and how I operate. I was always taught, if you're going to do something, do it right the first time and give it everything you got. Otherwise, why do it in the first place? And then there's that added layer of, well, if somebody here finds out who I used to be and this little portion of myself, I don't want that to be the reason why they look at me differently and evaluate my performance as being lower than my counterparts because I'm trans.

So generally speaking, would you say that there is a difference in how people from the community are being treated or even maybe perceived?

I would say yes and no. I have had, again, multiple conversations with supervisors and co-workers alike that, again, mainly targeting gay men and them being flamboyant and somehow that equating to less capabilities. One of my good friends is an excellent, excellent NCO. He's an excellent leader. He is the most flamboyant gay man I have ever met. I love him with everything in me. He is a brother and that man will charge anything, spearhead it from beginning to end with no reservations, no hesitations and accomplish the mission well ahead of schedule. It's just this constant need to blame our identities for "shortcomings" when there are no shortcomings. If you were to take a gay soldier, a trans soldier, a straight soldier and not know anything about them and their background and have them execute certain tasks without having that prejudice already, they would not have these things to say, but it's because they know. That's when they have all these additional messages to put out there. It's very unfortunate. It really is.

I have been blessed with very good friends that I call family that I've made from the military and in conversations and finally coming out to them in my own timing. They didn't believe me. They simply did not believe me. They thought I was joking and I'm like, I don't know how to prove this to you, but it's not something I would lie about. But because of this perception that has been put out by multiple people at different hierarchy levels, they've really painted this picture that we are just incompetent. We're not capable of performing certain tasks. Now seeing living proof in front of them, somebody that they've watched perform over several months not knowing, now their mind is just blown. They're just like, I thought that you weren't able to do these kinds of things. I'm human. I have a family. I come to work. I do my job. I just want to live a life just like everybody else. I don't want any special treatment. I just want to be treated like a human. That's it.

Your experience was rather, I would say, positive despite the few encounters that you mentioned earlier. What about those other trans people you know?

For the others, most of them are what we consider stealth. They don't really let people know that they're trans. There are certain instances where it has to be known.

For instance, doing medical reviews of our charts and things like that, just our records in general. There is a system in which every document that I have ever signed dealing with my career is filed in the system. When I legally changed my name, that document had to go in there. You'll see things from when I first joined the military with my birth name on it. You have my birth certificate in there. You have my high school diploma in there with my birth name on it. Then you have a legal document in there saying I changed my name. Without those instances, most of my friends, my colleagues that are trans have not disclosed to their organization that they are transgender.

Do you know why they chose not to?

Again, just the stereotype that is out there. They're just afraid of being seen differently. Their leadership or their co-workers will see them as being not capable of accomplishing a mission.

Earlier, you mentioned the policy aspect of all of this. How would you say that influences real life and practical experiences?

It's very interesting. I really have looked at the military as my family as I'm not close to my biological family. Seeing the hate that has come out, not targeted directly to me, but online in certain military forums, things that are being said from brothers and sisters in arms, it's very hard to read. I chose to serve. I chose to raise my right hand to serve this country and be a part of something bigger than myself and give myself a sense of purpose, which it definitely has. If I were given the opportunity to stay in the military right now, if I wasn't going through the med board, I unfortunately would not. I would choose to part ways with the military. Being true to myself is one of my biggest values. I have two young sons and I have to be that example for them. That we have to continue to choose ourselves day in and day out because most times others won't. I have had to put myself in a box with my own family. Once I finally came out of that box and I started medically and socially transitioning, I said that I would never allow myself and especially no one else to put me back into that box. As much as I loved the military, I loved a lot of the values, I loved the family that it gave me and the experiences, unfortunately it's something that I would not continue to choose. I would have to put myself and my family first.

Would you say there was any difference for the few years that trans troops were allowed to openly serve ? How did that translate into reality when Biden allowed trans troops to serve in 2021?

Times were great. I had everything to hope for. Everything was ahead of me. My aspirations and goals for the military were very much alive. I was looking forward to different trainings. I was looking forward to commissioning to be a warrant officer in the military. Like I said, everything was ahead of me. Even though I was already going through this med board once everything started changing under the Trump administration, having that hard moment to really reflect and think this is truly the end of the road for me. I started grieving the "what if" of my career. I had so many aspirations. I'm a very goal oriented person. It takes a lot for me when I don't reach those goals. It's something that I know that I will continue to grieve over the years even though I'm at peace in a way of leaving the military. Again, because I am choosing myself and my identity and my family over an organization that clearly does not want me. I'm at a point in my life where I'm only trying to give energy to those things that are going to inspire me and bring me peace and happiness. Being a part of an organization that doesn't align with that is a hard no for me. But I still will be grieving the potential of what my career could have been.

How would you describe the military culture in the Army?

It's very toxic. It is a love-hate relationship that one really cannot understand unless you've lived it. The trauma bonding is very real. I have had many conversations with my wife about this, and she still to this day doesn't fully understand it. For a lot of service members, the military gave them an out. Whether they were about to join a gang, they were homeless, they did not know what they wanted for their future, they were graduating high school, they didn't have a college to go to, they didn't have the means to go to college, and they didn't want to get stuck doing the same things that their family had been doing. The military was their out. For me, it wasn't necessarily that. For me, I did go to college, but when I was at college, I quickly realized I'm not prepared for this right now, I need some structure in my life, and that's when I decided to go ahead and join.

But the bonds that you create in the military, there's nothing that I can compare them to. I could call on any friend that I have made from going all the way back to 2014 when I enlisted in the Army to today, and I could call on any of them and break down on the phone crying with them, and they would be there for me. If they were on the other side of the world, they would find a way to come and see me and make sure that I was okay. I cannot say that about my own blood family. The bonds that you make in the military are life lasting. They truly are, and sometimes they even go beyond that where I have had friends that I have lost over the years, and they had kids. They had families. Us as a brotherhood, a family, we check on their family. Their family is our family, and it just continues. It is something that I cannot compare to anything on the civilian side. I grew up playing sports, and I was very close to my teams, but this bond that I have with my brothers and sisters in arms is beyond anything that I could compare it to.

What would you say are the main, the most important values that shape your daily life in the military ?

Yeah. Integrity is a huge thing. We have our core values for the military, for the army, and a lot of those aligned with my personal beliefs, and that was another reason why it was so easy for me to raise my right hand. Serving a greater purpose is something very near and dear to my heart. I do

not know why. I do not know when it started, but it has always been ingrained in me that I was not meant to work a regular job. By regular job, I mean flipping burgers or being a teller in a bank. There is nothing wrong with those jobs, but I just always felt that I needed something that gave me a bigger sense of purpose where I was affecting change, and the military definitely provided that for me.

Would you say this culture impacts in a way or another LGBT service members ? Does it impact how they are perceived or treated?

I do think that the military has an effect on the LGBTQ in a sense of, again, these bonds that we create, they go beyond seeing someone's religion, someone's sex, someone's gender identity. At the end of the day, we are looking for somebody that will have our back in war. If you are proficient in your job, you are proficient as a soldier in your technical and tactical skills, that's really all we care about. If I were to get into a firefight right now, can I depend on the person to the left and the right of me? That is the basis of what it means to be in the military.

Obviously, our connections go way deeper than that. Obviously, we all come from various backgrounds, religious backgrounds, geographical backgrounds, and those sometimes do play a part. I feel like for the LGBTQ service members, somehow we all find each other. At some point in time in our career, we find each other, and we gravitate towards each other. We make sure to uplift one another in the event that the organization that they're a part of at that time isn't as supportive or their direct leadership isn't as supportive because of their backgrounds that they come from. They just save face and basically live the Army values and push forward with whatever policies are there and try not to offer their opinion. Sometimes you can still read in between the lines and you know where somebody stands on a certain topic. I truly feel that at the core of the military, no one in the service truly cares about a person's gender identity or their sexual orientation. As long as I know that we get into the heat of it, I can depend on you to get me back home to my family. That's all that matters.

So then that would mean there's this gap between what service members think and their beliefs, and then on the other hand, the policies that come from the top of the hierarchy ?

Yes, yes, definitely. The picture being painted from the outside looking in, I believe, is vastly different from what you would see standing in formations amongst the ranks. It is a much different picture than what the media portrays.

I'm really looking at the community's integration within the military, and obviously the question of the policies is a huge part of it. I'm just trying to get people's opinions on how the policies actually influence or not the reality for the community on a day-to-day basis. But from what I can gather, everything you told me, you don't necessarily feel like it has such an impact just because people only care about your readiness ?

Yeah. I mean, yeah, obviously, like I said, there are those one offs. And unfortunately, I have seen under both Trump administrations that more outward hate and open hate has become more visible and people aren't as afraid to speak their mind against the LGBTQ community within the ranks. But if you go back to the Obama administration, when the first policies were put in to protect transgender service members, there really wasn't a lot of backlash. It was just like, okay, well, you guys are here. You've already been here. Great. You know, continue to do your job. Let's put

forward. But it wasn't until that Trump administration came in and started spewing hate against openly serving transgender service members. That's when I started to see more open opinions against LGBTQ being in the military. But again, those are one offs. I don't see it in my day to day. And, you know, the individuals within my organizations have never had anything negative to say about me.

You said you were able to do your transition because you were in the national guard. So that would have been different if you were not ?

Yeah, if I was regular active duty, I would not have been able to start my transition because every medical provider that I would have seen would have been a military affiliated.

And then they would not be able to grant you that right because of the policies, right?

Correct.

Do you feel like generally speaking the chains of command are rather supportive when it comes to reporting on discrimination or assaults or anything like that ?

I mean, I have had great leadership over the years that once I had that conversation with them, that I was transgender, they immediately told me if anyone were to ever say anything that made me feel a certain way you know, I felt discriminated against to bring it to their attention immediately. Thankfully I never have had to deal with that. For my friends that are openly serving, that wasn't really anything that we've really discussed. But I would think that, I don't know, depending on the individuals, again, not letting their leadership know that they were transgender, maybe they would be a little bit more hesitant to speak on things, in fear of retaliation. But for me personally, I felt supported in being able to, you know, discuss anything like that with my leadership.

Would you say there's a clear difference within the community, the LGB on one part and the trans troops on the other?

Not really. Not really. No. Like I said, I feel like somehow we gravitate towards each other within the service and we're that, that additional support for one another. I have many openly gay service members that are friends of mine. I have many open lesbian friends of mine. I really haven't come across any non-binary individuals. But I'm sure that we would be that support for one another, you know, whatever we needed.

Okay. Well, that's great to hear some positive feedback that's cool.

Yes, for sure. As a matter of fact, there's a captain that I don't even know who she is but she has been putting out videos on TikTok in support. She's an openly serving lesbian and she has been putting out a abundant support for the trans community going through, you know, all of these policy changes and finding ways to support the community.

Is there anything else you'd like to share or something we haven't really covered that you feel we should add up to ?

I mean, I think we really covered everything. My only concern for all the transgender service members going through this time right now and the back and forth, because now apparently a federal judge has put a pause to this trans ban. And so this constant back and forth is, is putting soldiers in a limbo where I know several individuals who are currently on administrative leave. So

they're still being paid. They are not going to work right now. They are trying to figure out their life, uh, whether they're, you know, going to sell their house or, you know, move back home or whatever the case is. Just being in this limbo right now is very off putting. I myself have had a lot of rough mental health days along with some of my buddies. We have all just been checking in on one another as the news continues to roll in and just making sure that, you know, we're taking care of one another. But yeah, this administration has caused a lot of mental health issues. I feel like with transgender service members, uh, as we are being targeted, um, and just needing to literally uproot our lives. I have an air force buddy of mine that, his effective date to be out of the military is at the end of next month. And he has had to put his house on the market and moving States away to go back home and uproot his life when, you know, this is something that he foresaw doing for 20 years.

I look at this as an outsider cause I'm not American, I'm not in the military. But as I am part of the community myself, I obviously feel very concerned and yeah, it's quite insane what's been going on.

It is, it really is. And you know, I know that one thing that one of my buddies, trying to plan accordingly and everything, an issue that they have run into with their leadership has been, well, we don't have an effective policy yet that tells us an exact date on when we need to start this. So let's wait until we have that before we can start, you know, processing you out and, you know, turning in your gear and allowing you to use resources that help service members that are transitioning back to civilian life. And it's like, we know how these things work in the military. It's a hurry up and wait system. So when that policy does come down, they're going to expect a fast turnaround and you're pushed out within 30 to 45 days. And that gives a soldier no time to prepare, especially one with a family and trying to, you know, get housing accommodations, find another job, you know, all of these things. So it has created a lot of issues. And again, talking about the community, we are really there for each other. And we have several group chats where we're just checking in on one another and being any type of support that, that, you know, we can provide.

Would you say that there's been a generational change within the military, you know with younger people coming in and maybe being more open-minded ? Or do you feel this has just been the same over the years? How do you feel about that?

Oh, no, there's, there's definitely been a generational change. And unfortunately for those that are part of the older generations that are still in, it's like almost as if they're seeing these new generations come into the military and they're standing firmer on their ground of, this is how things are supposed to be. This is how things were when I was coming through the ranks. This is what right looks like. And unfortunately, I feel like that has caused a lot of rifts with individuals continuing to serve. We have really bad retention issues right now. We have a lot of issues with recruitment as well, because of these things, at the end of the day, we are human. We are people, we have families, we have, you know, mental health issues. We have physical health issues and, you know, just seeing us as a robot or a number, you know, is going to leave no one to the ranks to perform the jobs that we do. And when you do find those individuals that provide that great leadership and ensure that you are taking care of yourself and your personal matters, you'll see a huge difference between those organizations and the organizations where they only put the mission first and the soldier's health and welfare finances, you know, are falling apart. And now that's reflecting in how that individual is performing at work.

So yeah, the generational change in the military is very real and I'm excited to see when those younger generations start to assume those leadership roles and changes will happen. I'm very hopeful that the future will be much brighter.

That's again great to hear because you're not the first person I'm interviewing for this and so far it's been pretty pessimistic, I would say. So it's great to hear people like you who are much more optimistic on this. I guess the generational change also was allowed somehow with the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Even though that was targeting gay people, do you think that influenced your decision to join? If it was still in place, would you have joined?

Um, honestly, yeah, I still would have. At the end of the day, I just wanted to serve. That was the bottom line for me. And obviously if I ever experienced any type of physical attacks, that probably would have swayed me to exit the military. But you know, words are words, but once those words turn into, you know, written words and policies that are targeting my life and then affecting, you know, my ability to support my family, that's when it became a huge issue.

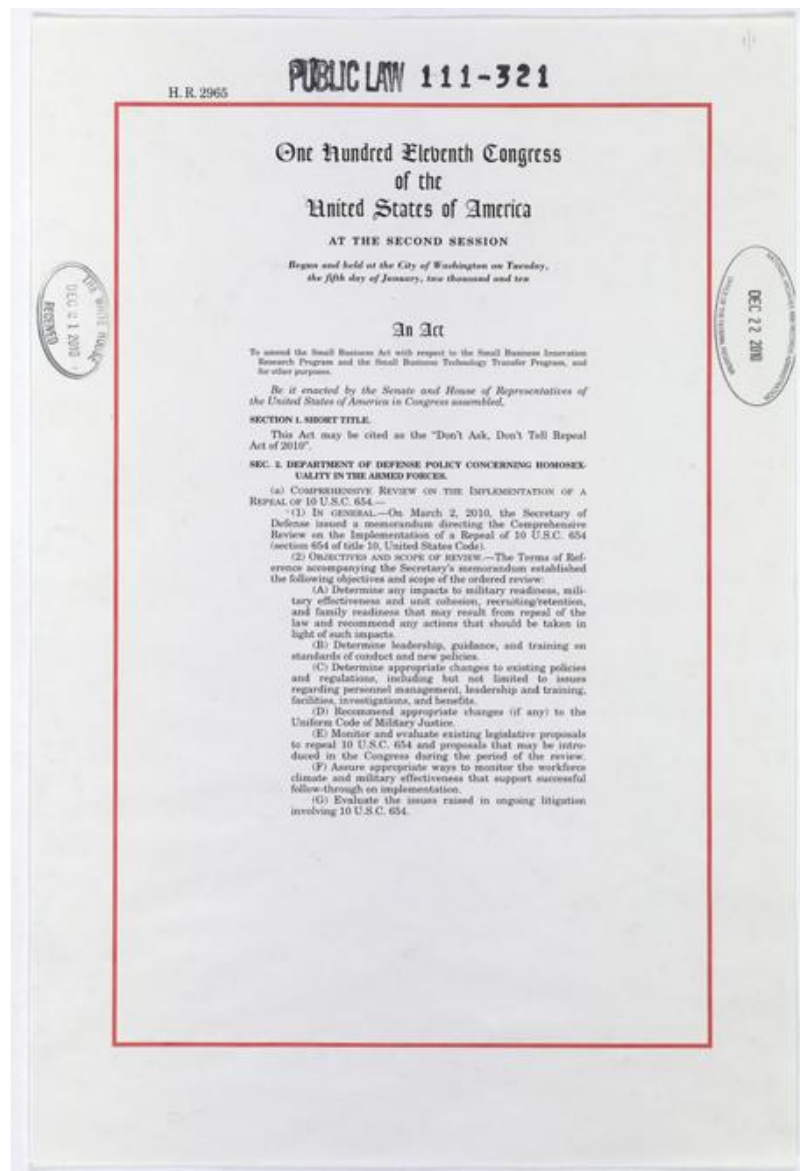
I would like to finish by asking you, why did you agree to do this interview with me?

Honestly, I just want to provide any insight that I can. I've been talking with several individuals that have either, you know, were transgender looking to serve and now seeing everything that was happening, you know, asking if they would still get a chance to, or if I regret my decision to serve. And so I want to be as open and transparent as possible and anything that I can provide from my experience that could, you know, help the future soldiers, future military service members, those that are currently serving, see that we're just human. We just wanted to serve. That was it. There was nothing with ill intent from us trying to serve. It was just us wanting to, to do a job and be a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Well, thank you very much for that. That's great. If you know anyone who would be willing to share, feel free to spread the word, honestly. I would love to hear about at least one more woman.

I would highly encourage if you could, because I do feel like there is a huge difference between openly serving transgender men and openly serving transgender women. There is a huge difference. And I feel like a lot of the policies, even outside of the military that are targeting transgender people, they mainly have transgender women in mind and almost forget about trans men, that we exist. And so if you can find some openly serving transgender women, I would highly encourage that.

Annex D: The first and signature pages of the repeal act of DADT, Dec 22, 2010



(1)

(b) **EFFECTIVE DATE.**—The amendments made by subsection (f) shall take effect 60 days after the date on which the last of the following occurs:

(1) The Secretary of Defense has received the report required by the memorandum of the Secretary referred to in subsection (a).

(2) The President transmits to the congressional defense committees a written certification, signed by the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stating each of the following:

(A) That the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have considered the recommendations contained in the report and the report's proposed plan of action.

(B) That the Department of Defense has prepared the necessary policies and regulations to exercise the discretion provided by the amendments made by subsection (f).

(C) That the implementation of necessary policies and regulations pursuant to the discretion provided by the amendments made by subsection (f) is consistent with the standards of military readiness, military effectiveness, unit cohesion, and recruiting and retention of the Armed Forces.

(c) **NO IMMEDIATE EFFECT ON CURRENT POLICY.**—Section 654 of title 10, United States Code, shall remain in effect until such time that all of the requirements and certifications required by subsection (b) are met. If these requirements and certifications are not met, section 654 of title 10, United States Code, shall remain in effect.

(d) **BENEFITS.**—Nothing in this section, or the amendments made by this section, shall be construed to require the furnishing of benefits in violation of section 7 of title 1, United States Code (relating to the definitions of "marriage" and "spouse" and referred to as the "Defense of Marriage Act").

(e) **NO PRIVATE CAUSE OR ACTION.**—Nothing in this section, or the amendments made by this section, shall be construed to create a private cause of action.

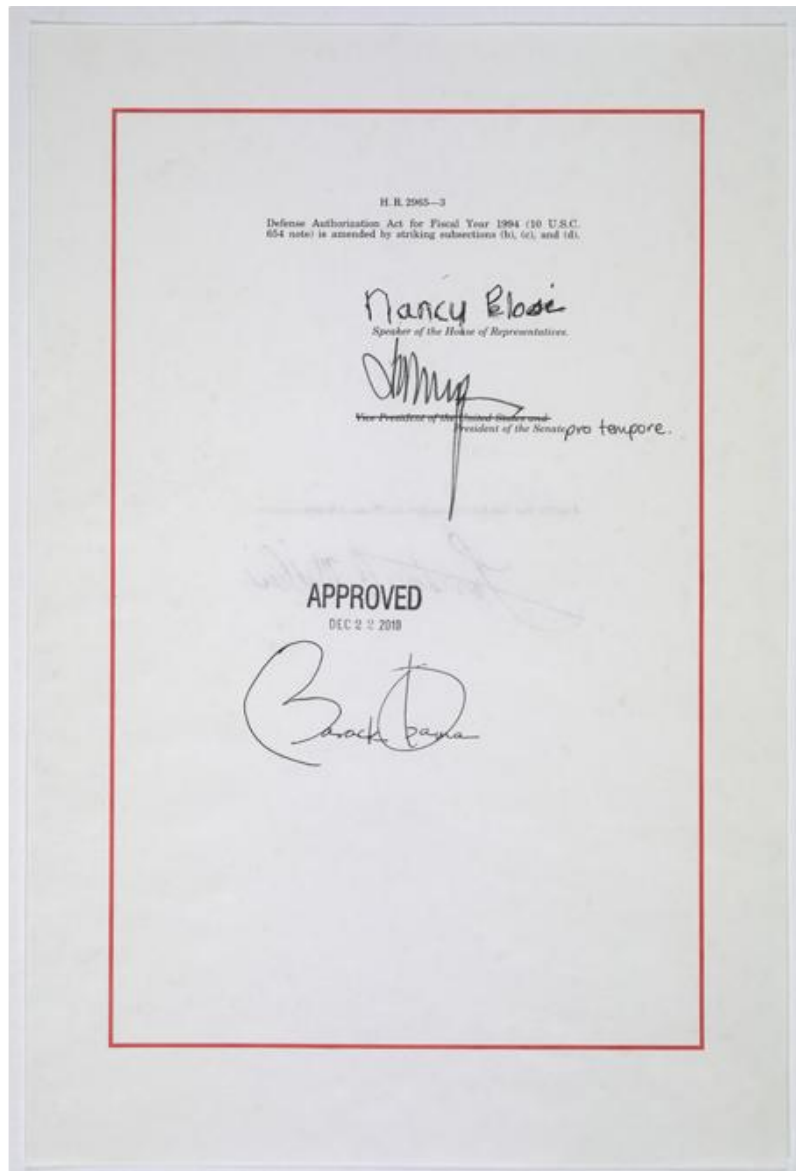
(f) **TREATMENT OF 1993 POLICY.**—

(1) **TITLE 10.**—Upon the effective date established by subsection (b), chapter 37 of title 10, United States Code, is amended—

(A) by striking section 654; and

(B) in the table of sections at the beginning of such chapter, by striking the item relating to section 654.

(2) **CONFORMING AMENDMENT.**—Upon the effective date established by subsection (b), section 571 of the National



(3)

Source: National Archives Foundation <https://archivesfoundation.org/documents/dont-ask-dont-tell-repeal-act-2010/>

Annex E: Executive Order 14183 banning transgender service members from the military (2025, January 27)



Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2025

Executive Order 14183—Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness *January 27, 2025*

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States, and to ensure the readiness and effectiveness of our Armed Forces, it is hereby ordered:

Section 1. Purpose. The United States military has a clear mission: to protect the American people and our homeland as the world's most lethal and effective fighting force. Success in this existential mission requires a singular focus on developing the requisite warrior ethos, and the pursuit of military excellence cannot be diluted to accommodate political agendas or other ideologies harmful to unit cohesion.

Recently, however, the Armed Forces have been afflicted with radical gender ideology to appease activists unconcerned with the requirements of military service like physical and mental health, selflessness, and unit cohesion. Longstanding Department of Defense (DoD) policy (DoD Instruction (DoDI) 6130.03) provides that it is the policy of the DoD to ensure that service members are "[f]ree of medical conditions or physical defects that may reasonably be expected to require excessive time lost from duty for necessary treatment or hospitalization." As a result, many mental and physical health conditions are incompatible with active duty, from conditions that require substantial medication or medical treatment to bipolar and related disorders, eating disorders, suicidality, and prior psychiatric hospitalization.

Consistent with the military mission and longstanding DoD policy, expressing a false "gender identity" divergent from an individual's sex cannot satisfy the rigorous standards necessary for military service. Beyond the hormonal and surgical medical interventions involved, adoption of a gender identity inconsistent with an individual's sex conflicts with a soldier's commitment to an honorable, truthful, and disciplined lifestyle, even in one's personal life. A man's assertion that he is a woman, and his requirement that others honor this falsehood, is not consistent with the humility and selflessness required of a service member.

For the sake of our Nation and the patriotic Americans who volunteer to serve it, military service must be reserved for those mentally and physically fit for duty. The Armed Forces must adhere to high mental and physical health standards to ensure our military can deploy, fight, and win, including in austere conditions and without the benefit of routine medical treatment or special provisions.

Sec. 2. Policy. It is the policy of the United States Government to establish high standards for troop readiness, lethality, cohesion, honesty, humility, uniformity, and integrity. This policy is inconsistent with the medical, surgical, and mental health constraints on individuals with gender dysphoria. This policy is also inconsistent with shifting pronoun usage or use of pronouns that inaccurately reflect an individual's sex.

Sec. 3. Definitions. The definitions in the Executive Order of January 20, 2025 (Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government) shall apply to this order.

Sec. 4. Implementation. (a) Within 60 days of the date of this order, the Secretary of Defense (Secretary) shall update DoDI 6130.03 Volume 1 (Medical Standards for Military Service: Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction (May 6, 2018), Incorporating Change 5 of May 28, 2024) and DoDI 6130.03 Volume 2 (Medical Standards for Military Service: Retention (September 4, 2020), Incorporating Change 1 of June 6, 2022) to reflect the purpose and policy of this Order.

(b) The Secretary shall promptly issue directives for DoD to end invented and identification-based pronoun usage to best achieve the policy outlined in section 2 of this order.

(c) Within 30 days of the date of this order, the Secretary shall:

(i) identify all additional steps and issue guidance necessary to fully implement this order; and

(ii) submit to the President through the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs a report that summarizes these steps.

(d) Absent extraordinary operational necessity, the Armed Forces shall neither allow males to use or share sleeping, changing, or bathing facilities designated for females, nor allow females to use or share sleeping, changing, or bathing facilities designated for males.

(e) Within 30 days of the issuance of the respective updates, directives, and guidance under subsections (a), (b), and (c) of this section, the Secretary of Homeland Security shall, with respect to the Coast Guard, issue updates, directives, and guidance consistent with the updates, directives, and guidance issued under subsections (a), (b), and (c) of this section.

Sec. 5. Implementing the Revocation of Executive Order 14004. (a) Pursuant to the Executive Order of January 20, 2025 (Initial Rescissions of Harmful Executive Orders and Actions), Executive Order 14004 of January 25, 2021 (Enabling All Qualified Americans To Serve Their Country in Uniform), has been revoked. Accordingly, all policies, directives, and guidance issued pursuant to Executive Order 14004 shall be rescinded to the extent inconsistent with the provisions of this order.

(b) The Secretary and, with respect to the Coast Guard, the Secretary of Homeland Security, shall take all necessary steps to implement the revocations described in subsection (a) of this section and ensure that all military departments and services fully comply with the provisions of this order.

Sec. 6. Severability. If any provision of this order, or the application of any provision to any person or circumstance, is held to be invalid, the remainder of this order and the application of its provisions to any other persons or circumstances shall not be affected thereby.

Sec. 7. General Provisions. (a) Nothing in this order shall be construed to impair or otherwise affect:

(i) the authority granted by law to an executive department or agency, or the head thereof; or

(ii) the functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget relating to budgetary, administrative, or legislative proposals.

(b) This order shall be implemented consistent with applicable law and subject to the availability of appropriations.

(c) This order is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person.

DONALD J. TRUMP

The White House,
January 27, 2025.

[Filed with the Office of the Federal Register, 8:45 a.m., January 31, 2025]

**Annex F: Pentagon Memorandum on Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness
backing presidential Executive Order 14183 (2025, February 7)**



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

FEB - 7 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR SENIOR PENTAGON LEADERSHIP
COMMANDERS OF THE COMBATANT COMMANDS
DEFENSE AGENCY AND DOD FIELD ACTIVITY DIRECTORS

SUBJECT: Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness

The Department of Defense's (DoD) mission requires Service members to abide by strict mental and physical standards. The lethality, readiness, and warfighting capability of our Force depends on Service members meeting those standards.

The Department must ensure it is building "One Force" without subgroups defined by anything other than ability or mission adherence. Efforts to split our troops along lines of identity weaken our Force and make us vulnerable. Such efforts must not be tolerated or accommodated.

As the President clearly stated in Executive Order 14183, "Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness," January 27, 2025: "Expressing a false 'gender identity' divergent from an individual's sex cannot satisfy the rigorous standards necessary for Military Service."

Effective immediately, all new accessions for individuals with a history of gender dysphoria are paused, and all unscheduled, scheduled, or planned medical procedures associated with affirming or facilitating a gender transition for Service members are paused.¹

Individuals with gender dysphoria have volunteered to serve our country and will be treated with dignity and respect. The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness is authorized and delegated the authority to provide additional policy and implementation guidance outside of the normal DoD issuance process, including guidance regarding service by Service members with a current diagnosis or history of gender dysphoria, to implement this direction.

¹ For the purposes of this guidance, these procedures include unscheduled, scheduled, or planned genital reconstruction surgery associated with gender transition, gender affirming surgery, sex reassignment surgery, or newly initiated gender-affirming hormone therapy.



OSD000959-25/CMD001366-25

Source: Retrieved from the Department of Defense website