

Is Clinton seeking gay-rights legacy?

By Joyce Howard Price
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Clinton's attendance at a homosexual banquet Saturday may signal that the president seeks to be remembered in history books as the champion of the "civil rights agenda of gay America," former Education Secretary William Bennett said yesterday.

In his speech, Mr. Clinton compared his attendance of the the homosexual rights dinner to President Truman's appearance at a 1947 NAACP event in which he declared his commitment to civil rights.

"It may be politically significant if this tells us that this is going to be a legacy for him," Mr. Bennett said on ABC's "This Week." "Maybe this is the legacy he's looking for.

"He compared himself to Harry Truman, so perhaps what liberalism's new mission will be will be the civil rights agenda for gay America, and that this will be the defining issue for the next few years."

Mr. Clinton is the first president

Bennett poses Truman comparison

to attend a homosexual-rights event. Mr. Truman was the first to attend a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People event.

There, Mr. Truman pledged to support equality for all Americans. "And when I say all Americans, I mean all Americans.

At the banquet — in which actress Ellen DeGeneres was honored for "outing" her lesbian television character — Mr. Clinton said: "Well, my friends, all Americans still means all Americans."

On NBC's "Meet the Press" yesterday, Mr. Clinton brought up his experiences growing up in Arkansas.

"I grew up in the segregated South in the '40s and '50s. And all my life, from the time I was a child, I was taught and I have believed that every person in this country — no matter what their differences are, in their lifestyle or their race or their religion, if they obey the law, show up for work every day or show up for school, if they're good

citizens, they ought to be treated with respect and dignity and equality," he said.

Mr. Clinton said he does not think anyone should teach school children that homosexuality is an "acceptable alternative lifestyle," but he also said no one should teach children that "they should hate or discriminate against or be afraid of people who are homosexuals."

Also during the interview, Mr. Clinton said he backed Vice President Al Gore's support of the ABC show "Ellen," in which the main character, played by Miss DeGeneres, announced she was a lesbian. Last month, Mr. Gore lauded the show for "forcing Americans" to examine homosexuality in an "open light."

"I think when she did that on television, and you got to see the interplay with her family and her friends who were not homosexual, you got to see all that — I think for many Americans who themselves had never had a personal experi-

ence, never had a friend or a family member who's a homosexual — it did give them a chance to see it in a new light. So I think [Mr. Gore] was accurate about that," Mr. Clinton said.

At the annual Human Rights Campaign dinner at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in downtown Washington Saturday night, Mr. Clinton gave Miss DeGeneres a symbolic wink and posed backstage for pictures with her, her lesbian partner, actress Anne Heche, and her mother, Betty DeGeneres.

Mr. Bennett, now a director of the think tank Empower America, said Mr. Clinton should have told the audience that the "promiscuous lifestyle of homosexual men is devastating the homosexual community" and that AIDS is taking an average of 30 years off their lives.

Elizabeth Birch, executive director of HRC who also appeared on the show, countered: "AIDS has moved way beyond the gay community, and it is now a concern to all Americans. Gay Americans are no more promiscuous than heterosexual Americans."

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