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Opinion Home
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E The People

Front Page
News

Sports

The Buzz

Go Healthy

Entertainment

Business

Community

Photo Gallery

Special Features

Audio

Archives

Shortcuts

Special Features

9/11 & Beyond

Casino Watch

Obituaries

Columnists

Outdoors

Weddings

Engagements

Births

Mortgage Rates

Weather

TV Listings

Movies

Horoscope

Crossword

Site Map

Classifieds

Homefinder

Record Jobs

Autofinder

Dining

Personals

Reservations

Customer Care

January 23, 2004

Marriage advice from Uncle Sam

The president wants to decide who can get married – and help them stay that way.

One would think that a president trying to reshape two oppressive Middle Eastern nations into democracies without losing the lives of hundreds more American soldiers while simultaneously leading a worldwide battle against terrorism, even as the United States faces record budget deficits, tens of thousands of Americans can't find jobs and millions have no health insurance would be far too busy to go messing around in people's private lives.

Not George W. Bush. This president, after all, doesn't let the details deter him. He admittedly doesn't read the papers and depends on his aides to fill him in on the important stuff – like whether to attack Iraq. So it's possible he doesn't realize what a full plate he has.

That could explain why, undoubtedly on the advice of his top political advisers, Bush announced in his State of the Union address that he would support a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages if the courts did not.

In a clear bid for votes from social conservatives, the president launched his re-election campaign by saying he would make it the government's business to "defend the sanctity of marriage." He would do this by denying states the right to decide for themselves whether to recognize gay marriages, as Massachusetts has done.

So, denying state's rights and denying individuals the right to be in a loving, legal relationship of their own choosing is now to be considered conservative philosophy? Whatever happened to less government is better government?

The president and some conservative groups define this as a family-values issue. Giving gays the right to marry and enjoy the same legal rights as heterosexual married couples is seen by them as a blow against "traditional" marriage. But today's tradition is tomorrow's quaint memory. Besides, it is not at all clear how redefining marriage poses a threat to the security of the nation if one presumes that all people, regardless of gender, enter into marriage because of feelings of love and respect for each other.

It must be noted that, thankfully, not all Republicans share their president's view on same-sex marriages. Rep. Sue Kelly, R-Katonah, for example, says she has "no problem with it."

"It's not my business," she told this paper's editorial board recently. Asked about the suggested constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages, she replied, "The government should not be involved in this."

No, it shouldn't. In fact, we're not sure the government

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should be involved in another program the president is reportedly considering to help low-income Americans preserve their marriages.

Bush is said to be thinking about a \$1.5 billion marriage (and pre-marriage) counseling program to help low-income couples stay married. The thought is that well-off couples can afford to get help or manage to split with less harm. The research supporting the damage from divorce, especially for children in poor families, is unassailable. But there is absolutely no proof the government can manage to repair thousands of broken marriages. Nor that it can afford to try.

It makes sense to put more government support behind teen pregnancy, preschool and job-training programs, all of which will help poor Americans get a better foothold on the societal rung and, maybe, be part of a successful marriage. The more successful marriages there are, the more stable the nation will be as a whole.

But that doesn't mean the marriages have to be strictly heterosexual or that the government needs to spend millions to remind people that maintaining healthy marriages is a good thing. We'd rather the president spent his time getting rid of that deficit, which threatens to rob future generations of opportunities that can lead to more stable relationships.

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