

Gay Question Puts CNN on Defensive  
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Published: November 30, 2007

The president of CNN said yesterday that the cable channel would redouble its efforts to vet the campaign affiliations of questioners at open-forum debates, after a retired brigadier general was permitted Wednesday to ask the Republican presidential candidates about gay men and lesbians in the military without CNN's knowing that he was listed on an advisory committee of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign.

"I think it's pretty obvious, in retrospect, our search should have turned this up," Jon Klein, the president of CNN's domestic networks, said in an interview. "It's in the nature of doing something that hasn't been done before — you're going to try to anticipate everything, and you're going to fail at that.

"Had we known ahead of time," Mr. Klein added, "we would probably not have used his question. It raised too many flags, in terms of motivation."

The retired general, Keith H. Kerr, was one of 5,000 people who had uploaded videos of themselves asking potential debate questions to YouTube, which organized the debate with CNN. Several dozen questions were selected for use.

Mr. Klein said that a small group of producers had conducted basic searches on the questioners picked as finalists, including whether they had made donations to any presidential campaigns. There was no evidence Mr. Kerr had, Mr. Klein said.

Mr. Klein said the producers had also typed the questioners' names into a search engine to see "who this person is and where they're coming from."

And yet, as of yesterday, someone typing "Hillary Clinton" and "Keith Kerr" into Google was prominently directed to Mrs. Clinton's media site. There, a press release dated Nov. 11 identified Mr. Kerr as one of four dozen national co-chairmen of Veterans and Military Retirees for Hillary.

As shown on CNN, Mr. Kerr had prefaced his video question by saying: "I'm a retired brigadier general with 43 years of service. And I'm a graduate of the Special Forces Officer Course, the Commanding General Staff Course and the Army War College. And I'm an openly gay man."

He then said: "I want to know why you think that American men and women in uniform are not professional enough to serve with gays and lesbians."

Anderson Cooper, the moderator, told the audience that Mr. Kerr was in the audience in St. Petersburg, Fla., and he was brought into the talk.

CNN learned of Mr. Kerr's Clinton connection in its post-debate discussion, when William Bennett, serving as analyst, said on camera: "On that 'don't ask, don't tell,' I'm getting a ton of e-mails saying that this guy who asked the question was part of Hillary Clinton's gay steering committee. I don't know if that's true or not, but if he is, that certainly should have been disclosed."

Mr. Cooper responded, "It's something that we should follow up on, because certainly, I had not heard that." Mr. Cooper added, "If so, that should have been, certainly, disclosed, and we would have disclosed that."

The episode was quickly seized upon on the blogosphere, including on some conservative sites.

Mr. Kerr was interviewed yesterday by John Roberts on "American Morning" on CNN. In addition to the military advisory committee for Mrs. Clinton, the retired general said he had been part of a Clinton steering committee on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues but he said he had done no work for the campaign.

Asked by Mr. Roberts if anyone affiliated with Mrs. Clinton "put you up to the idea of asking this question," Mr. Kerr said, "This was a private initiative of my own."

Also, when Mr. Roberts asked about his experience as a gay man in the military, Mr. Kerr said that "because of the generation in which I grew up, one could not reveal their sexuality."

Mr. Klein said CNN should have known about Mr. Kerr's affiliation with Mrs. Clinton, but he defended his question.

"We were looking for questions that would help Republican voters decide amongst the candidates," Mr. Klein said. "We didn't particularly care who was asking the question, as long as it was strong and relevant to the race."

To that end, Mr. Klein acknowledged that the selected questions tended to tilt toward subjects generally considered to be of more import to Republican voters — including abortion and gun control, while subjects like health care were minimized.

Mr. Klein said that, in selecting the questions and questioners, the producers had done their jobs well, at least as measured by number of people — 4.4 million — who had watched, according to estimates of Nielsen Media Research. No primary debate on any cable channel has had a bigger audience, according to CNN.

When asked about the fuss in St. Petersburg yesterday morning, Senator John McCain said that Mr. Kerr's identity should have been made clear.

"But I am glad the issue came up," Mr. McCain said. "It continues to be an issue of discussion."