

Social conservatives formally trotted out their latest stunt to "save" marriage—an amendment to the U.S. Constitution—during a news conference July 12 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. They tried to wrap it in language of moderation and "letting the people decide," but opponents call it "a nuclear bomb."

The effort is being led by the Alliance for Marriage, ostensibly a diverse coalition of individuals. But behind it are ties to James Dobson, his Focus on the Family and other socially conservative organizations. The executive director is Matt Daniels, formally associated with the Massachusetts Family Institute, which is preoccupied with the homosexual "threat" to marriage.

The amendment is simple enough: "Marriage in the United States shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman. Neither this constitution or the constitution of any state, nor state or federal law, shall be construed to require that marital status or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon unmarried couples or groups."

It mirrors anti-gay marriage amendments to state constitutions that conservatives have pushed in several states. Even though the amendment would inject the federal government into an area that heretofore has been exclusively a state matter, Daniels claimed, "The traditional autonomy of state legislatures on family law matters is preserved by the text of the amendment."

He said the alliance is protecting U.S. citizens from activist courts that are "distorting" existing law in order to promote a gay marriage agenda. The amendment would return power to the people to decide this issue.

"Our nation cannot go forward unless our laws send a positive message to children about marriage, family and their future," Daniels said. The amendment, he added, would help solve the problems of divorce, abuse, drug use and others that wrack U.S. families.

Walter Fauntroy, a Baptist minister and former congressional representative for the District of Columbia, said the worst thing besetting people of African descent throughout the world is "the pandemic of fatherless families that is sweeping our nation today. If we don't do something about it, we will soon be back to slavery," which was "based upon the destruction of the nuclear family."

Fauntroy called marriage "an institution which defines sexual activity as having a dual purpose, procreation and recreation, and not recreation alone." Presumably, he would deny marriage to all post-menopausal women.

Fauntroy claimed, "I am by no means abandoning my lifelong commitment to protecting the

A MORE PERFECT UNION?

Conservatives push constitutional amendment to "protect" marriage

by Bob Roehr



The Alliance for Marriage announces its remedy for to the destruction of the nuclear family

civil rights of all citizens, gay and straight, and of every race, creed and color on this planet." He said sexual minorities could "enter into binding contracts. But that right does not extend to the right to redefine the institution of marriage for the purpose of legalizing a lifestyle that one has chosen."

In 1983, Fauntroy opposed letting a gay person speak at an anniversary celebration of the 1963 civil rights March on Washington. He equated gay rights with "penguin rights."

Alliance members were not willing to talk about when the amendment might be introduced in Congress or by whom. And despite all of the talk, none seemed to be able to answer a basic question from reporters: How would this amendment help heterosexual marriages?

Perhaps that is why the event got so little ink. As CBS Radio commentator Dave Ross said, the amendment seems to come down to, "We don't care who you marry or how long it lasts, so long as the sexes are opposite."

The Human Rights Campaign organized a

news conference across the lobby of the press club to respond to the earlier gathering. Spokesman David Smith said the alliance "is intending to write out gay and lesbian families from the U.S. Constitution."

Donna Payne, an HRC field organizer, acknowledged the problems facing U.S. families. "What is needed is solutions, not scapegoats," she said. "They mistakenly think that

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'pro-family' is a synonym for 'anti-gay.'" She said the amendment "would create a constitutionally mandated second class of American citizens" and urged a celebration of families in all of their diversity.

"I just don't understand the reason for all of the sound and fury," said Elder Michael Van Zant of Faith Temple Evangelical Church. "It is obvious that these threats to heterosexual marriage and family are not homosexual unions but rather the conduct and behavior of heterosexuals in and out of their heterosexual unions."

Leslie Watson, Equal Partners in Faith interim director, added, "As people of faith, we

actively oppose the manipulation of religion to promote inequality and exclusion." She evoked the language of the Declaration of Independence calling for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for all U.S. citizens. She said each religion should be free to decide what constitutes marriage within its own tradition.

"Most of the anti-gay attacks in Congress are legal equivalents of sticks and stones," said Christopher Anders of the American Civil Liberties Union. "This amendment is the legal equivalent of a nuclear bomb. It will wipe every single line protecting gay and lesbian families and other unmarried couples."

He said it would "invalidate all state and local domestic partnership laws," even in those states that have passed a gay civil rights bill. It would prohibit state and local governments from offering domestic partner benefits to employees and "undermine" adoption and guardianship laws, including hospital visitation and decision making.

Anders turned to last fall's vice presidential debate in which Dick Cheney said, "People should be free to enter into any kind of relationship they want to enter into." He continued by noting that marriage is an issue where states might come to "different conclusions...I don't think that there should necessarily be a federal policy in this area...I think we ought to do everything we can to tolerate and accommodate whatever kind of relationships people want to enter into."

The alliance claimed the amendment would not affect the gay civil unions enacted in Vermont or domestic partner laws. "I don't know whether that is a purposeful misstatement or they don't understand the language that they're putting forward," Anders said, but "the legal incidents of marriage" include benefits that have been conferred through domestic partnership and other laws.

Anders called the amendment "a more extreme measure than the Defense of Marriage Act," which sailed through Congress in 1996. He is afraid politicians might sign on before they realize how extreme it is, thus making it more difficult to change their minds later on.

Passage would "deprive states of having that traditional role" of being a laboratory for family law and civil rights issues, he said. "Every single federal civil rights law has always allowed the states to develop stronger civil rights laws. But this takes states out of the picture entirely."

Smith said HRC has not seen "any evidence that this is a viable effort" in Congress, although the organization will continue to monitor things closely. ■

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