

THOSE WHO DEFEND OUR RIGHT TO BE FREE

My father was a 20-year Navy veteran. I was born at the Naval Base at Yokosuka, Japan. I am proud that my father, like so many others, served our country. I am equally proud that my eldest son is an officer in the Marine Corps.

Those who defend our right to be free deserve nothing less than our gratitude for their willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice in the call of duty. Whether it be preserving the peace overseas or in active combat in hostile territory, it takes a special bravery and commitment to choose the military as a career.

As history shows, courage is found in women as well as men, minorities as well as whites, and people of all religions or socio-economic backgrounds. Our armed forces are stronger because it has found the way to accommodate and incorporate the variety of dedicated persons who wear the U.S. uniform.

Those whose sexual orientation is different should also have the choice to serve in our military. Navy Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified before Congress that allowing gay soldiers and sailors to serve openly in the military is the right thing to do. This past Session, I introduced a resolution in the Hawaii State Senate expressing support for the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT). Our Senate adopted the resolution.

Roughly 13,000 service members have been expelled from military service simply for being homosexual, since 1993, when the policy took effect. At a crucial time when our armed services are desperately short of experts in Middle East languages, DADT has resulted in the discharge of over 65 gay Arabic and Farsi linguists.

Military efficiency and preparedness is at stake, advocates of abolishment contend. Soldiers and sailors with stellar academic and physical fitness credentials are among those who have seen their careers ended solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. Among those who are battling discharge for being gay is Lt. Col. Victor Fehrenbach, a decorated Air Force pilot who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Lt. Dan Choi, who is an Arabic language expert.

Federal judge Virginia Philips of California ruled in a case before her that the ban is unconstitutional. The three plaintiffs testified about the hardship to remain silent about their sexual orientation and their expulsion from the military. Mike Almy was a Air Force communications officer discharged after a 13-year career. Jason Knight was a

Navy translator. Anthony Loverde was an Air Force technician. In her memorandum opinion, Judge Philips held that the restriction against disclosure impedes military readiness and unit cohesion.

Repeal of the policy was a provision in a major defense authorization bill recently debated in the U.S. Senate. Republicans blocked the bill over their opposition to allowing gays to openly serve in the military. For the first time in 48 years, Republicans filibustered the defense authorization bill, which got a final vote of 57 in favor, 40 against. Maine's Senator Susan Collins was the only Republican to vote in favor.

In a Washington Post – ABC poll earlier this year, 75% of those surveyed, support allowing gays to openly serve in the military. A recent Pentagon study shows that about 70% of troops say that the effect of a repeal would be positive, mixed, or none.

Those qualified, brave persons whose strong love for our country draws them to a career in our armed forces should be permitted to do so without discrimination. Allowing gays to openly serve in the military is an idea whose time has come.