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DADT & Politics

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday's vote on the Defense Authorization Act, which included provisions repealing the discriminatory "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, has become Exhibit A in the case against the dysfunctional ways of Washington. Bradford Plumer at the New Republic makes the case well, asking how a policy can be defeated when not only a majority support it, but 60 Senators support it, and it still goes down in flames due to procedural difficulties.

That is an odd way of looking at it. The repeal of Don't Ask; Don't Tell did not die for procedural reasons. It died for political reasons. The end of the legislative session is the time when the political rubber hits the road, when, for example, Sen. Jon Kyl holds up ratification of an important international treaty because he wants to secure more funding for his home state, or when Sen. Susan Collins and Sen. Harry Reid engage in a kind of Kabuki theater, she mindful of the need to avoid a primary challenge and he seemingly more focused on getting some special consideration for the casino industry than in advancing the national interest. That's politics. These votes the next two weeks are only partially about policy. They are about politics, about showdowns between the leadership and the members, and struggles between the White House and Congress, a complicated, often puerile game of chicken that confirms, in case confirmation was needed, that Pelagius was wrong when he denied the doctrine of Original Sin.

There is no surprise here. The end of a legislative session is usually an especially ugly time and, this year, the ugliness is compounded by the fact that the members of the lame duck session of Congress know that by this time next month, the GOP will be in control of one chamber and have increased strength in the Senate, affording them an incentive to delay and giving Democrats a sense of exasperation and dread. Repealing DADT won't happen in the next Congress so it is now or never. Passing the DREAM Act will never happen in the next Congress, so it is now or never. The compromise on the tax cuts may be unseemly to most Democrats but they know they have to have some kind of deal this year because next

year, the deal will be worse. Time grows short. The special interest groups ramp up their threats. Merry Christmas, one and all!

Level heads are needed. (Intelligence would help too.) Yesterday, shortly after the Senate failed to invoke cloture on the Defense Authorization, the Human Rights Campaign Fund issued a statement urging President Obama to simply stop enforcing the law. I am not sure if the communications people at HRC have ever heard of a scandal called the "Iran-Contra" scandal, in which the Reagan administration decided it too could ignore some laws it did not like. The President has many constitutional powers, but deciding which laws he will enforce and which he will ignore is not among them. This did not prevent the Post's Jonathan Capehart from repeating the HRC foolishness approvingly.

DADT has provoked a lot of foolishness. Both sides concede that there are already gay men and women serving in the military. Both sides say that unit cohesion is a legitimate concern. What happened if every gay man and woman in the military came out of the closet tomorrow? What would their dismissal do to unit cohesion? But, these men and women do not come out of the closet. Why is that? Despite what some on the right might think, it is because these soldiers are intensely devoted to serving the nation, devoted to their units, devoted to their mission, and it is that shared devotion that makes for unit cohesion and being in or out of the closet would not change it one iota. Despite what some on the left might think, there are soldiers for whom being gay is not the be all and end all of their existence, who do not wish to be activists, who would rather continue to serve in the military under any circumstances than bring the whole thing crashing down with a mass, simultaneous coming out.

The DADT debate is largely conducted by advocates and extremists on all sides, but there are some real human lessons in all this. One of the lessons I have learned is that you can now, pretty easily, tell the difference between someone whose opposition to gay rights is rooted in bigotry and those who may object to some of the goals of the LGBT community on non-bigoted grounds. There is no credible reason, moral or practical, to oppose the repeal of DADT. This is not about defending traditional marriage, preserving the link between procreation and sexual function. This is not about the religious freedom of churches in hiring. Keeping DADT is no different from treating the Army like a covenanted community in which owners of property are forbidden from selling to blacks or Jews. It is bigotry and kudos to the USCCB for not simply following the rightwing line and opposing the repeal of DADT.

I hope that some solution will be found in the next week or two to pass the repeal of a law that is repellant to good morals and sound military practice. Back when DADT was first passed, I do not think anyone would have thought it would be ending so soon. Our culture and our society have come a long way, very quickly, on the issue of gay rights, faster and further than other minorities in previous times. The repeal of DADT may pass in the next fortnight and it may not, but its days are numbered and that is clear. In the meantime, commentators and lobbyists should cut with the "I'm shocked, shocked!" routine when they see politicians committing politics.

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