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Study finds 'low' risk in ending 'don't ask, don't tell' gay ban

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WASHINGTON — Ending the military's ban on openly gay and lesbian service members would present a “low” risk to “overall military effectiveness,” a Pentagon study says.

“While repeal will likely in the short-term bring about some limited and isolated disruption to unit cohesion and retention, we do not believe the disruption will be widespread and long-lasting,” said a 17-page summary of the study, which was led by Army Gen. Carter Ham and Jeh Johnson, the Defense Department's general counsel.

“We are convinced that the U.S. military can adjust and accommodate this change just as it has others in history,” the summary said.

A survey underpinning the report's findings showed that 50 percent to 55 percent of service members questioned say repealing the “don't ask, don't tell” would have a mixed effect or no effect and 15 percent to 20 percent said it would have a positive impact. Thirty percent of survey respondents overall, and 40 percent to 60 percent of those in the Marine Corps, said ending the ban would have a negative effect.

The survey “consistently revealed a widespread attitude among a solid majority of service members that repeal will not have a negative impact on their ability to conduct their military missions,” according to the summary of the report released to Congress and the public. While those who predicted a negative impact “must be approached with caution,” the report said there are other factors “that lead us to conclude that the risk of repeal to military effectiveness is low.”

President Barack Obama pledged in his January 2010 State of the Union address to end the “don't ask, don't tell” policy.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates commissioned the review to gauge the challenges of implementing a personnel policy that lets gays and lesbians serve openly and to make recommendations to the administration and Congress.

“For the first time, the chiefs and I have more than just anecdotal evidence and hearsay to inform the advice we give our civilian leaders,” said Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“This is without question a complex social and cultural issue,” Mullen said. “But at the end of the day, whatever the decision of our elected leaders may be, we in uniform have an obligation to follow orders.”

The Pentagon report's release moves the fight to Capitol Hill, where Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has said he will seek a vote to repeal the ban on openly gay soldiers during the lame-duck session of Congress. Republicans blocked a bid in September to bring the policy to a vote before the Pentagon completed the study.

The Senate Armed Services Committee has scheduled hearings Thursday and Friday to hear from top military officers.

The House in May voted 234-194 for legislation that would repeal the policy.