

# COMMENTARY

EDITORIALS

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## From the priorities file

### Gay rights agenda

What do homosexual activists really want? Just civil rights, they reply. But it's more complicated than that.

Over the weekend, the National Review Institute held a "conservative summit" in Washington. The conference, attended by 800 people from 41 states, took up every issue of interest to conservatives from environmentalism to defense, from school choice to saving the inner cities, from crime to multiculturalism. I chaired a panel titled "sexual politics," which wound up focusing primarily on gay rights.

Conservatives resent being caricatured as gay bashers. Most are content to be tolerant of homosexuality. As one panelist, Professor Hadley Arkes of Amherst College, put it, "We all have gay friends, whose friendship we treasure. And who wouldn't rather spend an evening with Noel Coward than Al Gore?" Where conservative resistance to the gay rights agenda tends to focus is in response to aggressive measures by homosexuals to go beyond tolerance to endorsement. That is what the curriculum dispute in the New York City school system is about. It is one thing to say gays should be left alone, quite another to say that "Daddy's New Roommate" should be taught to first-graders.

Homosexual activists tend to frame their demands in classic civil rights language. They seek only an end to discrimination, they claim. That includes discrimination in the military and in marriage and adoption laws, which currently require that spouses be of different sexes.

Andrew Sullivan, editor of the *New Republic*, also on the panel, urged the case that marriage would be good for gays just as it is good for straights. "If you object to gay male promiscuity," he said, "permit us to marry. Marriage civilizes men."

Mr. Sullivan's plea is arresting but not ultimately persuasive, because it is not marriage that civilizes men—it is women. If you doubt this, just visit any college dorm before

and after it goes co-ed. Or, for a grimmer example, visit any maximum security prison, where, for all intents and purposes, homosexual marriage does take place. The prisons are hardly more civilized thereby.

The whole weight of the homosexual claim to equal status with heterosexuals rests on one pillar—the belief that homosexuality is innate, unchosen and immutable; that it is like skin color or gender, a more "constitutive" (Mr. Sullivan's word) part of their natures than religion. This is an article of faith in gay and lesbian circles. Gay activists, the linguistically alert will have noticed, stopped using the term "sexual preference" some years ago. It has been replaced by "sexual orientation" to remove the suggestion of choice.

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(which Christians and Jews believe, but that's a theological matter) but because it is not a trait that is obvious to outsiders. Forbidding discrimination against gays is like forbidding discrimination against mystery readers. How does an employer know?

And there's another wrinkle as well. Conservatives are concerned because civil rights protection in the America of 1993 doesn't mean non-discrimination. It means quotas. Accordingly, if gays are granted the status of "protected class" under the civil rights laws, they will soon be entitled to "affirmative action." If it can be shown that, say, 6 percent of the community surrounding a particular business is gay, but only 4 percent of the firm's employees are gay, the statistical disparity would be sufficient to prove discrimination.

Finally, if gays are a protected class, based solely on what they do in the bedroom, who's next? Polygamists? Sadomasochists? Peeping Toms? Perhaps those people believe that their sexual orientation is a "constitutive" part of their being as well.

Conservatives neither hate nor despise homosexuals. But they do believe that society's preference for the traditional family is justified.



SPECIAL INTEREST

The mix of gay issues is up for debate across America. States like Colorado and Oregon placed gay tolerance and rights on last November's ballot, with wholly conflicting results. On Capitol Hill, only a third of S. senators would vote to enact Clinton's admission of gays into the military.

In essence, the American people have yet to sort this one out. American institutions are still groping

for a few universities, for instance,

have announced that gay partners will receive the same rights and benefits on campus as heterosexual spouses. But by no means is such a change prevalent, even on campuses, which themselves are not terribly reflective of American values.

Members of the military are more traditional. Their ranks come disproportionately from rural, Southern white and black communities, which have been less inclined

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