



Belatedly, Top Dems Reject Pace's Moralism

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If Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Peter Pace was surprised that his remarks about homosexuality and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy created such an uproar, there must have been similar feelings in the two leading Democratic presidential campaigns when their candidates responded to the general's comments.

Early last week Pace told the Chicago Tribune that he believed homosexuality was immoral and that the U.S. military had an interest in keeping out people who engaged in immoral behavior.

In the wake of reports about Pace's comments, Newsday on March 14 asked for a response from Senator Barack Obama, Illinois' junior senator and a leading Democratic presidential hopeful, specifically on the immorality question.

"I think traditionally the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman has restricted his public comments to military matters," Obama said. "That's probably a good idea to follow."

He then used the moment to criticize Don't Ask, Don't Tell, saying, "I think the question here is whether somebody is willing to sacrifice for their country, should they be able to if they're doing all the things that should be done?"

In a written statement, the Illinois Democrat focused on the recruiting problems the military has suffered during the protracted war in Iraq as evidence of the failures of the ban on service by openly gay soldiers.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, New York's junior senator, offered a similar answer when questioned by ABC News the same day, emphasizing her policy disagreements with the military ban. When asked point blank if she thought homosexuality was immoral, Clinton said, "Well, I am going to leave that to others to conclude."

Clinton then tried to steer the conversation back toward her critique of the operational logic of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, saying, "I believe in the Uniform Code of Military Justice... so no matter who you are, if you breach the rules, then that should be something that is taken into account and you should face consequences. But I don't believe in 2007, when a number of our allies like Great Britain and Israel have integrated gays and lesbians into the Armed Services, that we want to turn our backs on people who want to serve our country."

The clear reluctance of either Obama or Clinton to take on Pace over the question of morality was stark, particularly in light of comments from at least one leading Republican. Senator John Warner, the 80-year-old Virginian who is the ranking GOP member of the Armed Services Committee and not known as a gay rights ally, told reporters, "I respectfully but strongly disagree with the chairman's view that homosexuality is immoral."

In their criticisms of Pace, LGBT organizations chose to quote Warner, rather than traditional allies such as Clinton and Obama, while the media began to press the two Democrats more aggressively on their words.

In a written statement released later in the day that she first fielded a question on the matter, Clinton said, "I disagree with what he said and do not share his view, plain and simple. It is inappropriate to inject such personal views into this public policy matter."

But that did not prove sufficient to quiet a growing chorus of critics. The same evening, Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the nation's leading gay rights lobby group, based in Washington, told the New York Times, "I still feel like the reaction from Senator Clinton and Senator Obama merits clarification on their views on the morality of our community."

Alan Van Capelle, the executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, New York's LGBT lobby organization, referring to Clinton's March 12 appearance at the 25th anniversary dinner of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, told the Times, "Forty-eight hours later, she is not able to say that the people in that room were not immoral. That worries me."

By the following day, March 15, Obama and Clinton had both apparently gotten the message. Obama publicly stated that he does "not agree with General Pace that homosexuality is immoral."

Clinton offered two comments that day. In a statement to HRC, Clinton, noting, "I have heard from many of my friends in the gay community that my response yesterday to a question about homosexuality being immoral sounded evasive," added, "I should have echoed my colleague Senator John Warner's statement forcefully stating that homosexuality is not immoral because that is what I believe."

In a separate comment to Bloomberg News, also on March 15, Clinton made essentially that same point, and added, "Then let the Uniform Code of Military Justice determine if conduct is inappropriate or unbecoming."

In comments on two consecutive days, then, the New York senator made reference to the Armed Services legal code, under which sodomy continues to be illegal. Following the March 15 reference to the UCMJ, in an e-mail exchange with Philippe Reines, spokesman for Clinton's Washington office, Gay City News asked whether by invoking the military code the senator was saying she would support open service by gay soldiers only if they do not run afoul of the sodomy ban. Reines replied that Clinton was "referring to inappropriate relationships - such as between officer and enlisted, or between commander and subordinate - irrespective of orientation."

However, Reines and Clinton's office did not respond to two follow-up e-mails seeking to clarify whether the senator is in fact opposed to the UCMJ's bar on sodomy.

Top New York and national LGBT leaders seem prepared to put the matter behind them.

Van Capelle, after learning of Clinton's express disavowal of Pace's immorality comments, said he was satisfied.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, was both critical and forgiving.

"Their thought processes on this were extremely disappointing. They seemed not to have the gut sense that we are in fact moral," said Foreman, though he also observed, "Having worked in several political campaigns, I can say your first thought is, 'How do I answer this question without offending voters?'"

Not surprisingly, Clinton and Obama won the greatest slack from Democratic Party faithful.

"While I can't presume to know the senators' thoughts, running for president tends to shade everything you do," said John Marble, spokesman for the National Stonewall Democrats, before

adding, "As a result of this, the Democratic campaigns are more aware of their statements on LGBT issues and we are consciously in the minds of candidates. They now know who their supporters are."

Solmonese expressed the hope that the Democrats have learned something from the flap.

"What the electorate is looking for is clarity on the issue," he said. "The most important thing that has been learned is to be true to your convictions. I hope the candidates have learned that." Foreman said his wish is that the gay community has learned an important lesson as well.

"We share some of the responsibility for the deer-in-the-headlights reaction when it comes to gay people and morality," he said. "For years we have ceded the moral argument in favor of the argument that we don't care if you think we are moral, just don't discriminate against us... It's a wake-up call to put our fundamental humanity and morality on the table all the time."