Get over gay fear, U.S. allies advise

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Despite decades of combined service experience in the British, Dutch and Swedish armed forces, one senior U.S. military official watching U.S. developments around the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell.

We were just in Washington at a Brooks Institute/Palmer Center conference, where representatives from the world's militaries discussed this matter.

Though we maintain a respect for the American people, their military and their political process, we share a sense of puzzlement — and a sort of shock — at the rhetoric we heard surrounding "Don't ask, don't tell."

As Congress prepares to vote on this, we hope our international perspective can be of some value.

The U.S. armed forces are the world's most formidable, with an armed might almost unparalleled in history. The U.S. military has played both positive and negative roles in the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to protecting our men and women from enemy combatants, we must also protect them from anti-gay and anti-SLAM discrimination.

Increasingly, this is not a situation we and our personnel will tolerate. So we are less able to help accomplish our collective missions.

We are aware of colleagues in our own military who don't like that gays and lesbians serve openly. However, despite considerable fears before we enacted these policies, such attitudes are rare.

In too cases, in fact, have negative private opinions about gay people understated our ability to work with one another. Our service members are professionals who care, first and foremost, about the ability to do the job.

Moral opposition to homosexuality while real, is just not allowed to obstruct our military leaders.

Nor do we think it will have any impact on years after you repeal "Don't ask, don't tell."

This is an important point because many Americans seem to believe that ending anti-gay discrimination in European and Israeli militaries faced no resistance because America's culture more tolerant.

In fact, our polls, rhetoric and even threats of mass resignations were quite similar to the continuing resistance in America. Yet none of the demonstrations came true.

According to research and assessments of our transitions, the new policies had no negative impact on military readiness.

Another dimension missing from the congressional debate is how the closet harms gay troops. We know this from personal experiences. Unit cohesion is paramount, and that's why the public debate about "Don't ask, don't tell" has focused on this topic.

But the impact of discrimination on gay troops matters as well — and we have not heard members of Congress discuss this.

Each of us has experienced what it means to have to live a lie. Excluded silence has undermined our well being, resilience and ability to do our job. If you want your gay and lesbian troops operating at 100 percent, you cannot force them into isolation and discomfort on a daily basis.

We are also puzzled about repeated claims we heard in Washington about the need for more research on "Don't ask, don't tell." There is more than enough on the ground experience, as well as serious social science research, showing what will happen when the U.S. military allows gays and lesbians to serve the terms "I am gay" without getting fired.

We are confident that, despite the unique nature of each culture and military, we will have a similar experience to ours — which is that ending discrimination against gay troops was a giant nothing.

Washington must project force like no other nation. But the military is also about projecting values — and the discriminatory "Don't ask, don't tell" policy undermines America's commitment to the democratic values of fairness and equality under the law.

The policy pays you in the company of Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, China and Yemen. Is that the kind of company you want to keep?

Maj. Peter Roes Harman is in the Royal Dutch Army. Lt. Colonel is in the Swedish Armed Forces. Lt. Col. Craig Jones is retired from the Royal Navy of Britain.