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NATIONAL news

POPPING THE QUESTION

Bush, Democrats dance around marriage amendment by Bob Roehr



President Bush doesn't know if the Federal Marriage Amendment is necessary yet

Social conservatives are trying to make gay marriage a wedge issue during the next election cycle, but the politicians whose names will be on the ballot seem to be resisting the effort.

The Federal Marriage Amendment would amend the Constitution to state that marriage "shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman."

Anti-gay leaders took heart when Republican Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee voiced his support for the amendment on a June 29 television appearance. But any momentum that the comments might have generated seemed to dissipate during the long Fourth of July weekend.

Nobody was surprised when President Bush said he supported "the notion that marriage is between a man and a woman" at a July 2 media event. What did surprise listeners was his downplaying of the need for a constitutional amendment to guarantee that fact.

"I don't know if it's necessary yet," Bush said. "Let's let the lawyers look at the full ramifications of the recent Supreme Court hearing."

The delivery had a natural, off-the-cuff flow to it, but most observers believe those lines represented a carefully crafted message that offered something to Bush's conservative political base without alienating moderate voters in the political center.

The leading Democratic political figures, including presidential candidate Howard Dean and U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., are a reverse image of that, gliding round gay marriage with equal finesse. They vociferously support the concept of legal equality for gay unions but studiously assert that does not include the word "marriage."

The semantic game rests upon the principle of "separate but equal" that proved not to work when it came to racial matters. None of the politicians have explained why it should work with matters of sexual orientation.

Even social conservatives are not united in the need for the amendment. "Honestly, I don't think we need any congressional legislation," said Phyllis Schlafly, president of the Eagle Forum.

None of the social conservative's leading lights in Congress have embraced the House version of the amendment as co-sponsors since it was introduced in 2001.

U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., has not taken the opportunity to introduce a companion bill in the Senate. As U.S. Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., told *The New York Times*, "Regardless of

how you feel about gay marriage, I don't know that it's a good idea to put it in the Constitution."

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a nominal Republican, warned party officials not to condemn same-sex unions in the platform that they unveil at their convention in his city.

Recent appointments of gay-friendly politicos to senior positions within the Republican Party and Bush's re-election committee increase the odds that Bloomberg's advice will be heeded. Those include Ed Gillespie and Maria Cino to the top two party slots and Marc Racicot to lead the re-election effort. Mary Cheney, the lesbian daughter of Dick Cheney, leads her father's re-election efforts.

The Washington Post offered its support for recognizing gay couples in a July 5 editorial. "Society as a whole is made stronger when couples—whether opposite-sex or same-sex—cement their love and their commitment in legally sanctioned unions."

The newspaper was "distressed" by Frist's embrace of the proposed constitutional amendment. "Changing the Constitution in this way would be an unwise and unnecessary intrusion of the federal government into what is a quintessential state matter."

So it is perhaps ironic that the latest victim of the far right's jihad against gay marriage might be the president of the Family Research Council. After three years on the job, Ken Connor quietly announced his resignation July 3, giving just 10 days notice and no good reason save for the generic "professional and personal reasons."

The question is, did he jump or was he pushed? And was it because he was not sufficiently anti-gay? Perhaps Connor, an attorney, read the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on sodomy and decided the anti-gay gig was up.

In a strange way, the uproar now over gay marriage might be the best thing that could happen. Perhaps it will act like a vaccination, inoculating the American public to the idea so that when gay marriage really does come to the United States, probably within the month through a decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Court, the body politic will be better able to handle the idea. **JR**

To fight the FEDERAL MARRIAGE AMENDMENT visit DontAmend.com, which promises to be the largest online gay mobilization in history. The Web site is the brainchild of Robin Tyler and John Aravosis, who co-founded the successful StopDrLaura.com campaign.

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