

Bush Hits Hard at Gay Marriage

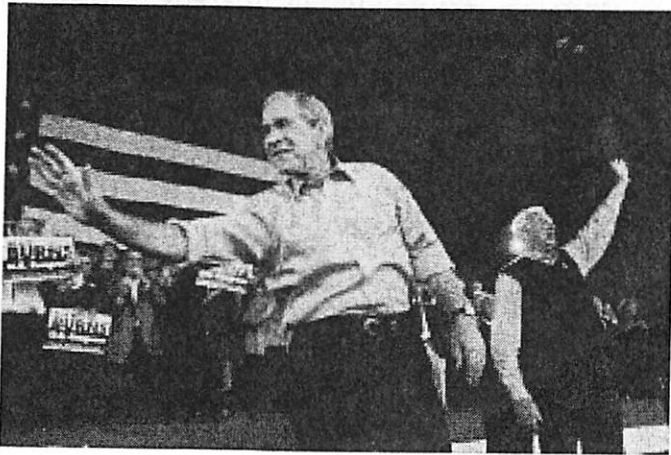
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STATESBORO, Ga. President Bush has for months cast the midterm elections as a choice about just two issues: taxes and terrorism. Now, with polls predicting bleak results for Republicans, he is trying to fire up his party by decrying gay marriage.

"For decades, activist judges have tried to redefine America by court order," Bush said Monday. "Just this last week in New Jersey, another activist court issued a ruling that raises doubt about the institution of marriage. We believe marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and should be defended."



The line earned Bush by far his most sustained applause at a rally of 5,000 people aimed at boosting former GOP Rep. Max Burns' effort to unseat a Democratic incumbent. In this conservative rural corner of eastern Georgia, even children jumped to their feet alongside their parents to cheer and clap for nearly 30 seconds — a near-eternity in political speechmaking.

The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples must be given all the benefits of married couples, leaving it up to the state Legislature to decide whether to extend those rights under the structure of marriage or something else.

One alternative, civil unions, is an idea Bush supports. But he ignored that on the way to portraying the New Jersey decision as the kind of thing America should do without.

"I believe I should continue to appoint judges who strictly interpret the law and not legislate from the bench," the president said, earning more applause in the sweltering basketball arena at Georgia Southern University. He pointed to his nominations to the Supreme Court of Chief Justice John Roberts and Samuel Alito.

The gay-marriage theme became a staple in Bush's political remarks last Thursday, the day after the New Jersey ruling on a touchstone issue for religious conservatives who are crucial to Republican electoral calculations. White House deputy press secretary Dana Perino said it was added merely to respond to the ruling — not because his other messages were failing to connect.

But the lines, repeated to great enthusiasm at a second rally later Monday in Texas, mark one of the only substantive changes in the president's stump speech as he turns from raising money for Republican candidates to encouraging the GOP faithful to vote Nov. 7.

To that end, he was focusing on the South.

After campaigning for Burns, trying to win back the seat conservative Democrat John Barrow took from him in 2004, Bush flew to the district vacated by former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas. DeLay resigned in June amid a series of investigations of his fundraising activities.

Organizers said Bush's appearance in a partially filled airport hangar in Sugar Land, Texas, drew over 6,000 to support Republican Shelley Sekula-Gibbs' write-in campaign to replace DeLay. The former Republican party star and Bush ally on Capitol Hill was nowhere to be seen, and the president never mentioned DeLay's name.

The election in the reliably conservative district outside Houston is complicated. Republicans were legally barred from replacing DeLay's name on the ballot. So supporters must choose Sekula-Gibbs

twice _ once for the special election filling out DeLay's term and again for the general election for the next Congress.

She faces former congressman Nick Lampson, who has outtraised and outspent her, giving Democrats a chance at a seat long in the GOP's hands. A Lampson victory would also be sweet revenge for an opposition party that DeLay fought at every turn while in office.

On Tuesday, Bush is heading back to Georgia, a state he twice won comfortably. Tuesday's rally, about 130 miles west of Statesboro, is aimed at helping another former GOP congressman, Mac Collins, oust Democratic Rep. Jim Marshall.

After Thursday, the president's schedule remains fluid, as his political advisers balance the need for help in tight races against the president's unpopularity.

Bush pleaded with Republicans not to give up on the election _ and mocked Democrats.

"You might remember that about this time in 2004, some of them were picking out their new offices in the West Wing," he said. "The movers never got the call."

Democrats ridiculed him back, for an itinerary that took him to once- solid Republican areas.

"Clearly President Bush is more of a liability than an asset as he's forced to stump for candidates in districts that were once considered safe for Republicans," said Democratic National Committee spokeswoman Stacie Paxton.

The president played down the idea that next Tuesday's vote is a referendum on his embattled presidency. "This is different from a presidential campaign because it's not necessarily a national election, in that each congressional race really depends upon the candidates and how they carry the message," he said in an interview on Fox News Channel's "Hannity & Colmes."

Bush also rejected the idea he'll become a lame duck after the elections. "I promise you I'm going to be president up until the very last day, and I've got a lot to do," he said.

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