

Boy Scouts's Coming Out

Boy Scouts of America and the Threat of Gay Masculinity

Jon Catlin

When you've spent 14 of your 19 living years affiliated with an organization, it becomes your second nature and you largely internalize its values. For some people this activity is religious or ethnic. For others it's a sport or a musical instrument. For me it is Boy Scouts of America, which, unlike most other groups that hone specific skills, takes on the task of teaching the art of manhood itself.

Jon is a second-year in the College majoring in Fundamentals: Issues and Texts and Jewish Studies.

Like any meaningful activity, scouting constantly tests one's commitment. There's a reason only two percent of scouts become Eagle Scouts, scouting's highest rank: Boy Scouts is a physically, mentally, and emotionally trying experience for every boy. Scouting also requires subjecting oneself to often unrealistic standards of what it means to be a "good man."

In the case of BSA, *gay* manhood is not part of that standard, as I experienced firsthand. I realized I was gay just after I had completed my Eagle Scout service project and just a few months before I would earn the rank. Though I was out at school, I didn't risk coming out to my fellow scouts or to my father (who was then also my Scoutmaster), for fear of being denied Eagle.

I was lucky in that my troop, though registered through a church, was not composed of especially religious or conservative members. Years earlier, two scouts in my troop had come out as gay and promptly quit, despite my father's urging them to stay. However welcoming an individual troop may be to gay youth, it's understandable that having

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to take an oath to be “morally straight” once a week can feel morally repugnant.

Yet as much as I was ready to be done with scouting once I went to college, I soon missed it and became involved with a group of former Boy Scouts at the U of C, which I found by a web search. I am now the president of this community service group, which organizes independent campus events for Boy Scouts and is not affiliated with BSA. When the school newspaper wrote a story on the group, the article spawned bitter comments and heated e-mails to myself, the campus LGBT group, and UChicago administrators, calling the group “a campus branch of the Hitler Youth Organization” and demanding that the it be abolished for violating the University’s non-discrimination clause.

Oddly enough, many of the former scouts who founded the group were gay, and that legacy continues with me. As much as we agree with said angry e-mail-writers that BSA is to be condemned for its discrimination, *scouting* in practice is another story entirely and has many redeeming qualities. This is an essay about why many, including me and dozens of organizations, are trying to reform scouts from within.

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The scouting movement was founded in 1908 in the midst of a “crisis of masculinity.” Its leader, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, a British military hero from the Boer War, was alarmed at the lack of physical and mental preparedness he saw in his British troops. This crisis of boyhood overlapped with rising nationalism in Europe—the deficiencies of his British soldiers were taken as deficiencies of Britain itself.

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Those nationalist fears about faltering masculinity made it across the Atlantic when the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) was founded in 1910. These trends are discussed at length in the work of Jay Mechling, an American studies scholar who has

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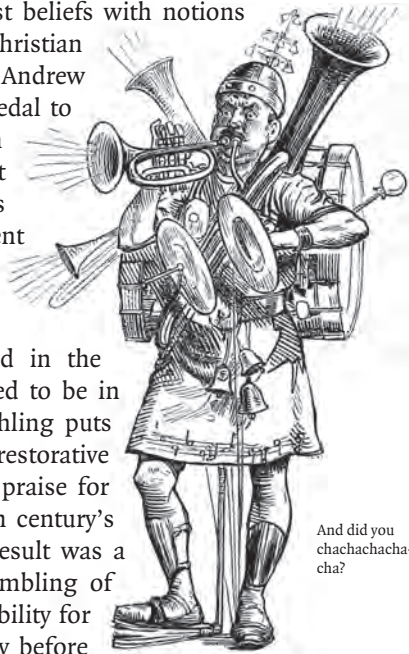
built an academic career out of scouts and the way it reflects broader aspects of American culture. He writes:

Boy Scouts...must be understood, at least in part, as a nineteenth-century solution to the cultural trauma experienced as a result of the twentieth century's assault on traditional understandings of what it meant to be a boy and a man.

Turn of the century thinkers saw programs like scouting as melding of “scientific” social Darwinist beliefs with notions of the Protestant work ethic and Christian selflessness. Around this time, Andrew Carnegie created the Carnegie Hero Medal to reward those who acted selflessly in an increasingly Darwinist and individualist urban America. These movements combined to form a youth movement founded on American exceptionalism and ‘muscular Christianity.’

“Honor” and “duty” were included in the Scout Oath because they were perceived to be in decline, and scouting is thus, as Mechling puts it, “an inherently conservative, even restorative social movement.” The 19th century’s praise for “character” was giving way to the 20th century’s acceptance of “personality,” and the result was a perceived moral slippage and the crumbling of concrete notions of individual responsibility for the collective. As Mechling says, “‘Duty before self’ was giving way to ‘self before duty.’” It is in this light that the first edition of the BSA’s *Handbook for Boys* included a medieval code of chivalry and a code of honor derived from Native American traditions.

Notions of American exceptionalism remained popular tenets of Boy Scouts through the trials of the Cold War. Defeating



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communism in particular demanded a “conflation of religion, patriotism, and vigorous masculinity,” which was popularly accepted until the Vietnam War. But starting in the 1960s, anti-militants began labeling scouts “little fascists” and comparing them to the Hitler Youth. While Scouts didn’t yet have a set political leaning, that changed when

BSA chose sides in the culture wars of the 1980s by affirming its investment in absolutes and traditional values against pluralism and relativism.

After this choice, Mechling notes, the group began “to act more like a hierarchical church than like a secular youth organization” as troops came to be predominantly sponsored by churches rather than secular institutions. BSA began

centralizing its mission around a

codified ‘morality’—a concept that was deliberately left out of BSA’s founding charter in an effort to draw boys from many religious and ethnic backgrounds. The perceived ‘moral panic’ that brought about the culture wars is remarkably similar to that which led to BSA’s founding 100 years ago and led BSA to promote the slogan “Character Counts” in the late ’80s.

Mechling notes a perceived “feminization of American primary education” in the 1990s that replaced traditional boyish qualities like heroism and self-reliance with Kumbaya-style kindness and toleration. National news stories like school shootings, declining academic performance, and violent video games creating a “toxic boy culture” further strengthened the need for Scouts to reinforce traditional masculine values.

Scholars of the Millennials characterize the current generation of youth as “raised feeling special, sheltered, and over-scheduled...by ‘helicopter parents,’” according to Mechling. In polls of what made their generation unique, Millennials most often answer that it is their use of technology, while previous generations touted their “work

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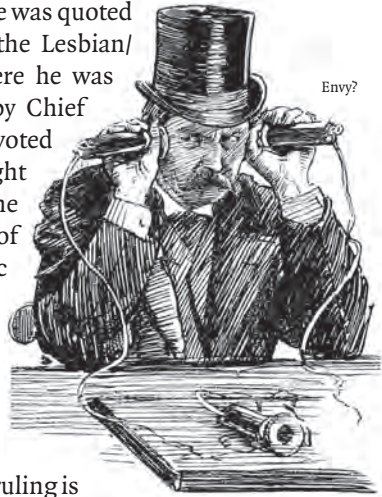
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ethic”—a phrase that did not even make the list for Millennials. For this generation especially, BSA positions itself as a nostalgic kind of social antidote to rising problems.

Mechling writes: “Honor, duty, God, country, strength, and morality establish the masculine ideal the Boy Scouts sees as being as relevant in the twenty-first century as in the nineteenth.” These are the values that comprise BSA’s “model of boyhood” and that of “adult masculinity” and the ones at stake in the organization’s current controversies.

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Just two days after BSA declared in July 2012 that, after a 10-year investigation into the issue, it would continue to exclude gay youth and adult members, an eight-part opinion panel appeared in *The New York Times* by the title “Why Do the Boy Scouts Exclude Gays?” Contributors ranged from a Cato Institute member who defended BSA’s right to discriminate as a private organization to James Dale, an openly gay Eagle Scout and later an adult leader who brought his case to the Supreme Court in 2000. Dale’s adult membership in a New Jersey scout troop was revoked by the leader of his local BSA council when he was quoted in a newspaper as the co-president of the Lesbian/Gay Alliance at Rutgers University, where he was then a student. In an opinion written by Chief Justice William Rehnquist, the Court voted 5–4 to defend BSA’s First Amendment right of expressive association, thus ruling the New Jersey Supreme Court’s defense of New Jersey’s anti-discriminatory “public accommodations law” unconstitutional. This protects BSA’s right to discriminate as a private organization, as opposed to a business, as the New Jersey Court had ruled.



The major complication in the Court’s ruling is that while BSA is a private organization and is entitled to

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practice discrimination, it is also dependent on government funding and facilities, ranging from community funding to the use of public meeting spaces. Given the government's obligation to non-discrimination after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, an endorsement of scouting is often construed as a violation of these policies. As a result, scouts have been dislocated from many public meeting spaces and lost the support of major donors like the United Way and of city governments such as San Francisco's.

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Contrary to the popular characterization of BSA given by many critics, the Scout executives who contributed to the Times panel avoided conservative language of 'contamination' and 'moral degradation' and instead aimed to keep homosexuality, and sexuality itself, out of scouting altogether:

This week, the Boy Scouts of America announced that after a two-year evaluation, it is maintaining its membership policy to allow the organization to most efficiently accomplish its mission of preparing young people for life. As a private organization, the Boy Scouts of America may deny membership to anyone whose behavior creates a distraction to its mission.



This ban applies to both youth and adult leaders who are openly gay. They reaffirmed a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy (since “Boy Scouting makes no effort to discover the sexual orientation of any person”), stating that these complex moral issues should be left to other

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organizations and individual families. They continued,

Our role is to equip young people with life skills so one day, they can make their own decision about these issues. And we teach our members to treat those with different opinions with courtesy and respect at all times and to adamantly oppose the mistreatment of others based on any perceived difference.

These claims are problematic in that exclusion is itself a kind of mistreatment. These leaders are deeply mistaken in thinking that their organization can remain effectively neutral on sexuality—an issue central to both masculinity, manhood, and boyhood. And so Dale, whose case essentially began this discussion, wrote in his *Times* piece that he was baffled less by BSA’s ruling than by why it chose to make a declaration on the issue at all.

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One contributor was Jay Mechling himself. In his *Times* piece, “Saving Scouting,” Mechling separated scouting as an independent practice and set of values from the Boy Scouts of America itself: “I distinguish scouting from the Boy Scouts of America because I love scouting, and I don’t have much love for the Boy Scouts of America.” This distinction is illustrated in an anecdote from journalist Dave Banks, who also contributed to the *Times* piece:

At the 2000 Democratic National Convention, hundreds of delegates booed a group of Boy Scouts as they led the convention in the Pledge of Allegiance. While this show of disapproval must have been heart-felt, it was misguided. The frustration that some have with the Boy Scouts is understandable, but a group of 14 and 16 year old boys doesn’t dictate organizational policy. The argument the delegates had was with the BSA administration.

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In associating these two entities too closely and boycotting scouting outright, Mechling argues that many on the left have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, and forgotten that scouting itself still has much to offer youth. Though BSA executives may decide policies, they are essentially unenforceable at the local level. Banks puts it nicely: “At the local level, we’re all just people, and local administration understands that.” In my own experience, these policies are indeed rarely defended by individual troops.

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The illusion of top-down control in BSA arises from its common association with the U.S. military. Aaron Belkin, a professor at San Francisco State University, described the “fantasy about militarized masculinity that sustains the Boy Scouts’s exclusionary tradition” in his piece in the *Times*. He writes,

Scouting came to the U.S. about a century ago, when many believed that masculinity was in crisis and that white men had become too feminine to maintain their superiority over racial minorities. Scouting followed by military service was seen as the antidote to feminization, the pathway for producing hearty boys who would become rugged men.



The Boy Scouts of America has always taken pride in its promotion of military values like hierarchy, conformity and bravery to prepare boys for manhood, and its Web site exalts that, “Boy Scouts prove themselves in an environment that challenges their courage and tests their nerve.” Understood from this perspective, the intimate, longstanding partnership

Marginalia manqué

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between the military and scouting is not just about recruiting, but reflects a more profound effort to inculcate boys with martial priorities.

Belkin laments that BSA's exclusionary policy mistakenly conflates homosexuality with the unmasculine and arrives at the silly conclusion that gay inclusion would somehow "contaminate the process of masculine preparation." The thinly veiled charge here, as Mechling argues elsewhere, is BSA's conflation of homosexuality—that is, moral corruption—with pedophilia—physical corruption—which has indeed been scouting's most notorious 'distraction' from its mission.

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BSA's favorite argument that sexuality is simply not a part of scouting fails when we consider Mechling's argument that "to the degree that heterosexual men and boys openly discuss wives and girlfriends, sexual orientation is a topic in scouting." He concludes,

The Boy Scouts of America repeatedly insists that gay men cannot be "appropriate role models" for young men. We need another measure of what makes a "good man." Kindness and tolerance toward human difference are qualities I want to see in men who work with boys. Sexual orientation is nowhere on my list.

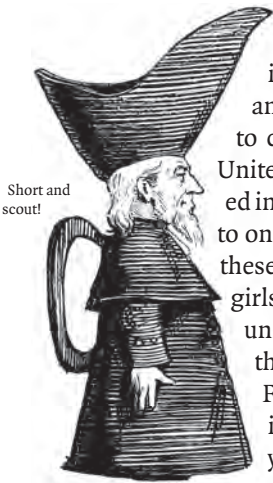
This re-evaluation of the notion of a good man is the task that has stumped BSA. Today, despite board members like James Turley who support inclusive policies, BSA is financially bound by its two largest donors, the Mormon and Catholic Churches, respectively, to endorse obsolete notions of the "good man" as heterosexual. While Mormons make up only two percent of the nation's population, they account for 20 percent of Scouts and exert a strong force on BSA as a whole.

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The precedent we need comes from BSA's historical role as an institution that generally mirrored changes in American society. From its beginning, BSA tolerated scouts of all faiths—a rare and unpopular decision—and even honored them by allowing Scouts to this day to earn over 20 special religious badges. It also enrolled African Americans in segregated troops until it integrated them in the late 1940s, following the lead of the U.S. military.

The question today is whether BSA will again follow the U.S. military and endorse an acceptance of gays in the near future. Similar groups, like Girl Scouts and Camp Fire USA, have long followed non-discrimination policies that accept gay and lesbian members and leaders. By not requiring troop sponsors, these organizations avoid the politics that currently ensnare BSA. Moreover, Girl Scouts allows its members to substitute another word in place of 'God' when reciting the Girl Scout Promise, and in the same spirit Camp Fire went from being all girls to co-ed in 1975. In most other countries, including the United Kingdom and Canada, Boy Scouts similarly went co-ed in the 1970s after the idea of limiting the scout experience to one gender was revealed to be indefensible. Compared to these other groups, BSA's obstinacy on the issues of "God, girls, and gays," as Mechling has dubbed the triad, seems unnecessary. Rather than simply selling out to liberals in the culture wars, as Cathy Tisdale, the president of Camp Fire, wrote in the *Times* debate, inclusion has simply improved her organization's outcomes by encouraging youth to become "their whole, best selves," whatever that might be.



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Unlike Mechling and Turley, who are internal reformers, James Dale is one of the all-or-nothing activists who proclaims that BSA has "outlived its usefulness" by staying out of step with American social progress. But has scouting lost relevance in our society?

Over 100 million scouts have joined BSA since its founding in 1910. It reached a membership peak of 4.8 million in 1973, but has

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since fallen to 2.7 million in 2011, with a 16-percent drop in the 2000s alone. Despite this fall, a record 56,176 scouts reached the rank of Eagle in 2010. So while the organization itself is becoming smaller, its core membership is still becoming stronger. While the organization is losing relevance compared to past decades, it is still the largest youth organization in the United States and the 12th-largest non-profit in the United States, with a revenue of \$665.9 million in 2005. By conservative estimates, Scouts contribute 2 million service hours per year—far more than any other organization.

Perhaps the most pressing case for BSA's relevance is the skills and values that it alone imparts among peer groups. As correctives to today's problems of child obesity and sedentary lifestyles, Scouts instills an outdoor and active lifestyle in its members and requires improvements in physical fitness at many stages along the trail to Eagle Scout. In an era where video games are consuming our youth's lives, Scouts stands as a constructive and indeed moderate throwback to the times when kids played outside recreationally and experienced nature on their own terms.

Though camping and outdoor recreation are typically what come to mind when one thinks of scouting, more than anything, these activities create an arena in which character can be tested. With camping outdoors comes the need to cook, clean, and delegate other responsibilities, which test youth peer leaders and also develop work ethic in scouts who have to work for their meals and take on additional responsibilities. Peter Applebome, an editor of *The New York Times*, once wrote that, as an adult volunteer involved with his son's scout troop,

Scouting's genuinely egalitarian goals and instincts are more important now than they've ever been. It's one of the only things that kids do that's genuinely cooperative, not competitive.

While one could try to group scouting with other youth organizations, how many of those encourage achievement without also harboring the negative pressures of competition? How many can claim to

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directly practice character education?

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There are hundreds of discriminatory groups like BSA in our country, ranging from religious groups to political organizations, and our typical response is to cut ties with them and dismiss them as socially irrelevant. The puzzle is why people like myself cannot seem to do that with BSA. Very few former scouts would defend the unconditional abandonment of the organization that many liberals defend. But dozens of organizations such as Scouting for All and Scouts for Equality have formed since the 2000 Dale decision to try to reform Scouting from within. Perhaps the most wide-ranging of these efforts was a petition that collected over 300,000 signatures on Change.org urging BSA to reinstate Jennifer Tyrrell, the Ohio mother of a 7-year-old Cub Scout who was ousted as a den mother because she is a lesbian. People like Tyrrell see an intrinsic value in Scouts that other organizations cannot provide for their children.

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What then are the values and skills that scouting instills in boys, and why is Scouting (and BSA) worth defending? The primary motivator for reformers like Tyrrell is that Boy Scouts is the largest, most accessible, and most proven way to participate in scouting in the United States. While there exist other scouting organizations like Camp Fire and YMCA Indian Guides, these are only for younger children and do not share the respected status and global network that Boy Scouts has achieved. Like other reformers, I defend BSA not because I agree with all of its policies, but because it is in my opinion the best way to participate in scouting.

But even BSA itself deserves to be defended from the misinformed critiques one can find online. Many of the critics who attacked my group referred to BSA as spreading a “hate-filled message” and thus “harming the development of innocent children.” My first response is that these people have obviously never been to a scout meeting. As Mechling argues, rather than simply imposing its own moral values, Scouting actually encourages youth to question them. Mechling,



an Eagle Scout, spent over 20 summers at a scout camp observing scouting, though from an academic perspective. He reveals his decades of observation in his book *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth*, a history and ethnography of scouting culture.

Mechling's primary claim is that there is no standard scout experience since there is no single locus of power between BSA's headquarters, local executives, adult leaders, scout peer groups, and the scout himself. Rather, these features function in constant dialectic, and it is at points of friction that boys are tested most. He writes,

Despite the national organization's wishes (maybe fantasies), having a uniform program does not guarantee that local troops crank out a uniform product—the God-fearing, highly moral, heterosexual adult male of Boy Scout rhetoric. Culture is a great deal more messy than that.

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Mechling's claim is one of common sense: Experience will show you that no 11-year-old who walks into his first scout meeting is going to submit entirely to scouting's patriarchal, almost military-style hierarchy and adhere to all of BSA's rules. Rather, he instinctively fights his lowly place on the totem pole by questioning the authority of peer and adult leaders and proving himself through achievements in rank advancement. Those Scouts who keep advancing soon find themselves in leadership positions, and are constantly tested and frustrated by the task of asserting themselves at the age of only 13 or 14. Alongside these commitments, the Eagle Scout service project looms as a task often requiring over a year of planning and execution led solely by the scout with minimal assistance from his parents and scout leaders.



Like many young Scouts, I loathed scouting for much of my time in it. In middle school, it was an embarrassing thing to be outed as a Boy Scout in front of my peers because scouting was 'cute' and actually emasculating. Up until I reached Eagle I often kept it a secret from even my close friends. Most scouts just quit at this point, but I wasn't allowed to because—as often happens in legacy families—my father couldn't finish scouting when he was young because he had to work from a young age, so I had to vicariously finish it for him. But somehow being forced to do something simultaneously makes you hate it and become more attached to it as you are empowered by its oppressive idealism.

I want to argue that Boy Scouts affirms a positive, albeit traditional, picture of manhood when our relativistic culture no longer provides one. LGBT scholar David Halperin has recently suggested that even gay men—the most self-proclaimed relativistic group of them all—in fact have to learn “how to be gay” (the amusing title of his latest book) by adopting pre-existing elements of gay culture like diva-worship, drag, and fashion. Similarly, manhood of any persuasion cannot ever be constructed solely by the individual, much less the

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individual adolescent; it is imperceptibly formed and guided by social organizations in our society. The reality is that the human tendency is to look up, not around, for building blocks for identity and character, and despite all its flaws, Scouting provides one of the better models for the 'good man' in our culture. However, this status also makes its condemnation of homosexuality all the more regrettable.

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Scouting has much to offer for all boys, but especially for underserved or low-income boys, who are removed from other forms of societal success. For these boys, scouting serves as a play-world in which their words and actions matter, even if they don't in the real world. It becomes a spring of confidence for boys otherwise dismissed as immature or socially isolated. Youth of any background are not taken seriously in our society, and Boy Scouts seeks to support them in that respect, albeit it by pseudo-seriousness.

There's a kernel of truth in BSA's claim that the values of heroism and self-reliance have been abandoned in the name of tolerance, at great expense for our youth. However, these two value structures—namely the conservative, character-based side and the liberal, tolerance-based side—though often set in opposition, are both distinctly American and need not conflict. In the struggle for a better America for these youth, liberals advocating for the dissolution of BSA have forgotten the youth themselves, whose benefit has always been BSA's unwavering focus.

The efforts of BSA reformers to salvage the group from within shows just how conflicted our culture is about its own values. Yet, for me personally, the question is simple: Would I be a better or worse version of myself if I had not been through scouting? Ask any scout you know, whether gay, straight, liberal, or conservative, and his answer will undoubtedly be 'worse.' I have no doubt that Boy Scouts could have made me into an even better version of myself by supporting my homosexuality, but for me it is fundamentally worth supporting anyway.



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I can't say for sure, but I expect that when I get off the bus at 37th street to help out the new Cub Scout pack at the U of C charter school Donoghue campus, my sexuality is going to be the last thing on my mind. When scouting has the potential to change a boy's life for the better, I refuse to put politics first. That's Scout's honor if I ever saw it.

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