

Don't Ask/Don't Tell & John McCain

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 3, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Few political stories are as genuinely sad as the forfeiting of his once impressive moral stature by Arizona Sen. John McCain. The man known for reaching across the aisle to work with Democratic colleagues for the good of the country, to achieve campaign finance reform or to make a stab at immigration reform, that man is no more. Instead, we now see only a petulant crank.

Over the past year, on several occasions, I have written about how disappointed I was at seeing the Senator abandon positions he had once embraced. But, he was facing a GOP primary challenge from the right, and he would not be the first Senator to run away from the ideological center to win a primary, only to run back to the center for the general election. But, the problem is, McCain won his primary and did not run back to the center.

[Yesterday](#) [1], his questions during the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing showed just how far McCain has gone off the deep-end. The hearing was about the flawed "Don't Ask; Don't Tell," (DADT) policy. Both the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense, who was originally appointed by George W. Bush argued in favor of ending the policy, so it is not like this is a liberal pipedream. McCain himself indicated during the 2008 campaign that he would support ending DADT of the Pentagon agreed it would be the right thing to do. Now, the Pentagon has so agreed, taken a survey of troops to prove it, and what does McCain do? He said he was disappointed that the survey of U.S. troops did not simply ask the troops whether or not they think the policy should be changed. Both Admiral Mullins and Secretary Gates looked at the Senator, apparently wondering if they had heard him right. Finally, Gates had to respond that the idea of asking troops about what a policy should be might set a really bad precedent. (So, troops, think we should invade Iraq?) This is not merely about civilian control of the military, but about the chain of command.

The survey asked intelligent questions designed to discover the attitudes of the military without asking the troops to vote on any policy. For example, they asked if they thought ending DADT would be problematic for the military's principal mission of defending the country. A super-majority, almost 70 percent, said a change would not compromise the military's principal mission. Interestingly, fully half of those surveyed said repeal of DADT would have "no effect," while fifteen to twenty percent indicated repeal would have a positive effect. Young people have the right attitude towards working alongside gays and lesbians: Sexuality doesn't have any effect on workplace environment. Perhaps most tellingly, 92 percent of respondents who said they had actually worked with a gay service member said the soldier's sexuality had not in any way affected unit cohesion.

None of this was good enough for Sen. McCain. He has changed the goalposts repeatedly. He has failed to follow the more genuinely conservative approach of the Arizona Senator whose seat he holds, Sen. Barry Goldwater, "Mr. Conservative himself," who said he opposed DADT because, "You don't have to be straight to shoot straight." It is almost impossible to conceive he will run for office again, so why is he doing this? Sadly, it appears to be petulance. The thing John McCain really hates is not gays in the military but Obama in the White House and he will even abandon previously held positions in order to keep the President from a political victory.

McCain has long been mercurial. During the 2008 presidential campaign, many of my Democratic friends admitted they could live with a McCain presidency, but it was the Republican insiders who were genuinely

terrified of a McCain presidency. They did not want that man's hand anywhere near the button. But, one man's petulance should not be able to dictate the nation's policy or the Senate vote on DADT. The Republican members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, if they take their responsibility for the nation's safety seriously, should distance themselves from McCain's crazy suggestion that we should poll the troops. They should follow the advice of Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullins and the clear intent of the American people.

DADT should be repealed. And, John McCain should take his meds.

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