

Republicans block vote on repeal of “Don’t ask, don’t tell”

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A Republican filibuster blocked Senate consideration of an appropriations bill that would repeal the Pentagon’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that excludes openly gay men and women from the military. The 56-43 vote, which fell four short of the 60 votes needed to end the filibuster, followed days of legislative wrangling characterized by cynicism and reaction on both sides of the legislation.

Republicans complained that the Democratic leadership in the Senate was bringing up the bill not in order to pass it, but to win support from voters sympathetic to gay rights in the upcoming congressional elections, which take place in only six weeks. There is no doubt that electoral concerns were the main factor in the timing of the vote, which the Democratic leadership knew it would lose.

Every Republican voted to sustain the filibuster except the absent Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. She was defeated for renomination in a primary election last month and is now back in her state seeking reelection as a write-in candidate. The two Democratic senators from Arkansas, Mark Pryor and Blanche Lincoln, also backed the filibuster.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid had also promised to support an amendment to the military appropriations bill incorporating the so-called DREAM act, a measure that would allow undocumented immigrant youth, brought to the United States illegally as children, to qualify for legal status if they enlisted in the military or completed two years in college. The successful filibuster blocked consideration of that amendment as well.

Nearly all Senate Republicans are opposed to any concession to either gays or immigrants, and many flaunted their bigotry to appeal to Christian

fundamentalist and chauvinist groups. They threatened, if the filibuster was unsuccessful, to delay action on the bill by introducing a flood of amendments.

Senate Democrats, for their part, did little to conceal the fact that they were merely going through the motions to appease gay rights and immigrant rights groups, who have vocally complained about the indifference of the Obama administration to their concerns.

The website Politico.com highlighted the cynicism of the Democrats, commenting, “With the critical vote to proceed looming, Obama’s political operation at the Democratic National Committee, Organizing for America, entered the fray Monday by sending separate messages about the immigration and gays-in-the-military battles to Obama’s massive e-mail list. The messages decried the planned Republican filibuster, but, curiously, they didn’t call on recipients to contact the fence-sitting senators who could subvert such a stalemate. Instead, the official Democratic missives urged citizens to call [Republican Senator John] McCain and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky).”

In other words, rather than an actual effort to win the Senate vote by pressuring wavering Republicans, the Democratic Party operatives sought to focus attention on those Republicans who were leading the filibuster, so as to win support for Democratic candidates on November 2.

Given that the Democrats enjoyed a 60-vote majority in the Senate from June 2009 until January 2010, they had an eight-month period during which they could have simply repealed “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” regardless of Republican opposition. Several Republicans from New England have since indicated their support for repeal. But no action was taken until six weeks before a congressional

election in which the Democrats are expected to lose dozens of House seats as well as seats in the Senate.

The House of Representatives, with a huge Democratic majority and no procedural roadblocks such as the filibuster, has taken no action either. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who controls the House legislative agenda, represents a district in San Francisco with a large gay population.

In addition to proving futile, the whole exercise of relying on the Democratic Party to enact measures against discrimination is degrading and reactionary. The Democratic leadership proposed the measures as amendments to a bill that appropriates \$725 billion for the Pentagon, including \$159 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The liberal establishment and the Democratic Party, with the support of most gay rights organizations, have chosen to make the military the focus of their opposition to anti-gay discrimination. This enables them to link the defense of a democratic right to support for US militarism and the Obama administration's wars of aggression.

Similarly, the DREAM Act would promote the enlistment of tens of thousands of immigrant youth, mainly Hispanic, in the armed forces, after the Democratic leadership made clear there would be no other proposal on offer to legalize the status of millions of undocumented workers and their families.

This is a cynical attempt to manipulate immigrant youth who are desperate for a means to achieve legal status. Most of them would not have the financial resources to attend college and would be virtually pressed into military service as the only alternative to a life of poverty and persecution.

Senator Reid, in a statement issued before the vote, defended his proposal to incorporate the DREAM Act into the military spending bill, citing the military's support for the measure. "The Defense Department's strategic plan explicitly states that passage of the DREAM Act is critical to helping the military shape and maintain a mission-ready all-volunteer force," he said.

In other words, the Pentagon needs the DREAM Act to provide fresh meat for the battlefields of Iraq and

Afghanistan.

As for expanded recruitment of gay men and women as cannon fodder for the military, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have publicly endorsed the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell."

Gates has appointed an internal review of the proposed repeal, which is to deliver its findings December 1. Even if the review backs repeal, however, Senate action is still required, since the current policy was made mandatory by bipartisan legislation in 1994 with the support of Democratic President Bill Clinton.

As written, the Senate measure would not have preempted the December 1 review, merely authorizing the Obama administration to end "Don't ask, don't tell" once the study is completed and Obama, Gates and Mullen certify that a change in policy would not harm military morale or adversely affect troop readiness for combat.

There are indications, however, that sections of the military brass are pushing back against a repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell," particularly in the event of a Republican sweep in the November elections. General James Amos, nominated by Obama to head the Marine Corps, told a Senate committee Tuesday that responses from the Marine rank-and-file to the proposed repeal were "predominately negative."

The general said he opposes repeal at this time because it would be a "significant change during a period of extended combat operations." He pulled back from outright insubordination, however, telling the committee he would carry out the implementation of repeal if ordered to do so by the commander-in-chief and Congress.



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