

Time to Tell: Son says author of military's 'don't ask' would now repeal it

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by Peter Moskos

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I was the first critic of "don't ask, don't tell." It was 1993, and I was home on break from college. My father, Charles Moskos, and I were watching TV and drinking ouzo.

Bill Clinton's election promise to end the ban on gays in the military had turned into a political debacle. My father, a conservative Democrat who was considered by some to be the foremost expert of his generation on military personnel issues, told me he had a brilliant idea to save the president: "Don't ask, don't tell. Don't seek, don't flaunt!"

My father, a proud draftee, came up with the concept and coined the phrase. He had lots of crazy ideas. But this one, I declared, was "the stupidest idea you've ever come up with."

A few months later, despite being attacked by the left and the right, "don't ask, don't tell" was the law of the land. The left hated that it banned military service by out gay people, the right hated that it didn't. Ever the pragmatic centrist, my father gloated, "If both extremes are pissed off, you're probably doing something right." Most important to my father was that the law was a compromise the military could support.

Today, 17 years later, I am convinced that my late father would support the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell." But to understand why he would embrace this change, one needs to understand the nuances of his support for the law in the first place -- and his love for the military and the enlisted man in particular.

Certainly a small part of my father's support for "don't ask, don't tell" was a simple but real pride in having contributed to the English language. After all, how many of us have added to our mother tongue?

But in defending the law, my father had one hard-to-refute point: Civilized societies do not force people to get naked in front of those who might be sexually attracted to them. Since we do not force women to shower in front of men -- not even in the military -- why should we force men to shower with openly gay men?

Of course Papa had a better way to phrase it: "Until Hillary Clinton agrees to shower with me, I shouldn't be forced to shower with an openly gay man." And he

had a point, up to a point. Less persuasive was that the thought of gay sex simply gave my father the heebie-jeebies.

My father was no homophobe; he had nothing against gay people. He didn't care if gay men hit on him but noticed how rarely it happened ("they don't like fat ugly guys like me anyway"). He just didn't want to get naked in front of people he knew were gay. He always shifted the argument away from sexual orientation and toward issues of privacy.

Perhaps it was generational, but my father believed in something that seems quaintly old-fashioned today: sexual modesty. He didn't like being confronted with anybody's sexuality, gay or straight. If confronted about his own sexuality, my father liked to quip, "At my age, I would be happy to have any sexual orientation!"

The only thing sexually my father was open about was his prudishness. And he practiced what he preached. When I was young, my father told me I should learn about sex in the alley, hanging out with my friends. "And I don't want to know about it," he would say with a dismissive wag of the finger. My mom quickly became the go-to person for such matters.

Before my father died in 2008, I asked him to reverse his support for the law. "Be on the right side of history," I said. I also appealed to the newshound in him, "Just think of all the press you'll get!" He did like the idea of one last hurrah, but he would not turn his back on the military. His continued commitment to "don't ask, don't tell" was exactly as deep as the military's continued support.

And now the brass is shifting. A few months ago, Gen. Colin Powell, one of the law's original supporters, reversed his position and came out against "don't ask, don't tell." Powell would have likely asked for my father's support. And my father wouldn't say no to Gen. Powell.

Ever the contrarian, my father would have savored the irony (and media attention) of renouncing the law he defended for many years. Next, he would have flown to a war zone to help the military figure out the best way to have openly gay men and women serve.

So, for my father's memory, here's hoping the phrase "don't ask, don't tell" survives long after the law fades into history.