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Gay Marriage: Are Some Conservatives Ready to Surrender?

Is the battle against same-sex marriage already lost? With homosexual marriage now legal in Massachusetts and with momentum toward legalization now spreading across the nation, homosexual advocates are increasingly confident that victory is in sight. Now, some conservatives are beginning to wonder if the gay activists might be right. Christopher Caldwell, writing in The Financial Times, notes the momentum of the gay rights movement as it achieved its great victory in Massachusetts. "In gaining full legal marriage rights in an important state, American gays have effected the quickest transition from pariah status to protected status in the history of civil rights movements." Caldwell, a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, appears certain that same-sex marriage is now an established social reality.

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A similar case is made by Max Boot, senior fellow at the Counsel on Foreign Relations. A keen observer of social trends, Boot argues that opposition to same-sex marriage is "another lost cause for the social conservatives." Also writing in The Financial Times, Boot argues, "For decades, social conservatives in the U.S. have been fighting and losing culture wars. Contraception and abortion—once taboo topics—have been enshrined in the law. The rates of pre-marital sex, out-of-wedlock births and divorce have soared since the 1950's. In school, prayer is out, sex education is in. On television, characters used to say 'gee whiz' and sleep in twin beds; now they curse as if they had Tourette's syndrome and flash skin as if they were Gypsy Rose Lee."

Together, both Caldwell and Boot would counsel fellow conservatives to throw in the towel on the issue of homosexual marriage. The end of this debate is already decided, concludes Boot, who argues "there is little mystery about how the latest culture war over gay marriage will turn out." Really? "Opponents of same-sex marriages may have public opinion on their side for now, but they have all but lost this battle. How do I know? Simply by examining the arguments on both sides."

Boot goes on to argue that the advocates of same-sex marriage "speak in the powerful language of civil rights and liken their cause to that of African Americans fighting anti-miscegenation laws in years past."

Opposition to same-sex marriage, Boot asserts, is rooted only in theology. "At one time the case would have been open and shut: sodomy is a sin, period. Many may still believe that, but that is no longer a tenable argument in our secularized politics."

According to Boot, conservatives are losing the same-sex marriage debate because the culture will eventually buy the argument that this is about civil rights, not about morality. Once a movement gains civil rights status in the public mind, victory is ultimately assured, he reflects. Beyond this, Boot points to a desensitization of the culture on issues of

homosexuality in general. Once newspapers began carrying homosexual wedding announcements and television began featuring a plethora of homosexual characters, the homosexual lifestyle became mainstreamed and thus accepted. As Boot comments, "Same-sex kisses, once shockingly daring, are now as common on TV as commercials for Levitra or Prozac."

Christopher Caldwell, on the other hand, traces acceptance of same-sex marriage to the AIDS crisis. According to Caldwell's analysis, AIDS functioned as a force to bring the homosexual community together into a potent political force. Furthermore, the tragedy of AIDS also transformed homosexuals into a victim group, and public sympathy quickly followed.

Are Boot and Caldwell right? Is opposition to same-sex marriage already a lost cause? We must certainly hope not, for the redefinition of marriage will effectively destroy the central organizing unit of society. In a day of rampant moral relativism and social experimentation, Americans have been engaged in a free-for-all exercise in cultural revolution. But when the experiment is directed at marriage, the fallout is sure to be uniquely tragic. The legalization and cultural acceptance of same-sex marriage will mean, ultimately, the destruction of marriage itself. Without a coherent vision of marriage, the entire society will eventually find itself completely unable to regulate sexual behavior or personal relationships.

What happens when the next "sexual lifestyle" gains civil rights status? Those who charge that even raising such a question is scare-mongering, must face the simple fact that the question is unavoidable. Intellectual honesty demands that we recognize the fact that acceptance of same-sex marriage implies—to anyone who has even the slightest commitment to intellectual integrity—the acceptance of any adult consensual sexual lifestyle as legitimate and ultimately deserving of legalized status.

The arguments presented by Caldwell and Boot reflect a deeper problem at the very heart of the conservative movement in America. In some sense, both writers—associated with a generally conservative perspective—actually celebrate the advent of same-sex marriage. "The good news from the conservative point of view, is that it is unlikely that legalizing gay marriage will make much difference to the lives of most people," Boot claims. He also asserts that same-sex marriage "will have a considerably less corrosive effect on society than the prevalence of, say, divorce."

Caldwell goes even further, arguing that "something admirable in the national character is pushing Americans towards gay marriage." The Weekly Standard identifies itself with American conservatism, and the magazine has arguably become the nation's most influential periodical presenting conservative arguments and analysis. Furthermore, it has officially endorsed the Federal Marriage Amendment. What should we make of the fact that a senior editor at The Weekly Standard celebrates the legalization of same-sex marriage in the pages of The Financial Times? What does this tell us about the future of the conservative movement?

These developments indicate something of an ideological divide within American conservatism. Increasingly, neo-conservatives committed to conservative thought on political and economic matters are divided from traditional conservatives who refuse to accept same-sex marriage, or homosexuality in general, as worthy of legalization and normalization.

To the contrary, authentic conservatives have long understood the necessity of conserving institutions and patterns of life that protect human happiness and the welfare of society. Those who argue that an institution as fundamental as marriage can be redefined to accept same-sex relationships are fooling themselves—and they are certainly not conservatives.

For years, analysts on the left have predicted an eventual breakup of the conservative movement, with moral conservatives and economic conservatives dividing over basic issues of ideology and worldview. Though many of the economic and political conservatives appreciate President George W. Bush for his assertive foreign policy and leadership on the war on terror, they are frankly embarrassed by his embrace of Christian conservatives, his pro-life policies, and his advocacy for a Federal Marriage Amendment defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

These same tensions were present even as the new conservative alignment came together in the campaign to elect Ronald Reagan to the presidency. For the first time, social and economic conservatives were united in one candidate who boldly cast a vision that included both wings of the conservative movement. Looking back at the Reagan administration, it is clear that two different visions of conservatism were often in conflict, even within the administration itself.

The same is now true of the conservative movement today, and any effort by economic conservatives to push social conservatives out of positions of influence and policy-making will spell disaster for American conservatism, the Republican Party, and the reelection hopes of President George W. Bush. Max Boot, Christopher Caldwell, and their colleagues may be right. Nevertheless, most of us are not willing to declare surrender yet—not by a long shot. There is much work to be done and much ground to be gained, but we must do our very best to awaken the American conscience and reshape the debate. The cost of losing this debate is too tragic to calculate, and the moral cost of surrender is too great to bear. Throwing in the towel is just not an option.

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