

GAYS GAINING ACCEPTANCE

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The writers are with the *Los Angeles Times*.

THAT GAYS are more widely accepted in American society is readily apparent in everything from television sitcoms to corporate anti-discrimination policies and recent U.S. Supreme Court opinions.

Less apparent is why and how the shift in attitude occurred.

The American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, has compiled 30 years' worth of major public opinion poll results on Americans' attitudes toward homosexuals. While the surveys consistently show that about two-thirds of Americans oppose gay marriage, they also demonstrate remarkable shifts on numerous other fronts. For example:

■ Public acceptance of gays serving in the military grew from 51 percent in a 1977 Gallup Poll to 80 percent in 2003.

■ Acceptance of gays as elementary school teachers grew from 27 percent in 1977 to 61 percent over the same period.

■ A 1999 Gallup survey showed that 59 percent would vote for a well-qualified homosexual presidential candidate, up from 26 percent in 1978.

"There's been an enormous increase in tolerance — that's the bottom line," said Karlyn Bowman, who compiled the poll results for the institute.

Some of the factors fueling the changes have been related to gays' own efforts, some have not. Some factors have opposed one another, some have been mutually reinforcing. Two powerful societal forces associated with the 1960s — the sexual revolution and the civil rights movement — are credited with driving the change in attitude.

The emergence of widespread contraception and a new insistence on sexual privacy were key elements in Americans' evolving view of sexuality, according to Gregory Herek, a University of California-Davis psychology professor and an authority on sexual orientation and prejudice. That a person's sexual behavior was his or her affair, and not society's, became an accepted precept.

That philosophy led last year to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, which abolished anti-sodomy laws. Just 17 years earlier, in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the high court had upheld Georgia's anti-sodomy law, essentially agreeing that homosexuality was a crime.

"In the *Bowers* case, the Court's

opinion essentially trivialized the lives of gay people," said Herek, who helped prepare abolitionist briefs in both high-court cases. "In the *Lawrence* opinion, the Court recognized the important role sex plays in people's lives, and recognized gay people as human beings. The tone was so different. It was a tremendous change."

Most historians mark the so-called Stonewall riots of 1969 as the first flaring of gay militancy. When gay men took to the streets after police raided the Stonewall Inn bar in New York's Greenwich Village, they showed other gays that they need not be invisible or silent.

In response to pressure from newly vocal gay groups, the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

In Herek's view, that toppled one of three pillars on which prejudice against gays traditionally rested. "Up to that point, homosexuality could be a sin, a crime and a sickness, and that took one of those away," he said.

The 1970s also saw early attempts to include gays in local anti-discrimination laws. Acceptance began to surge after large numbers of gays began to come out of the closet.

"The act of coming out has probably been the single most important determinant in the change in public opinion polls," said Brad Sears, who directs the Williams Project on Sexual Orientation Law at the University of California-Los Angeles Law School. "People learn that this isn't some kind of abstract, foreign, exotic creature. This is somebody who lives down the street."

Scholars describe the dynamic of social acceptance as self-accelerating — the more gays come out of the closet, the more heterosexuals come to know gays and feel more tolerant toward them; in turn, the greater atmosphere of tolerance allows more gays to come out.

Nothing, however, galvanized gays as much as the AIDS epidemic that descended with such devastating results in the 1980s.

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NO DOONESBURY

Garry Trudeau is on vacation. His *Doonesbury* cartoon will return next Monday.

Gay soldiers

DURING the decade that followed President Bill Clinton's retreat in 1993 from his promise to allow gays to serve openly in the military, about 10,000 members of the armed forces have been discharged on the grounds that they violated the noxious "don't ask, don't tell" policy that Congress and the Pentagon forced Mr. Clinton to accept.

That dismaying number represents a deplorable squandering of skill, intelligence and courage that could have been put to good use in defense of the nation. As Mr. Clinton was fond of saying, America cannot afford to waste the talents of a single citizen.

Now, however, with American forces engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, an interesting thing has happened. According to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a gay rights group focused on the military, the number of "don't ask, don't tell" discharges has dropped from a peak of 1,273 in 2001 to 787 last year. (The Pentagon's figures vary slightly.)

That trend screams the obvious question: If the supposed threat to morale and cohesion posed by gay men and lesbians actually diminishes during wartime, why should it be viewed as a problem at all when peace prevails?

The answer, of course, is that need trumps ideology and tradi-

tion. The military's, and the country's, most urgent requirement now is for personnel who can perform. It is even possible that the Pentagon has quietly had second thoughts about the stupefying dismissal in 2002 of several Arabic-language translators, despite a severe shortage of such specialists.

Unfortunately, the latest discharge numbers really aren't good news. They simply underscore bad news that has become less bad.

The bottom line is that the military is still discharging competent and honorable individuals based entirely on their sexual orientation — and on their unwillingness or inability to keep it a secret. And the statistics don't reflect at all the harassment and bullying to which gay soldiers are often subjected.

The country's top military leaders would do well to focus on two developments. One is America's rapidly evolving acceptance of gay citizens. The other is that the nation's staunchest ally, Great Britain, rescinded its ban on gays in the military in 1999, and its forces have performed superbly in Iraq.

The anti-gay bias in the military is increasingly out of step with the nation and is unbecoming an institution that otherwise richly deserves the admiration it commands from the American people.

It is time — it is past time — for "don't ask, don't tell" to give way to "don't know, don't care."