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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Smoke the Bigots Out of the Closet

By FRANK RICH

A funny thing happened after Adm. Mike Mullen [called for gay men and lesbians to serve openly in the military](#): A curious silence befell much of the right. If this were a Sherlock Holmes story, it would be the case of the attack dogs that did not bark.

John McCain, commandeering the spotlight as usual, did [fulminate against the repeal](#) of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” But the press focus on McCain, the crazy man in Washington’s attic, was misleading. His yapping was an exception, not the rule.

Many of his Republican colleagues said little or nothing. The right’s noise machine was on mute. The Fox News report on Mullen’s testimony was fair and balanced — and brief. The network dropped the subject entirely in the Hannity-O’Reilly hothouse of prime time that night. Only ratings-desperate CNN gave a fleeting platform to the old homophobic clichés. Michael O’Hanlon, an “expert” from the Brookings Institution, [speculated](#) that “18-year-old, old-fashioned, testosterone-laden” soldiers who are “tough guys” might object to those practicing “alternative forms of lifestyle,” which he apparently views as weak and testosterone-deficient. His only prominent ally was the Family Research Council, which issued an inevitable “action alert” demanding a stop to [“the sexualization of our military.”](#)

The occasional outliers notwithstanding, why did such a hush greet Mullen on Capitol Hill? The answer begins with the simple fact that a large majority of voters — between [61 percent](#) and [75 percent](#) depending on the poll — now share his point of view. Most Americans recognize that being gay is not a “lifestyle” but an immutable identity, and that outlawing discrimination against gay people who want to serve their country is, as the admiral said, “the right thing to do.”

Mullen’s [heartfelt, plain-spoken testimony](#) gave perfect expression to the nation’s own slow but inexorable progress on the issue. He said he had “served with homosexuals since 1968” and that his views had evolved “cumulatively” and “personally” ever since. So it has gone for many other Americans in all walks of life. As more gay people have come out — a process that accelerated once the modern gay rights movement emerged from the Stonewall riots of 1969 — so more heterosexuals have learned that they have gay relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers and co-workers. It is hard to deny our own fundamental rights to those we know, admire and love.

But that’s not the whole explanation for the scant pushback in Washington to Mullen and his partner in change, Defense Secretary Robert Gates. There is also a potent political subtext. To a degree unimaginable as recently as 2004 — when Karl Rove and George W. Bush ran a national campaign exploiting fear of gay people — there is now little political advantage to spewing homophobia. Indeed, anti-gay animus is far more likely to repel voters than attract them. This equation was visibly eating at Orrin Hatch, the Republican senator from Utah, as [he vamped nervously with Andrea Mitchell of MSNBC last week](#), trying to duck any discernible stand on Mullen’s testimony. On only one point was he crystal clear: “I just plain do not believe in prejudice of any kind.”

Now that explicit anti-gay animus is an albatross, those who oppose gay civil rights are driven to invent ever loopier rationales for denying those rights, whether in the military or in marriage. Hatch, for instance, limply suggested to Mitchell that a repeal of “don’t ask” would lead to gay demands for “special rights.” Such arguments, both preposterous and disingenuous, are mere fig leaves to disguise the phobia that can no longer dare speak its name. If gay Americans are to be granted full equality, the flimsy rhetorical camouflage must be stripped away to expose the prejudice that lies beneath.

The arguments for preserving “don’t ask” have long been blatantly groundless. McCain — who [said in 2006 that he would favor repealing the law](#) if military leaders ever did — didn’t even bother to offer a logical explanation for his mortifying flip-flop last week. He instead huffed that the 1993 “don’t ask” law [should remain unchanged](#) as long as any war is going on (which would be in perpetuity, given Afghanistan). Colin Powell strafed him just hours later, [when he announced](#) that changed “attitudes and circumstances” over the past 17 years have led him to agree with Mullen. McCain is even out of step with his own family’s values. Both his wife, Cindy, and his daughter Meghan [have posed for the current California ad campaign](#) explicitly labeling opposition to same-sex marriage as hate.

McCain aside, the most common last-ditch argument for preserving “don’t ask” heard last week, largely from Southern senators, is to protect “troop morale and cohesion.” Every known study says this argument is a canard, as do the real-life examples of the many armies with openly gay troops, [including those of Canada, Britain and Israel](#). But the argument does carry a telling historical pedigree. When Harry Truman ordered the racial integration of the American military in 1948, Congressional opponents (then mainly Southern Democrats) embraced an antediluvian Army prediction from 1940 [stating that such a change would threaten national defense](#) by producing “situations destructive to morale.” History will sweep this bogus argument away now as it did then.

Those opposing same-sex marriage are just as eager to mask their bigotry. The big arena on that issue is now in California, where the legal showdown over Proposition 8 is becoming a Scopes trial of sorts, [with the unlikely bipartisan legal team of David Boies and Ted Olson](#) in the Clarence Darrow role. The opposing lawyer, Charles Cooper, [insisted to the court](#) that he bore neither “ill will nor animosity for gays and lesbians.” Given the history of the anti-same-sex marriage camp, it’s hard to make that case with a straight face (so to speak). In trying to do so, Cooper moved that graphic evidence of his side’s ill will and animosity [be disallowed](#) — including that notorious, fear-mongering television ad, [“The Gathering Storm.”](#)

The judge admitted such exhibits anyway. Boies also triumphed in dismantling an expert witness called to provide the supposedly empirical, non-homophobic evidence of how same-sex marriage threatens “procreative marriage.” In cross-examination, Boies forced the witness, David Blankenhorn of the so-called Institute for American Values, to concede [he had no academic expertise in any field related to marriage or family](#). The only peer-reviewed paper he’s written, for a degree in Comparative Labor History, was “a study of two cabinetmakers’ unions in 19th-century Britain.”

In another, milder cross-examination — on [“Meet the Press” last weekend](#) — John Boehner, the House G.O.P. leader, fended off a question about “don’t ask” with a rhetorical question of his own: “In the middle of two wars and in the middle of this giant security threat, why would we want to get into this debate?” Besides Mullen’s answer — that it is the right thing to do — there’s another, less idealistic reason why President Obama might want to get into it. The debate could blow up in the Republicans’ faces. A protracted battle or filibuster in which they oppose civil rights will end up exposing the deep prejudice at the root of their arguments. That’s not where a party trying to expand beyond its white Dixie base and woo independents wants to be in 2010.

Polls consistently show that independents, however [fiscally conservative, are closer to Democrats than Republicans on social issues](#). (In [May’s Gallup survey](#), 67 percent of independents favored repealing “don’t ask.”) This is why Scott Brown, enjoying what may be a short-lived honeymoon in his own party, calls himself a “Scott Brown Republican.” A Scott Brown Republican isn’t a Boehner or Hatch Republican. In [his interview with Barbara Walters last weekend](#), he distanced himself from Sarah Palin, said he was undecided on “don’t ask” and declared same-sex marriage a “settled” issue in his state, Massachusetts, where it is legal.

It’s in this political context that we can see that there may have been some method to Obama’s troublesome tardiness on gay issues after all. But as we learned about this White House and the Democratic Congress in the health care debacle, they are perfectly capable of dropping the ball at any moment. Let’s hope they don’t this time. Should they actually press forward on “don’t ask” in an election year with Mullen and Gates on board — and with even McCain’s buddy, Joe Lieberman, calling for action [“as soon as possible”](#) — they could further the goal and raise the political price for those who stand in the way. Recalcitrant Congressional Republicans will have to explain why their perennial knee-jerk deference to “whatever the commanders want” extends to Gen. David Petraeus and Gen. Stanley McChrystal on troop surges but not to Mullen, who outranks them, on civil rights.

The more bigotry pushed out of the closet for all voters to see, the more likely it is that Americans will be moved to grant overdue full citizenship to gay Americans. It won’t happen overnight, any more than full civil rights for African-Americans immediately followed Truman’s desegregation of the armed forces. But there can be no doubt that Mike Mullen’s powerful act of conscience last week, just [as we marked](#) the 50th anniversary of the Greensboro, N.C., lunch counter sit-in, pushed history forward. The revealing silence that followed from so many of the usual suspects was pretty golden too.

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