Nunn Offers Compromise On Military's Gay Ban

By Martin Kasindorf

WASHINGTON

As the Senate Armed Services Committee began hearings Monday on President Clinton's plan to end the prohibition of gays and lesbians serving in the military, committee chairman Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) offered an olive branch on the explosive issue.

Nunn, white siding with the uniformed Pentagon leadership against Clinton on maintaining the longtime ban, suggested in a "CBS This Morning" interview that an interim six-month compromise reached in January could be made permanent.

If the White House agreed, such an arrangement would continue a new policy of not asking would-be recruits about their sexual orientation. But service members who then went public about their orientation would be subject to administrative discharge, as they were for decades before Clinton announced plans to change the policy by executive order.

Clinton ordered the Pentagon to draft an order by July, preventing discharge for the mere status of being gay but subjecting all service members to a rigid code of personal conduct.

Nunn, foreseeing problems of equal treatment for "hand-holding," "kissing" gays and non-gays under a new code of conduct, said that "if people keep their private behavior private, if they don't declare and advertise their private behavior," they are currently able to stay in the service as long as they perform their duties. The interim compromise "may be a pretty good place to end up," he said.

Gay-rights groups, who attended Monday's low-key opening hearing in large numbers, rejected Nunn's overture. Thomas Stoddard, coordinator of the gay and lesbian Campaign for Military Service, said that under the proposed compromise, efforts to "hunt people out of the service" for their private views would continue. "That is a civil rights question," Stoddard said. "The principle here must be parity — treatment based only on performance."

Nunn started off the hearings, which will extend over at least four months, with nominally "neutral," generally dispassionate testimony by two congressional researchers and two law professors on the historical and legal background of the Pentagon ban.

Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) jokingly congratulated Nunn for "taking an explosive issue and making it dull."

Gay and lesbian activists complained that Nunn, who promised "fair, thorough and objective" hearings, had hand-picked the witnesses and had rejected six or seven scholarly experts suggested by their side.

The hearings continue Wednesday with three military manpower experts discoursing on the need for military "unit cohesion," the Pentagon's prime argument for keeping the ban on gays in place to prevent "disruptive" differences.

Next month, the committee will host witnesses from foreign countries who allow gays in their armed forces, and then will undertake field hearings at military bases. Later, advocates on both sides will get their say, and finally the committee will review the Pentagon's scheduled July directive by inviting the military brass and civilian Pentagon leadership to testify.

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