

WASHINGTON -- Sen. Ben Nelson makes an unlikely champion for the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell."

The Nebraska Democrat said during his 2000 Senate campaign that he considered same-sex relationships immoral. In a 2007 interview, Nelson defended the law and policy that bans openly gay military members from serving, saying "it's worked." But his views on the policy, like those of the military establishment, have evolved.

Two weeks ago, Nelson said he was sticking to his position that Congress needed to wait for the completion of a Pentagon review due Dec. 1 before deciding.

Then came Wednesday, when the senator announced his support for a proposal to repeal the law but give military leaders the flexibility of when and how to implement the changes.

"I don't believe that most Nebraskans want to continue a policy that not only encourages but requires people to be deceptive and to lie," Nelson said. "The 'don't ask, don't tell' policy does just that. It also encourages suspicion and senior officers to look the other way. In a military which values honesty and integrity, this policy encourages deceit."

Nelson is a member of the Armed Services Committee, which is set to vote on the proposal Thursday. The proposal represents a compromise struck Monday by the White House and a small group of Democrats who fear the repeal would be doomed if Republicans regain control of either house of Congress.

Before Nelson's announcement, committee chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich., said he was unsure whether he had enough votes to move the repeal amendment out of committee.

Following Nelson's announcement, a Levin spokesman said the vote tally remained unclear. Some news outlets reported Wednesday that Nelson's could be the pivotal vote. Other potential swing votes, including Sens. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., and Susan Collins, R-Maine, have announced their support.

The committee will decide whether to include the proposal in its version of a broader defense authorization bill. Tucking the repeal law into a bill authorizing the spending of hundreds of billions of dollars for U.S. troops could significantly strengthen the provision's chances during debate on the Senate floor.

News of Nelson's support heartened Nebraska veterans who traveled to Washington earlier this month to urge him and other lawmakers to support a quick repeal of the law.

"He really understood where we were coming from," Bellevue resident Cindy Hall said Wednesday, recalling their meeting.

Hall was surprised by the timing of Nelson's support, because the senator had said he wanted to follow the preference of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates that Congress wait until the Pentagon study was completed.

Hall was in the army five years, including one year in Iraq. Her recruiter, commanders and everyone else knew she was a lesbian and "it really wasn't a big deal." Still, she said, the policy prompted her to push to get out in 2008 because she never knew when she might run into someone who would cause problems.

She said she hopes to rejoin the army once the policy is changed.

Nelson said he talked to Gates, who told the senator he could live with the compromise.

That stance reflects a broader shift by the country's top military leaders, who, like Nelson, once staunchly backed "don't ask, don't tell."

In 2007, Gen. Peter Pace, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, defended the policy to the Chicago Tribune, calling homosexuality immoral and comparing it to adultery.

The current chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, told graduating Air Force Academy cadets on Wednesday that they should support a changing military. Mullen didn't speak directly about the policy, but the chairman has said it forces troops to lie.

Still, the four service chiefs have urged holding off until the review is done.

"The value of surveying the thoughts of Marines and their families is that it signals to my Marines that their opinions matter," Marine Commandant James Conway wrote in a letter to Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the committee's top Republican.

Nelson said the compromise shows that Congress still values the Pentagon's review.

"It rests ultimately the authority to make this change with military leaders, and I believe that's the right thing to do," he said.

Nelson's colleagues in Nebraska's congressional delegation oppose the proposal.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., said Wednesday that he sticks by his previous position that the current policy "works reasonably well."

Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., opposes scrapping the policy, as do Reps. Adrian Smith and Lee Terry, both Nebraska Republicans.

"Gates is carrying the water for the White House on this," Terry said Wednesday. "To me, it's foolish to make any decision on this before the study's done."

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