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NATIONAL news

NATIONAL

Conservative leader Paul Weyrich believes President Bush should shift the focus of his re-election campaign from the war on Iraq to the Federal Marriage Amendment, The Associated Press reported June 1.



Paul Weyrich

"If [Bush] wishes to be re-elected, then he better be upfront on this issue, because if the election is solely on Iraq, we'll be talking about President Kerry," he said. "If he wants to change the subject—which if I were president I would certainly want to do—then I think he would be well-advised, in fact, to take the leadership on this particular point."

Human Rights Campaign president Cheryl Jacques urged Bush-Cheney '04 campaign manager Ken Mehlman to reject Weyrich's recommendation. "This kind of cynical advice...further illustrates that the movement behind the FMA is not about 'protecting marriage' but about partisan electoral politics," she wrote in a letter sent June 2.

The Senate Republican leadership is aiming for a mid-July vote on the amendment, forcing Democrats to take a stand on the controversial topic just before the party heads to Boston for its presidential nominating convention. Bush reaffirmed his support for the marriage ban during an interview with religion reporters and editors May 26.

"This dialogue needs to be a dialogue worthy of a nation and worthy of a debate over a constitutional amendment," he said. "And it's a very important discussion. And it's one that should not be politicized. It should be debated in a very profound way. Politicized means, put it in a context of a real process which to me will change the debate from where it needs to be. You don't want people making up their mind whether or not this benefits a candidate or not. You want people making up their mind on this issue about whether it benefits America—in the long term for America, I think is the best way to put it."

Bush also underscored the lack of groundswell support for the amendment. "I will tell you the prairie fire necessary to get an amendment passed is simmering at best...I'm not sure people quite understand the issue yet."

The Office of Special Counsel—the federal agency responsible for investigating workplace discrimination—has failed to fully reinstate protections from bias based on sexual orientation.

Following pressure from several politicians, the agency issued a press release in April asserting that "it is the policy of this administration that discrimination in the federal work force on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited." However, the nondiscrimination directives have not yet been restored on the office's Web site, and several of the agency's actions since April have sparked concern among federal employees.

U.S. Reps. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y.; Barney Frank, D-Mass.; George Miller and Henry Waxman, D-Calif.; and Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., sent a letter June 1 to special counsel Scott Bloch about the lack of evidence that his office has genuinely reversed its policy of ignoring the rights of gay, lesbian and bi federal employees.

"Mr. Bloch is continuing his right-wing assault on the rights of gay and lesbian federal employees," Engel said. "The White House issued a statement publicly opposing Mr. Bloch's policy after it became well-known, but considering he is still employed and using his authority to subvert federal law, I am concerned that the president is allowing Mr. Bloch's homophobic agenda to move forward."

The office has reportedly ordered all discrimination complaints to be assigned to political appointees instead of career employees. It has also issued a gag order preventing staff from discussing its nondiscrimination policy.

The National Black Justice Coalition convened May 28 in Washington, D.C., for its first physical board meeting since the organization's inception in December 2003.

Among the strategies and ideas discussed, the coalition solidified a July launch date for an advertising campaign aimed at African American newspapers featuring black gay and lesbian couples and their families. The areas targeted include New York/New Jersey, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Birmingham, Ala.



U.S. Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., criticized a Bush administration official for failing to protect gay federal employees from discrimination

NEW YORK

A New York state court ruled June 10 in favor of same-sex marriage because denying gays and lesbians the right to wed goes against equal protection measures in the state's constitution, Reuters reported.

"This marks the first official step in the march toward full equality for gays and lesbians in New York state," attorney E. Joshua Rosenkranz said. "The court has ruled that same-sex couples have not just some of the same rights, and a modicum of legal protection from blatant discrimination, but full equality in the eyes of the law. It is the first time that any court in this state has declared that same-sex couples have the same rights, same status and same dignity as every other citizen. If history is any guide, this is the beginning of an unstoppable trend in New York."

The New Paltz Justice Court also threw out charges that the town's mayor, Jason West, violated the law by marrying dozens of same-sex couples in February without licenses. "With remarkably clear vision, the...court has seen what anyone who has approached the question thoughtfully knows to be the truth: that there's no fair reason for keeping same-sex couples from marrying," said James Esseks, litigation director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project.

Lambda Legal urged Geico Insurance on June 14 to comply with state law and respect valid marriages of all same-sex couples in determining car insurance rates and coverage. During the past few months, the New York-based company has recognized the marriages of some same-sex couples and denied recognition to others.

Two New York couples who were married in Canada have been treated unequally by the insurance giant in their auto coverage. Martin Farach-Colton and his spouse recently received written confirmation from the statewide underwriter that their marriage would be respected by Geico and that the two men could share Farach-Colton's policy just like any married heterosexual couple. But Geico refused to recognize the marriage of Thomas Hroncich and his spouse, which could require the couple to pay hundreds of dollars more annually in premiums to receive the same level of insurance coverage.

"New York law says that marriages validly performed elsewhere must be respected here," attorney Alphonso David said. "Geico is breaking the law by denying Mr. Hroncich and his spouse benefits that the insurer provides to its other married policyholders. Geico must stop its practice of randomly recognizing some married gay or lesbian couples but not all of its married gay or lesbian policyholders."



From left, National Black Justice Coalition board members Alexander Robinson, Irene Monroe, Donna Payne, Mandy Carter, Jasmynne Cannick, Sylvia Rhue and Keith Boykin meet May 28 in Washington, D.C.