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NATIONAL news

NATIONAL

Activists vowed Feb. 1 to hold Attorney General John Ashcroft accountable for the new, more moderate positions he professed during his divisive nomination. The Senate voted 58 to 42 to confirm his nomination.

"It is clear a different man turned up for this job interview," said Elizabeth Birch, Human Rights Campaign executive director. "To win confirmation, Ashcroft recognized he had to turn himself into an inclusive moderate, an image in stark contrast to his settled record and past."

Although Ashcroft received enough votes, his nomination galvanized an unprecedented coalition that opposed confirmation based on his dismal human rights record and because it doubted his ability to enforce the nation's laws fairly. The civil rights community opposed him for a multitude of reasons, including the many anti-gay statements he made during his career in public service and his opposition to laws that would protect sexual minorities from discrimination.

Ashcroft's anti-gay record became a flash point during his confirmation hearing when he was questioned on his role in blocking a vote on President Clinton's openly gay nominee for ambassador to Luxembourg. During sworn testimony, he said James Hormel's sexual orientation had nothing to do with his opposition, but previous statements he made to the media contradicted his testimony.

Ashcroft misled the Senate Judiciary Committee when he said that he opposed Hormel based on the "totality of his record" and that he "knew" Hormel more than 30 years ago while a student at University of Chicago Law School, where Hormel was a dean. But he refused to elaborate on what part of Hormel's record he opposed, and his suggestive inference of "knowing" Hormel belied the fact that the two had never had a conversation.

To separate himself from his anti-gay record, Ashcroft said he would not take sexual orientation into account in hiring and "couldn't imagine" asking a prospective employee about his or her sexual orientation. A Georgetown University professor, however, said at a news conference that he was asked about his sexual orientation during a job interview with the governor of Missouri.

According to Paul Offner, the first question Ashcroft asked him was, "Do you have the sexual preference of most men?" Offner said he believed that giving the wrong answer would disqualify him from the job.

"It is important that the nation's highest-ranking law enforcement official tell the truth," said Elizabeth Toledo, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director. "Ashcroft seems to be experiencing either amnesia or an inability to be forthright."

U.S. Rep. Barney Frank wants the Bush administration to put its money where its mouth is. The Massachusetts Democrat filed legislation Jan. 24 to comply with the policy on the definition of marriage expressed by Dick Cheney during his debate with Joe Lieberman.

When asked Oct. 5 by Bernard Shaw about same-sex relationships, the vice president replied: "People should be free to enter into any kind of relationship they want to enter into...the next step, then, of course, is the question you ask of whether or not there ought to be some kind of official sanction, if you will, of the relationship or if those relationships should be treated the same

way a conventional marriage is. That's a tougher problem...I think the fact of the matter, of course, is that matter is regulated by the states. I think different states are likely to come to different conclusions, and that's appropriate. I don't think there should necessarily be a federal policy in this area."



Elizabeth Toledo

Frank said this position directly contradicts the Defense of Marriage Act, which Congress adopted in 1996 and President Clinton signed into law. His legislation would repeal Section 3, which establishes a national definition of marriage.

"I welcome Vice President Cheney's recognition that the 'appropriate' policy is for the states to decide for themselves whether or not to give official sanction to same-sex unions," Frank said. "I should note that I offered an amendment to strike this provision in 1996 when the House considered the bill, and while it was heavily defeated, it did receive 35 more votes than were cast in opposition to the overall DOMA."

Lawmakers in Arkansas and Indiana introduced bills last month to ban adoption and foster parenting by homosexuals, while Texas is likely to face similar legislation during its short session this year.

"These bills are a growing danger to families," said Robin Kane, advocacy director of the Family Pride Coalition, which is monitoring the legislation's movement. "The public debate supporting them attacks GLBT parents and harms children. When they pass, families suffer real economic and legal harm while our opponents gain momentum to attack us elsewhere."

In Arkansas, Republican Rep. Randy Minton introduced House Bill 1026, which would prohibit the Department of Human Services from "placing any child with any adoptive or foster parent who is a homosexual." State regulations already prohibit agencies from placing children with foster parents who are gay.

Arkansas Equality Network; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; and other groups are leading efforts to defeat that measure. Similar legislation died in committee during the last session two years ago.

In Indiana, Republican Sen. John Waterman introduced Senate Bill 144, which "prohibits homosexuals from adopting or being foster parents." Similar legislation has been introduced in the past and has failed.

Meanwhile in Texas, parents, family and friends across the state are preparing for another legislative battle regarding adoption. In 1999, lawmakers introduced two bills to ban adoption and foster parenting by gay people.

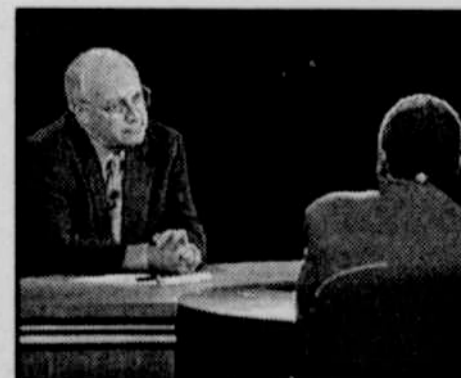
One of them focused on "homosexual behavior" and "deviate sexual behavior." Those bills did not pass.

ARIZONA

The Army announced Jan. 15 it will not pursue its planned discharge of Lt. Steve May, a Republican in the Arizona Legislature, for alleged violations of "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue, don't harass." He will continue to serve in the Reserve until May 11, when his two-year obligation is complete.

The Army initiated discharge proceedings after learning of remarks May made about his sexual orientation during a debate on domestic partner benefits for state employees in the Legislature. At the time, he was on inactive duty.

May was called back to duty after making the remarks and after winning re-election as an openly gay candidate, so his sexual orientation was a matter of record at the time. He served as executive officer of his Reserve unit.



Cheney and Shaw

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