

Y2K “CRISIS” DOES NOT CAUSE CRISIS

January 1, 2000

Despite predictions of disaster to businesses, governments, and public services, the worldwide transition to the year 2000 caused few problems for computers, thanks to extensive preparations.

ALSO KNOWN AS: Millennium bug

LOCALE: Worldwide

CATEGORIES: Science and technology; Business and economics; Computers and computer science

KEY FIGURES

Grace Murray Hopper (1906-1992), inventor of the English-based computer language FLOW-MATIC, which evolved into COBOL

Robert Bemer (1920-2004), co-developer of COBOL who was the first to publish warnings about the date problem hidden in most computer software

Peter de Jager (b. 1955), Canadian computer consultant who was an early, influential advocate of preparing for the Y2K transition

Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927-2003), chair of the U.S. Senate committee that persuaded the federal government to prepare for Y2K

John A. Koskinen (b. 1939), chair of the President’s Council on Year 2000 Conversion

SUMMARY OF EVENT

Across North America and around the world, people waited nervously as midnight approached on December 31, 1999. Many wondered whether predictions of doom about the year 2000 computer transition, popularly called the Y2K (for “year 2000,” with *k* representing the Greek *kilo* for “thousand”) problem or the millennium bug, would prove correct: would power and water supplies fail, food distribution be disrupted, the economy begin to disintegrate, nuclear missiles launch accidentally, and widespread civil disturbances begin as computers and computer networks failed everywhere? No one was completely sure how to answer these questions, even though massive efforts to avert any possible problems occupied governments and businesses throughout the late 1990’s.

A definitive answer was apparent within days after January 1, 2000, came and went: there were no disasters. Some computer problems did occur on New Year’s Day and afterward, but they were so few, so inconsequential,

and so easily corrected that even the most optimistic experts were surprised.

The story of the Y2K transition problem began with the development of commercial computing. In 1957, Rear Admiral Grace Murray Hopper invented a programming language called FLOW-MATIC, the first to be based on English in order to make computers easier for businesses to use. FLOW-MATIC formed the basis for COBOL, the name of which derived from “common business-oriented language.” The principal data storage device of the times was the eighty-column punch card. To conserve space, COBOL used only six digits to represent any given calendar date—two each for the month, the day, and the year, as in “04/15/53” for April 15, 1953. This shortcut dating method saved as much as twenty dollars in the production of a date-sensitive record, so it was an important way of economizing as businesses grew dependent on computers.

Computer scientists, led by Robert Bemer, one of COBOL’s developers, warned that using only two digits for each year designation would later cause problems and argued for a four-digit style. However, the desire of businesses to minimize their immediate expenses overwhelmed such objections. When International Business Machines (IBM) designed its System/360 mainframe computer (marketed in 1964), it incorporated the COBOL two-digit year format. That computer, and its dating style, became the industry standard. Bemer again published warnings about the dating problem in 1971 and 1979, but his protests stirred little interest and no change. To most businesses and government agencies the heart of the danger—the arrival of the year 2000—seemed too far away to worry about at the time.

In 1993, Peter de Jager, a Canadian computer engineer, published an article with the alarming title “Doomsday 2000” in *Computerworld*, a magazine aimed at technology managers. In that article and subsequent lectures, de Jager argued that the Y2K bug could initiate massive disruptions and plunge the economy into a recession. Computers, he pointed out, would read a date such as “01/01/00” as “January 1, 1900,” because there was no provision for numbers 2000 and higher in their software, and computer-processed date-sensitive information was fundamental to national infrastructures. There were already signs that he was right: That same year, a U.S. missile warning system malfunctioned

when its computer clocks were experimentally turned forward to 01/01/00.

During the next seven years, other glitches turned up sporadically during testing. At the same time, with gathering momentum, attempts were under way to remedy the date problem. In 1996, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York held committee hearings on the Y2K bug and directed the Congressional Research Service to study the potential problem. The report produced as a result helped to convince President Bill Clinton to establish the President’s Council on Year 2000 Conversion, directed by John A. Koskinen, in 1998. Koskinen oversaw programs to adjust the software used by government agencies. The U.S. government also ordered many organizations essential to the economy, such as stock brokerages, to fix the problem—that is, to “become Y2K compliant”—by August 31, 1999.

Despite initial skepticism about the true seriousness of the Y2K problem, big companies soon undertook remediation efforts of their own. Most employed one or more of three basic methods, termed “windowing,” “time shifting,” and “encapsulation.” Windowing, the most common, entailed teaching computers to read 00 as 2000 and to place other two-digit year dates in their appropriate century. Time shifting involved programming computers to recalculate dates automatically following a formula. Encapsulation, a refinement of time shifting, added 28 to two-digit years to synchronize computers with the cycles of days of the week and of leap years. January 1, 2000, for instance, would not fall on the same day of the week as January 1, 2005, and so adjustments were necessary to accommodate such discrepancies. All three techniques required exhaustive searches and reprogramming of mainframes and personal computers that processed time-sensitive information, such as pay schedules and product expiration dates.

Computer chips embedded in various kinds of equipment posed further difficulties. Since their introduction in the early 1970’s, microprocessors had been built into appliances, tools, automobiles, and machinery of all kinds: By the late 1990’s, they controlled the operations of nuclear power plants, utilities, hospital technology, weaponry, and climate control systems in buildings, in addition to such mundane devices as home microwave ovens. With between thirty-two billion and forty billion chips in use by 2000, their potential for causing trouble was enormous even if only a fraction of them controlled time-sensitive operations, and often the chips were difficult to extract and replace.

As the year 2000 approached, the frenzy of preparation increased, and predictions of disaster grew more ominous. Some consumers stockpiled generators, money, food, and fuel in case utility and supply systems became disrupted on January 1, 2000. Some government agencies failed to meet their August 31 deadline for Y2K compliance. Large corporations worried that their preparations were insufficient, and about a third of small American businesses made no preparations whatsoever.

When the moment of truth came and passed on New Year’s Day of 2000, no system failures occurred, and essential services were uninterrupted even in countries, such as Russia, that were both sophisticated in terms of the computer technology in use and largely unprepared for the date turnover. There were problems, however. Some were comical, as when a 105-year-old man was directed to attend kindergarten, some newborn children were registered as born in 1900, and the Web site of the U.S. Naval Observatory, the government’s official timekeeper, proclaimed the date as “January 1, 19100.”

Most problems were simply annoyances. Some records were accidentally deleted, software used to service credit cards double-charged some users, renters returning videos that were one day overdue were billed for thousands of dollars in late charges, and cell phone messages were lost. Most such problems were easily corrected. Other problems were potentially more serious. For example, one Wall Street computer inflated a few stock values, and a small number of company security systems failed. Some satellites, including one U.S. spy satellite, lost contact with their controllers. Software modifications and simple common sense were sufficient to rectify the errors.

The Y2K problem did not end with the New Year’s date turnover, however. One expert calculated that only about 10 percent of the problems would turn up immediately. For instance, the leap year day February 29, 2000, caused at least 250 glitches in seventy-five countries, although none was major.

SIGNIFICANCE

Even though the year 2000 turnover passed without disaster, the event itself and the preparations for it revealed how thoroughly modern society had come to rely on a sophisticated technological infrastructure. Controlling and coordinating that infrastructure are computers and, increasingly since about 1990, computer networks, especially the Internet. The Y2K threat to information technology (IT) elicited one of the largest

The United States Prepares For The Year 2000

The U.S. government took seriously the possibility that problems with various forms of technology could arise with the transition from 1999 to 2000. On October 19, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed the Year 2000 Information and Readiness Disclosure Act and issued a statement highlighting the act's purposes and its importance:

As our Nation prepares for the year 2000 (Y2K), we face an urgent need to address the Y2K problem, which may cause computers and embedded systems that run America's critical infrastructure to malfunction or even shut down. With little over a year until January 1, 2000, this is a serious global challenge that businesses and governments around the world must address.

Today, my Council on Year 2000 Conversion is launching "National Y2K Action Week," to urge small and medium-sized businesses to take the necessary steps to ensure that the technologies they and their business partners depend upon are ready for the year 2000. Over the next 5 days, the Small Business Administration, the Department of Commerce, and several other Federal agencies will host Y2K educational events at their field offices across the Nation. As part of this week, we are also urging State, local, tribal governments, and community organizations to address this critical problem....

This legislation will help provide businesses, governments, and other organizations with the necessary informational tools to overcome the Y2K computer problem....

Many organizations have been reluctant to share valuable information about their experiences in dealing with the Y2K problem or the status of their Y2K efforts for fear of lawsuits. The Act's limited liability protections will promote and encourage greater information sharing about both experiences and solutions, which will significantly enhance public and private sector efforts to prepare the Nation's computer systems for the new millennium....

Firms within an industry confront similar challenges as they work to ensure that their computer systems are Y2K compliant. Although the Department of Justice has already indicated that competitors in an industry who merely share information on Y2K solutions would not be in violation of the antitrust laws, this Act creates a specific exemption from the antitrust laws for these activities. The limited antitrust exemption... will make it easier for firms to cooperate with one another to solve the Y2K problem while continuing to protect consumers from industry agreements to boycott, allocate a market, or fix prices or output.

Information sharing will be important not only to those who have already made progress addressing the Y2K problem, but also to the many small business and State, local, and tribal governments that are just beginning their Y2K work. I urge trade associations and umbrella organizations to collect such information from their members and provide it to others....

The Y2K problem is an enormous challenge, and we must meet it. Enactment of this legislation is a significant achievement toward allowing all of us to take a successful step into the new millennium.

and most effective joint responses among businesses and government agencies in U.S. history as well as extensive international cooperation. Programmers successfully corrected well over 95 percent of Y2K-related problems. People around the world, particularly Americans, became more keenly aware of their dependence on computers, but they also learned that managing computers is not beyond their control.

Because of its very success, the remediation effort had its critics, some of them bitterly vocal. In part, critics wondered how so little could go wrong if the Y2K bug had really been as big a threat as IT experts had insisted. Editorials and letters to the editors of business

periodicals accused the large coterie of Y2K experts of exaggerating the danger in order to scare businesses into spending money unnecessarily on remediation. They denounced the media hoopla and claimed that the predictions of doom had been psychologically harmful.

Critics were also outraged by the price of remediation. In 1993, de Jager estimated that addressing the problem would cost between \$50 billion and \$75 billion worldwide. He was far too conservative. The United States alone spent \$100 billion, including \$8.5 billion by the federal government, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. The worldwide bill was estimated at between \$500 billion and \$600 billion. De Jager and

his colleagues admitted that costs may have been unnecessarily high, but they insisted that the money was well spent, because without remediation largescale systems malfunctions would have occurred, costing much more money to repair and causing civil disorder. The controversy created a measure of ill will between businesses and IT specialists.

In addition to avoiding disaster, Y2K remediation had immediate tangible benefits for some segments of society. The rush to stockpile food and equipment before the New Year brought record profits to some manufacturers and retailers. Computer programmers were in high demand, and consultants earned money with books, articles, lectures, and Web sites offering advice. Companies were launched specifically to solve Y2K problems for businesses; many of them afterward diversified to serve the general needs of electronic commerce. The close scrutiny of programmers benefited companies’ overhead expenses as well. Programmers removed the clutter of computer code that had accumulated during decades of reprogramming and computer upgrades and uncovered applications that could be eliminated, streamlining business computer systems. Many companies learned how to conduct contingency planning for IT malfunctions. Others, especially small businesses, learned how to use computers effectively for the first time.

Less tangible, but at least as important, were two general lessons for businesses and governments. First, they were forced to reevaluate their dependence on technology, to understand the complexity of that technology, and to be aware of the danger to the technology from unforeseen conditions, such as the Y2K date problem. Second, they learned dramatically that forty years of development and use had built a computer infrastructure with serious inconsistencies and imperfections. Accordingly, commentators suggested that IT specialists, especially those developing large projects, should undergo certification to ensure coherent planning.

The President’s Council on Year 2000 Conversion was demobilized after February 29, 2000, but the Y2K bug continued to have direct and indirect effects on business. Many organizations had deferred computer data entry and innovations in order to devote employee time to Y2K

remediation, so following the New Year, they had to clear up the work backlog. Moreover, according to de Jager and other analysts, the programming techniques used to remedy Y2K dating problems were stopgaps, often not coordinated between computer systems and potentially only temporarily effective. Windowing and time shifting could insinuate subtle changes into computer codes, changes that might not cause problems for decades.

—Roger Smith

FURTHER READING

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- JD Consulting. *Y2K Procrastinator’s Guide*. Rockland, Mass.: Charles River Media, 2000. Introduction lucidly explains the source and nature of the date problem in business computers and embedded computer chips.
- Kuo, L. Jay, and Edward M. Dua. *Crisis Investing for the Year 2000: How to Profit from the Coming Y2K Computer Crash*. Secaucus, N.J.: Birch Lane Press, 1999. Offers a balanced summary of the computer problem for businesspeople and then discusses potential economic developments in detail.
- McGuigan, Dermot, and Beverly Jacobson. *Y2K and Y-O-U: A Sane Person’s Home-Preparation Guide*. White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green, 1999. An example, sensible and practical, of the better-safe-than-sorry advice offered to people worried about the millennium transition.
- Yourdon, Edward, and Jennifer Yourdon. *Time Bomb 2000*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999. An example of a gloomy assessment of Y2K risks to most segments of society.

See Also: Jan. 1, 2000: Y2K “Crisis”; Early 2000s: Cloud Computing Gains Popularity; May 4, 2000: ILOVEYOU Virus Attacks Computers; 2000-continuing: Children Ω Cybercrime Becomes Increasingly Common.

PEANUTS COMIC STRIP RETIRES

January 3, 2000

When Charles M. Schulz's comic strip Peanuts reached the end of its weekday run on January 3, 2000, the event marked the end of the career of one of the greatest comic-strip artists of the second half of the twentieth century.

LOCALE: United States

CATEGORY: Entrainment and recreation; Business and finance; Arts

KEY FIGURE

Charles M. Schulz (1922-2000), American cartoonist

SUMMARY OF EVENT

The comic strip *Peanuts* made its newspaper debut in 1950. At a time when newspaper comics were increasingly becoming team efforts and often were losing all connection to their original creators, Charles M. Schulz drew and wrote every line of *Peanuts* for the fifty years it appeared, a total of more than seventeen thousand daily and Sunday comic strips. *Peanuts*—a title the strip's original syndicators foisted on Schulz and that he loathed as meaningless—first appeared in only seven papers, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and Schulz's hometown *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. By the time Schulz retired, *Peanuts* was appearing in more than twenty-five hundred newspapers.

When he began drawing *Peanuts*, Schulz's distinctive style was influenced by the single-panel gag and montage comics he had been creating for magazines. The rigid four-panel format he adhered to in *Peanuts* for most of the strip's run and his deceptively simple style of drawing, with little detail, would be imitated over and over, although seldom with Schulz's flair. One of the commercial advantages of Schulz's style was that *Peanuts* could be shrunk to take up less space on the page than could detail-heavy adventure strips such as Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* and Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, an important selling point when the strip was initially sold to newspapers. The four-panel format was also versatile in that it could be published as a single vertical or horizontal strip or in a two-by-two grid.

Adults were rigorously excluded from physically appearing in the strip; the cast was composed entirely of children and animals, and the perspective was one that looked on the children as a peer rather than looking down on them from an adult point of view. The classic cast of

Peanuts characters—including the hapless Charlie Brown and his dog, Snoopy, and the crabby Lucy van Pelt and her brother Linus—was established at the beginning or in the first few years of the strip's run. Over time, Charlie Brown, originally a wisecracking prankster, became a stoic Everyman, suffering the numerous defeats the universe—or his fellow characters—inflicted on him with endurance, persistence, and even wit. Snoopy, originally a standard dog, developed a rich fantasy life that included imagining himself, sitting atop his doghouse, as a World War I flying ace piloting his Sopwith Camel. It was typical of the strip's pessimism that even in his imagination Snoopy was usually shot down by the never-seen Red Baron. Schulz continued to introduce new characters throughout the strip's run, including the tomboy Peppermint Patty and Snoopy's friend Woodstock, a bird.

Schulz also introduced a number of situations and images in *Peanuts* that became iconic. Two of the most famous are those of Charlie Brown lining up to kick a football held by Lucy, who invariably pulls it away at the last minute, and Linus with his "security blanket." That phrase passed from *Peanuts* into the English language—an accomplishment in which Schulz took great pride.

The *Peanuts* characters, particularly Charlie Brown and Snoopy, became pop culture icons, and the strip became a marketing juggernaut. It was reprinted in numerous formats and became the basis for a Broadway musical (*You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, first produced in 1971) as well as numerous television specials, the most famous the classic *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which made its debut in 1965 and became an annual staple of the Christmas season. *Peanuts* characters appeared as dolls and on napkins, sweatshirts, greeting cards, posters, coffee mugs, and myriad other items. Perhaps the high point for the *Peanuts* characters occurred when the Apollo 10 mission to the moon dubbed its command module "Charlie Brown" and the lunar landing module "Snoopy."

Schulz and his syndicate further capitalized on the success of the *Peanuts* characters by licensing them to appear in advertising and promotional materials for products, beginning with a camera handbook for Kodak in 1955 and eventually including Dolly Madison snack cakes and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. *Peanuts* was a pioneer in the kind of product licensing that would increasingly dominate popular culture in the late twentieth century, and Schulz became a very rich man, earning thirty to forty million dollars a year, much of which he gave away.

The popularity of *Peanuts* extended far beyond the United States; the strips were translated and published in dozens of languages. In addition, *Peanuts* attracted interest from intellectuals in Europe, including the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco. In 1990, an exhibition of Schulz's work titled *Snoopy in Fashion* opened at the Louvre in Paris, making Schulz the first comic-strip artist to be so honored.

As Schulz suffered from deteriorating health through the 1990's, he was forced to make changes in *Peanuts*. Although he continued to introduce new characters and situations, he increasingly shifted from his usual four-panel format to three or even one-panel layouts, minimizing the effort of drawing backgrounds and characters. Schulz's worsening health eventually forced his retirement. Hospitalized for a stroke in November, 1999, he was diagnosed with advanced colon cancer. His vision lost clearness, and he lost some mental acuity. Chemotherapy for his condition nauseated him, and his prognosis was poor. He announced his retirement on December 14, 1999, and the last daily *Peanuts* strip appeared on January 3, 2000. Schulz died on February 12, 2000, the day before his final Sunday *Peanuts* strip appeared. That strip included a tribute from Schulz to his characters.

On May 27, 2000, the same day Schulz was posthumously honored with the Milton Caniff Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Cartoonists Society, a tribute to Schulz and *Peanuts* appeared on newspaper comics pages, as nearly one hundred syndicated cartoonists incorporated references to *Peanuts* into their own strips. The tribute was organized by Mike Luckovich, an editorial cartoonist for the *Atlanta Constitution*. Among the many participating cartoonists were Darby Conley (*Get Fuzzy*), Aaron McGruder (*The Boondocks*), and Lynn Johnston (*For Better or for Worse*).

SIGNIFICANCE

The end of Schulz's original strips was not the end of *Peanuts* on the comics pages. The strip's syndicator, the United Feature Syndicate, did not pass the strip on to another creator—the idea of *Peanuts* being written and drawn by someone other than Schulz would have shocked fans—but it kept old strips appearing in newspapers under the label *Classic Peanuts*. In addition, the Seattle-based publisher Fantagraphics announced an ambitious project to reprint the entire newspaper run of *Peanuts* in twenty-five volumes.

The end of *Peanuts* was a milestone in the decline of the newspaper comic strip as a cultural and artistic medium in the twentieth century. Although some of the

creators who emerged in the 1980's and 1990's, such as Bill Watterson (*Calvin and Hobbes*) and Gary Larson (*The Far Side*), were Schulz's peers as artists and writers, none were willing to devote themselves to the medium for decade after decade as Schulz had. The fact that even reruns of *Peanuts* were more popular than many new strips demonstrated that Schulz could not be replaced on the comics page.

—William E. Burns

FURTHER READING

Michaelis, David. *Schulz and "Peanuts": A Biography*.

New York: HarperCollins, 2007. First full-length biography of the creator of *Peanuts* discusses Schulz's artistic development and how the comic strip's story lines were influenced by his upbringing and his life experiences.

Schulz, Charles M. *The Complete Peanuts, 1950-1952*.

Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2004. First volume in a planned series reprinting the entire run of *Peanuts* includes a biographical essay by David Michaelis and a lengthy and revealing interview with Schulz from 1987.

_____. *Peanuts: The Art of Charles M. Schulz*. Edited by Chip Kidd. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003. Presents discussion of Schulz's artistic development throughout his career, accompanied by Schulz's thoughts on his characters and style. Includes reproductions of *Peanuts* art and *Peanuts*-related items including dolls, comic books, and advertisements.

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Warnock, Brett, and Robert Goodin, eds. *Top Shelf Asks the Big Questions*. Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf Productions, 2003. Anthology of graphic stories includes a lengthy section of written and drawn tributes to Schulz and *Peanuts* from art cartoonists including Tony Millionaire, Chris Ware, and Seth. Many of these tributes originally appeared in the *Austin American-Statesman*.

See Also: June 11, 2002-April 7, 2016: American Idol Was One of the Most Successful Shows in Television History.

UNITED KINGDOM LIFTS BAN ON GAYS AND LESBIANS IN THE MILITARY

January 12, 2000

The British government followed a 1999 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights and ended its ban on gays and lesbians in the military. Great Britain joined other European nations that have changed their policies against gay and lesbian service personnel, leaving the United States and Turkey as the only members of NATO with the ban intact.

LOCALE: United Kingdom

CATEGORIES: Military; LGBT issues; Civil rights and liberties

KEY FIGURES

John Beckett, plaintiff; weapons engineering mechanic in the Royal Navy

Graeme Grady, plaintiff; personnel administrator in the Royal Air Force

Duncan Lustig-Prean, plaintiff; lieutenant commander in the Royal Navy

Jeanette Smith, plaintiff; nurse in the Royal Air Force

SUMMARY OF EVENT

Until the year 2000, the United Kingdom had a longstanding policy of subjecting gays and lesbians in its military branches to intrusive investigations and dishonorable discharges. The policy had continued after the 1967 repeal of the Labouchere Amendment, which had criminalized all sexual contact among civilian men in Britain. Homosexual acts by servicemen remained criminal acts in civil law until 1994, when the acts were covered as offenses under military law punishable by immediate dismissal.

While other Western European nations abandoned bans on gays and lesbians in their armed forces, Britain continued to expel homosexual military personnel. Between 1989 and 1998, Britain discharged thirty-three officers and more than five hundred enlisted service members for homosexuality. Many of those discharged had good service records and had caused no disruption to their colleagues. The Ministry of Defence defended these discharges on the grounds that the presence of out gay troops would hurt morale and discipline—an argument used by the U.S. armed forces as well—among the 210,000 British uniformed personnel. Defence argued that surveys indicated that 95 percent of the troops were reluctant to serve with gays and lesbians. Opponents of the ban pointed out that because military policy was

typically not decided on democratic grounds, the opinion of the troops should not hold any weight on the matter. Additionally, since most other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries had a lenient attitude toward gay and lesbian service personnel, British soldiers on multinational peacekeeping operations worked without problems alongside gays (and, sometimes, lesbians) in such places as Kosovo.

On June 7, 1995, Britain's High Court found that the no-gays rule was unjustified and inhumane but stopped short of changing it. On September 27, 1999, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, ruled in favor of four gay military personnel who had been dismissed from the British military in the mid-1990's because of their homosexuality. The plaintiffs were John Beckett and Duncan Lustig-Prean, formerly of the Royal Navy; and Jeanette Smith and Graeme Grady, formerly of the Royal Air Force. After un-successful judicial review proceedings in British courts, in which they invoked English administrative law and European Union gender-discrimination law, the four applicants took their cases to the court of human rights. The court held that the dismissals violated European human rights treaties, specifically the right of the plaintiffs to privacy as stated by Article 8 of the Convention on Human Rights. With its decision, the court became the first final appellate court in the world to invalidate a ban on lesbian, gay, and bisexual military personnel under a human rights treaty or constitution.

The verdict could not force Britain to change its laws. However, Britain was a signatory to the 1950 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. As such, it obliged itself to abide by the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. Accordingly, the Ministry of Defence immediately suspended discharges of homosexuals despite protests from senior officers.

On January 12, 2000, the British government announced that sexual orientation would no longer be relevant in military recruitment, assignment, promotion, and disciplinary decisions. The Ministry of Defence replaced the ban on gays and lesbians with a code of conduct that applies to all service members, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Military personnel experts had decided that it would be impractical to try to write specific rules on various types of sexual conduct. Instead,

“Homosexuality And The Armed Forces”

Details of the Policy on Sexual Conduct in the Armed Forces and the Armed Forces Code of Social Conduct.

...The Code of Social Conduct firmly recognizes the right to privacy, including sexual orientation. Accordingly the new policy lifting the ban on homosexuals, and firmly underpinned by the Code of Social Conduct, was considered the most appropriate solution for the UK Armed Forces.

The “Armed Forces Code of Social Conduct” sets out a policy based on behaviour and whether an individual’s conduct may impact adversely on the cohesion, efficiency or operational effectiveness of the Service. In setting out this policy, no account or distinction is made on the basis of the individual’s gender or sexual orientation, which is taken to be a private matter for the individual. The Code of Social Conduct is based on an assessment of the potential or actual impact of social conduct on operational effectiveness and, as a start point, operates on the principle that the Services will only interfere in an individual’s private life where the actions or behaviour of an individual have adversely impacted, or are they likely to impact, on the efficiency or operational effectiveness of the Service. It therefore recognises an individuals right to a private life in line with the intent of Article 8 of the HRA [Human Rights Act].

To summarize, the policy to bar homosexuals from the Armed Forces was not legally sustainable and has now been replaced with a new policy which recognizes sexual orientation as a private matter. It was formulated with the full consultation and support of the three Service Chiefs and is firmly underpinned by a code of social conduct that applies to all regardless of their sexual orientation.

Source: U.K. Ministry of Defence.

the military implemented a more general service test that makes no reference to sexuality. The new guidelines permitted commanders to respond to inappropriate conduct such as sexual relations between commanders and subordinates or overt displays of affection that might offend others. The code gives commanders the right and the obligation to intervene in the personal lives of subordinates if there is an overriding operational need to do so to sustain team cohesion and maintain trust. Also, military authorities reinstated personnel discharged under the previous policy barring gays and lesbians.

Most observers regarded the end of the ban as inevitable. The Labour Party government of Prime Minister Tony Blair had fostered a socially progressive climate conducive to change. Blair had scheduled a vote in Parliament on the question of gays and lesbians in the military as part of the review of the Armed Services Bill. In a nation increasingly tolerant of homosexuality, it was no longer deemed socially or politically acceptable to denigrate or dismiss gays and lesbians. Many of the conservative military officials who had backed the ban had retired. The new leaders were unwilling to copy the U.S. government’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy because they believed that it had failed. The government, the public, and the military were ready for a change in policy.

When the British government ended the ban, the announcement attracted relatively little news coverage.

Many citizens appeared indifferent. Most of the attention came from organizations such as Rank Outsiders, a group for gays and lesbians who were serving or had served in the British military. Gay organizations expected that gays would now be able to serve with dignity and respect, but gay and lesbian service members were concerned a backlash could result if gays and lesbians came out of the closet. In subsequent years, no backlash has been evident.

SIGNIFICANCE

The change in British policy leaves the U.S. military nearly alone among Western nations in its official policy of discrimination against lesbians and gays. The United States and Turkey are the only members of the NATO defense coalition that ban gays and lesbians from military service. The Netherlands became the first nation to end its ban on gays in the military in 1972, and nearly every other Western nation followed the lead of the Dutch.

The continued resistance of the U.S. military to ending its discriminatory policy is based on the argument that out gays and lesbians negatively affect unit cohesion and discipline, and the British continue to debate the effect of the change in policy on attitudes among soldiers. Some commanders still fear that heterosexual soldiers will have difficulty existing in close proximity with people who are gay and that violence will result. However, there have been no publically