

The New York Times

ROOM *for* DEBATE

Free to Discriminate

7.19.12 | Ilya Shapiro

I had no idea what my scoutmasters' sexual orientation was when I was a Boy Scout, and I'm pretty sure I didn't care. This was in Canada, where the scouts have since gone co-ed — too bad, given the great brotherhood aspect to the program I knew — but still I don't know how a gay scoutmaster would've been any different from a straight one.

It's not like we learned first-date etiquette along with the knot-tying, or earned badges for pickup lines to go along with those for foreign-language acumen. We did have plenty of instruction in interpersonal relations, of course: a scout is always patient and kind and respectful, particularly to his elders.

As a private organization, the Boy Scouts of America has the right to make the wrong decision. And to uphold it in the face of logic.

I still try to live by the Boy Scout creed, to be courteous to others and develop my own potential, to try to leave the world a better place than I found it and otherwise be a good human being. But I can't imagine that gay scoutmasters would be any better or worse at imbuing those traits — or at canoeing or building fires, for that matter.

That's why it saddened me to hear that the Boy Scouts of America is continuing its policy of excluding gays, not just from adult leadership but from youth membership. What kind of message does it send to hormone-addled adolescents discovering that they're gay (or that their friends are) when an organization central to their identity turns out not to want them?

The scouts are fully within their rights to maintain that exclusive policy — private groups should be able to discriminate on whatever basis they wish — but it's a shame that many Americans associate scouting with that constitutionally protected policy instead of the organization's valuable core mission of providing a unique space where boys can grow and develop into honorable men.

[Ilya Shapiro](#) is a senior fellow in constitutional studies at the Cato Institute and the editor in chief of the Cato Supreme Court Review.