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President Bush and the War on the Family

As Eugene McCarthy once quipped: "Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game and stupid enough to think it's important." Of course, McCarthy was only half right, for, when dealing with the most significant issues of life, the political game can be supremely important.

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As Eugene McCarthy once quipped: "Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game and stupid enough to think it's important." Of course, McCarthy was only half right, for, when dealing with the most significant issues of life, the political game can be supremely important.

Such is now the case, with the issue of same-sex marriage posing a direct threat to the integrity of civilization itself. As a species, politicians are inclined to run from divisive issues rather than to risk alienating any constituency. But no politician will be able to hide from the issue of same-sex marriage—not with city mayors and local politicians now joining the fray. We will soon know where virtually every office holder or candidate stands on this important issue.

The Washington Times reports that Christian conservatives are increasingly frustrated with President George W. Bush for what many see as a failure of presidential leadership on this issue. In "Evangelicals Frustrated by Bush," reporter Ralph P. Hallow reported that the conservatives have a long list of grievances, "but right now social conservatives are mad over what many consider the president's failure to strongly condemn illegal homosexual 'marriages' being performed in San Francisco under the authority of Mayor Gavin Newsom." According to Howell, many conservative leaders have responded with "apoplexy" over the President's failure to show decisive leadership on the issue. One evangelical leader was quoted as saying, "I am just furious over what's going on in California and over what the President is not doing in California." This leader suggested that the President "should pick up the phone and call [California Republican Governor] Arnold [Schwarzenegger] and tell him we want action against the rogue mayor who is breaking the law."

Two conservative activists cited by name in the article, Robert H. Knight and Sandy Rios of Concerned Women for America, openly criticized the President and his administration for failing to stop Mayor Newsom's act of civil disobedience in San Francisco. Both predicted big trouble for President Bush in this year's upcoming presidential election.

"It's not just economic conservatives upset by runaway federal spending that he's having trouble with," said Knight, director of CWA's Culture and Family Institute. "I think his biggest problem will be social conservatives who are not motivated to work for the ticket and to ensure their fellow Christians get to the polling booth." Rios, CWA's president, said the conservative activist "can't possibly guarantee a large turn out of evangelical Christian voters if he does not do what is morally right and take leadership on this issue as he did on the war," referring to the war in Iraq.

Conservative activists began sending similar warnings much earlier in the Bush administration. Ken Connor, former president of the Family Research Council [affiliated with James Dobson's Focus on the Family] threw down a gauntlet: "If Republican leaders cannot mount a vigorous defense of marriage, then pro-family voters perhaps should begin to reconsider their loyalty to the party."

Back in 2003, many conservative Christian leaders were upset when Mark Racicot, then chairman of the Republican Party, met with a group from the Human Rights Campaign, a prominent homosexual rights organization. In a memo sent to other conservative leaders, Connor raised the following question: "Have Republicans been so intimidated by the smear tactics of the homosexual lobby and its democratic attack dogs that they are cowering in silence?"

The fracas with the White House has also caught the attention of Christianity Today. In its weblog column posted February 20, writer Ted Olsen tried to put the issue in perspective. “A candidate’s core constituency is always going to complain that they’re not getting enough, or not being paid enough attention, or that one comment (or lack thereof) is going to cause people to change parties or to stay home and protest,” Olsen explained. “It’s a way of keeping the candidate in line. In this case, it’s an effort to get Bush to make a strong statement of support for a constitutional amendment against gay marriage.”

Olsen’s analysis is fundamentally right—he has caught the essence of the political process in postmodern America. Politicians (in this case the President of the United States), and political activist groups (in this case conservative Christian organizations) perform an intricate dance in order to achieve their own aims and purposes. It isn’t always pretty to watch.

In this case, conservative Christian leaders had better be careful, lest they overplay their hand. Evangelical leaders risk looking foolish—indeed almost irrational—when they suggest that conservative Christians might consider a future with John Kerry as president preferable to a second Bush administration. Of course, these conservative leaders are careful not to state this point directly, but their innuendos and threats could serve to disillusion their core constituency as much as they are attempting to intimidate the White House.

As quoted in *The Washington Times*, Gary Bauer [once president of Family Research Council and a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000] expressed something like conservative angst over the fact that cultural decline has not been reversed in three years under President George Bush.

“I am not blaming the President,” Bauer reflected, “but religious conservatives have been doing politics for 25 years, and on every front, are worse off on things they care about. The gay rights movement is more powerful, the culture is more decadent, the life of not one baby has been saved, porn is in the living room, and you can’t watch the Super Bowl without your hand on the off switch.”

While I can identify with much of Bauer’s frustration, his statement is at dangerously exaggerated. Conservatives must not underestimate the importance of the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003, the first successful pro-life legislation since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. That legislation promises to save the lives of many babies, whose existence would be snuffed out just as they were being delivered from the womb.

Bauer’s other points are fully valid, and, even on the issue of abortion, a partial birth abortion ban is only a small step toward the recovery of human dignity and respect for human life.

Conservative Christian leaders are right to call for bolder and more effective political leadership on these issues—and they are right to address their concerns to President Bush and his administration. Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, rightly observes that “conservatives coalesce around strong leadership. That’s what motivates and energized them.”

At the same time, conservatives must realize that remedial progress in the face of America’s cultural decline will take much time—more time than any president will have in office, even if he serves two terms. A bit of historical perspective is in order, and we need to be reminded that America’s lurch to the left during the second half of the 20th century had its roots in the 1920s, and only gained cultural ascendancy with the crisis of the Great Depression and the breakdown of the Christian consensus which had been shared by the vast majority of Americans since the nation’s founding. The liberals were not always patient, but the smartest politicians among them recognized that battles may be won and lost in short order, but the war always goes on.

Christian conservatives must mount an enduring long-term movement to recapture the culture and to change the way millions of Americans think about the most important issues of life, meaning, and morality. We are right to call our politicians to account, and to expect that those who run on a platform of conservative moral values will put their careers on the line for this cause when they are in office.

President Bush has defined his presidency in terms of the war on terror. The events of 9/11 put that issue squarely on his agenda, and the President has shown bold leadership in this fight, recognizing that history will judge him by how he leads this nation through the trial of world terrorism.

The President and his advisors would do well to recognize that the war on the family is just as important as the war on terror, and may have even greater long term significance. President Bush has repeatedly and courageously spoken on behalf of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and he has indicated his willingness to lead an effort to do whatever is necessary—including an amendment to the U.S. Constitution—to protect civilization’s most basic institution.

President Bush shows a keen sense of historical awareness and understands that he does not want to be the president who goes down in history as the leader who lost the war on terror. He and his closest advisors need to ponder an even more ominous historical judgment—for the President who loses the war on marriage will surely go down in infamy.

President Bush can point to a solid record of judicial appointments. He has shown courage in dealing with issues of embryo ethics, human cloning, and medical research. He has endured constant criticism from the political left and the cultural elites. He has done far more than to give lip-service to conservative concerns and moral leadership. We have every reason to expect that this president will be fully committed as the nation’s leader in the defense of marriage against its enemies, both foreign and domestic. The clouds are gathering, the skies are darkening, and the enemies of marriage are on the march. Mr. President, the time for action is now.

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