

local news

Potter fiasco

The Justice Department's "problem" with Tom Potter spells big trouble for Clinton

by Inga Sorensen

A spokesman for a national gay and lesbian rights organization says citizens will have to "vote their conscience" during the next presidential election, though he admits that may not be so easy in light of the Clinton administration's latest spectacle involving sexual minority rights.

"We are absolutely shocked and outraged with the Justice Department and the White House. What they've done seems a bit inconsistent, nonetheless, it's incredibly offensive, not to mention discriminatory," says Gregory Fisher of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Fisher is referring to the ongoing controversy involving former Portland Police Chief Tom Potter and federal officials. Potter, who is an extremely strong supporter of civil rights for gay men and lesbians, says he withdrew from being considered to head a federal community policing program after a Justice Department official called his advocacy for gay and lesbian rights a "problem" for the Clinton administration.

"I knew when he [Justice Department official John Schmidt] said the administration had a 'problem,' it wasn't a little problem, say, like a bad hair day," says the amiable Potter. "I knew it was a big problem."

Justice officials—including Attorney General Janet Reno—said conservative police chiefs might be reluctant to work with Potter because he publicly backs gay and lesbian rights. Potter's daughter Katie, a Portland police officer, is a lesbian. As police chief, Potter participated in lesbian and gay pride day events.

For his part, Potter says he is very disappointed with the Clinton administration's handling of the situation. "I voted for Clinton because I thought he was the better candidate and had some good ideas about where the country should be going," he says. "But I watched him get beaten down and make some tactical mistakes. I mean, look at the military ban situation. He started with a horse and ended with a camel. 'Don't ask, don't tell' is worse than the initial policy."

Potter says he brought up his support for gay and lesbian civil rights during his first interview with federal officials in August, and was told it was not an issue. He went through a number of other interviews, and the subject was not brought up again until Oct. 5, when Schmidt said Potter's advocacy would be a problem. "I knew this was a big deal by the way he said it," explains Potter. "I know I was being pressured to withdraw."

Potter did just that and eventually chose to go to the media with the story. "I was pretty shocked, but I didn't do anything. I waited to see if the Justice Department was going to say anything about it. I waited and waited and there was nothing. I felt that this was important enough to bring forward before the [Oregon] election because the public needs to realize that gays and lesbians—and even people who oppose discrimination against gays—are being discriminated

against. Now I am simply one more example of that."

Greg Jackson, executive director of Right to Privacy, an Oregon gay rights political action committee, says, "Tom Potter is known as one of the foremost experts on community policing, yet, as with so many gays and lesbians, his professional abilities are being totally overlooked simply because of his association with gay people. It's outrageous, and I think Clinton has some explaining to do."

Adding to the irony is the fact that the Justice Department recently implemented an in-house policy barring discrimination based on sexual orientation.

This is not the first time President Clinton has distanced himself from the gay and lesbian community. During his campaign for the presidency, Clinton vowed to lift the military ban on openly gay servicemembers. After a rebuff by some

members of Congress, Clinton not only backed away from that pledge but formulated the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which some legal scholars say is as bad as the policy's predecessor. During the campaign, gay men and lesbians donated millions of dollars to Clinton.

"Clinton is looking to the next election day, and he is seeing a shift in the electorate that seems to favor conservatives," says NGLTF's Fisher. "It's not that Clinton isn't aware of the power of the gay community,

it's that he fears the right is more organized and powerful."

In regard to his family's response, Potter says, "I sat all [four] of my kids down and discussed this situation with them. I said this wasn't simply about being the father of a gay child, but a matter of principle. They were totally supportive of my decision to go public about this."

He adds, "After this all came down, a reporter asked Katie if she somehow felt responsible for this, and she said 'Absolutely not.' I am glad and proud that she feels that way because she didn't cause this situation, homophobia and fear on the part of others did."

After the story became public, members of Oregon's congressional delegation blasted the Justice Department for its conduct. A few days later, Reno offered Potter a chance to be reconsidered for the community policing post—a move that has been widely viewed as "political" and "backpedaling." In light of the circumstances, Potter says he is not interested. "I'll just go back into retirement. I love it here in Oregon. It's my home. It's where my family is."

When asked to reflect if anything positive has come from this incident, he says: "The fact is, gay people are discriminated against, and so, too, are people who support civil rights for gay people. Maybe my situation will highlight that reality. This scenario just proves we have a long way to go in terms of defeating homophobia, but if people are moved to action because they felt I was treated unfairly, then that is positive."



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