

northwest

Honestly, Gordon

Sen. Smith's 'moderate' stance scrutinized

by Jaymee R. Cuti

U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., has positioned himself as a friend of the gays. Certainly, he's a friend of the Human Rights Campaign, which has described his slate of gay rights bills as "heroic."

Some of these stances—legal recognition for same-sex relationships, for example—aren't controversial in a Democratically led Congress. Others are downright pioneering coming from a member of the Republican Party.

"You only need to look to his long-standing support of hate crime legislation and his close relationship with Judy Shepard to see his commitment on a range of issues is not just sincere but has a long history," said Joe Solmonese, executive director of HRC.

Smith has been the lead Republican on two health benefits acts, including the Domestic Partnership Benefits and Obligations Act, which grants partners of federal employees the same benefits as spouses married to federal employees. He is the lead Republican on the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which adds sexual orientation and gender identity to existing federal Hate Crimes law. He is the author of the Early Treatment for HIV Act, which he reintroduced last month with U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y. Smith is also a sponsor of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA).

But with Smith's seat clearly in Democratic sights for 2008, some queer voters are skeptical of his motives, recalling his vote for the Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA) in 2006. Smith has said he would vote the same way again if the opportunity arose.

Still, for voters with an eye beyond queer civil rights issues, Smith's record is markedly conservative. His pro-life view earned him a 15 percent approval rating with the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, and he was rated 14 percent with the National League of Conservation Voters, a group that has always endorsed Smith's opponents. He supported sending more troops to Iraq as late as December 2006; he called for U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft to overturn Oregon's Death with Dignity law; he voted to support drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; he voted for all of the Bush

administration's tax cuts benefiting the wealthy; and he was a chief sponsor of a bill to give a one-year tax break to multinational corporations that have money tied up in overseas tax havens.

Terry Bean, a founding member of HRC who sits on the board of directors, considers Smith a friend. Bean has been credited with enlightening the senator on gay issues. He had this to say on Smith's support for sexual minorities: "Of course I'm very disappointed with his FMA vote, and I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat and I'm so pleased that we have Democrats in the majority in the Senate. It's making an enormous difference for GLBT rights. Having said that, there is no Republican and maybe only one or two Democrats who have taken as many leadership roles on GLBT issues that Sen. Smith has. I truly believe his work on this has been from his heart and not for any political gains on these issues."

Smith spoke with *Just Out* by phone from his Washington, D.C., office about whether he has earned the gay vote.

Jaymee R. Cuti: There was a time when Lon Mabon of the Oregon Citizens Alliance said the two of you were on the same page regarding the immorality of homosexuality. Was there a certain experience that shaped the future support you gave to gay rights issues?

Gordon Smith: Lon Mabon has never spoken for me. I had the good fortune to develop a friendship with Terry Bean. I told him how uncomfortable I was with the way I was viewed with the gay and lesbian community and I had also hired as the legislative director Rob Epplin, who is a gay man, and I began to ask questions of Terry and Rob. I felt in my heart to listen and learn and lead in a different direction.

JRC: Some wonder if you are courting the gay community as part of a re-election strategy. How would you respond to those suspicious of your commitment to gay rights issues?

GS: I support a number of causes and communities that do not vote for me. I support them because I believe that their causes are right. I don't know how large or small the gay community is in Oregon, but I have it in my heart and backbone to

help them with many of their causes and concerns, and I hope that my votes will speak louder than I can, because they stand the test of time.

JRC: Why did you feel it necessary to vote for the Federal Marriage Amendment?

GS: From the outset of my conversations with Terry Bean and Rob Epplin and many others in the gay community, I made clear that to be true to them, I couldn't be untrue to myself. I will admit to being a traditionalist and an idealist, and I believe that marriage is defined traditionally as an ideal that has many societal benefits. It's an ideal that I feel in my bones to preserve, but let me say clearly and loudly, that does not mean in any way that children cannot be

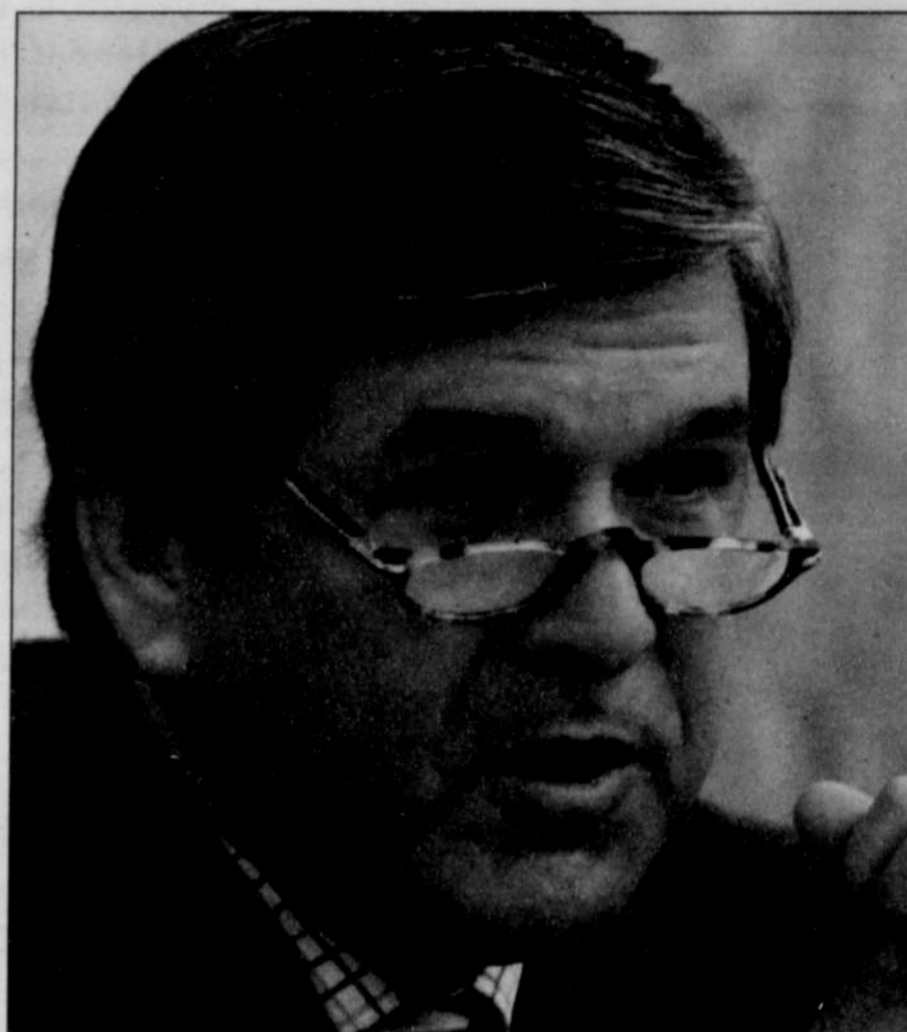
raised successfully and nurtured lovingly in non-traditional families. There is abundant evidence to that, and that's why I support gays and lesbians being able to adopt, why I believe we need to strengthen family law. That's why I have signed on to a whole range of legislation that protects and defends nontraditional families.

JRC: If the FMA came up again, would you vote the same way?

GS: Yes.

JRC: Do you support civil unions? What is your position on House Bill 2007, Oregon's civil unions bill?

GS: I would want to see the language in a civil union bill, but there are many that I could support. I haven't read [HB 2007] and I don't know any of its details, but I support the concept. I will leave that bill to the judgment of my state colleagues and not endorse or in any way denounce it.



U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., weighs in on issues relevant to gays and lesbians.

U.S. SENATE PHOTOGRAPHY OFFICE

JRC: Queer voters have more than one issue on their minds. Your voting record with regard to a range of issues is very conservative. Do you feel that you represent the views of Oregon progressives?

GS: I hope I represent the view of Oregon's majority. If you look at my votes for hate crimes, for ENDA, for stem cell research, for family planning funding internationally, for school clinic funding, for mental health parity—yes, I am a conservative, but I am also a centrist.

JRC: Is there anything else you'd like *Just Out* readers to know?

GS: I hope, whether I get their votes or not, that they will know I'm their friend and my door, my heart, my mind is open to their concerns. I think what's important is that what I said I would do, I have done. Where I said I couldn't go, I have not gone. I have been honest with the gay and lesbian community of Oregon. **JO**

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