

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-7012

September 24, 2009

Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing to express my concerns about the Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy regarding the service of gays and lesbians in the U.S. military. Unfortunately, it has become clear that a number of individuals with skills essential to winning our struggle against terrorism and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan—such as Arabic linguists and intelligence analysts—have been forced to leave the Armed Forces as a result of the current policy. At a time when we are fighting two wars, I do not believe we can afford to discharge any qualified individual who is willing to serve our country. I support equality for all of the men and women who wear the uniform of the United States military and believe we need leaders, whether straight or gay, protecting our nation from threats at home and abroad. That is why earlier this year I announced my support for the repeal of DADT.

Last month, I had the opportunity to be the keynote speaker at the Las Vegas Human Rights Campaign Gala Dinner. At the dinner, I was introduced to First Lieutenant Daniel Choi, a West Point graduate who served honorably in Iraq and was an Arabic linguist. This past April, as I am sure you are aware, Lt. Choi received a discharge letter from the Army after he publicly revealed that he is gay. According to published reports, Lt. Choi's fellow soldiers knew he was gay, but most cared more about his strong leadership of his unit than his sexual orientation. In June, a panel of New York National Guard officers recommended that Lt. Choi be discharged from the military. It is my understanding that a final decision on his discharge is still pending.

It appears that Lieutenant Colonel Victor Fehrenbach will suffer a similar fate. Lt. Col. Fehrenbach is an 18-year Air Force veteran with 400 hours of combat experience as an F-15 fighter pilot whose dismissal will shortly be before the Air Force Personnel Review Board solely because of his sexual orientation. During his two decades of distinguished service to this nation, Lt. Col. Fehrenbach has flown numerous missions against Taliban and al-Qaida targets, including the longest combat mission in his squadron's history. Our government has invested twenty-five million dollars in taxpayer funds in his training.

When qualified individuals with critical skills like Lt. Choi and Lt. Col. Fehrenbach are dismissed in a time of war, it seems to me that the time has come for the military and civilian leadership of the U.S. government to review DADT and evaluate whether the policy is in the best interests of our nation's security.

Many members of Congress, like me, support the repeal of DADT. As Congress considers future legislative action, we believe it would be helpful to hear your views on the policy. I would therefore request that you bring to Congress your recommendations on DADT. I would also ask that you review the cases of the individuals I have discussed above.

Your leadership in this matter is greatly appreciated and needed at this time. I look forward to your response. Thank you in advance from your time and consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Harry", written in a cursive style.

HARRY REID
United States Senator

HR:rth