

Bush defends Republican senator after attack on gays

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The Bush White House has come to the defense of Republican Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, the number three man in the Senate Republican leadership, after widespread criticism of his remarks in a press interview in which he compared homosexuality to bigamy, polygamy, incest and adultery.

Santorum was commenting on the upcoming Supreme Court decision on a legal challenge to the constitutionality of a Texas state law against sodomy. He attacked the notion of a right to privacy in matters of personal sexual conduct, saying, "If the Supreme Court says that you have the right to consensual sex within your home, then you have the right to bigamy, you have the right to polygamy, you have the right to incest, you have the right to adultery. You have the right to anything."

Santorum's comments, made public by the Associated Press April 21, were widely criticized by gay rights groups, newspaper editorials, some Senate Democrats, and a handful of Senate Republicans. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist defended Santorum as a "consistent voice for inclusion and compassion," denying he was a bigot, and most Republican senators rallied behind Santorum, who holds the position of chairman of the Senate Republican Conference.

After refusing to comment on the issue for several days, despite repeated press inquiries, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer voiced Bush's praise and support for the Republican senator. "The president believes that the senator is an inclusive man," he said April 25. Fleischer added, "The president has confidence in Senator Santorum and thinks he's doing a good job as senator—including in his leadership post."

Fleischer repeatedly refused to state Bush's position on the question of the Texas sodomy law, saying, "That's a matter for the court to rule on." Attempting to avoid either publicly endorsing or repudiating antigay bigotry, the White House spokesman made the absurd claim that Bush had no opinion on homosexuality. "That's not a matter that the president concerns himself with," Fleischer said. "He judges people for how they act and how they relate."

Far-right groups—which for their own purposes spearheaded the ouster of Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott last December, for comments defending segregation—defended Santorum's bigotry aggressively. The Christian Coalition declared, "Democratic politicians and the left-wing press should be ashamed for inhibiting freedom of speech." The Family Research Council criticized Bush for not defending Santorum immediately, complaining, "[M]any top GOP leaders cannot bring themselves to offer a spirited defense of marriage for fear of being accused of bigotry."

Fox News Channel broadcast an interview with Santorum in which

he rejected calls to step down from his leadership post. "I didn't say anything that needs to be apologized for," he told Fox. "I talk a lot about this issue of activism in the courts. I talk about the issue of privacy and the extension of the right of privacy to a variety of different areas that I think would be injurious to our country."

On the face of it, Santorum's claim to be concerned about the dangers of an extension of privacy rights is absurd. In his list of alleged consequences of recognizing the right to sexual privacy, the prohibitions of bigamy and polygamy would not be affected, since they relate to a state-sanctioned marriage contract.

As for adultery, it is significant that Santorum suggests it should be treated as a crime. There are only a handful of states that still have such antiquated laws on the books, and these are never enforced. Anti-sodomy laws are the only laws on private sexual conduct that are still enforced in many states, particularly the South.

From a political standpoint, Bush's delayed but emphatic embrace of Santorum's gay-bashing comments is a calculated effort to appease the extreme-right, Christian fundamentalist elements that are a key social base of the administration. But more is involved than throwing a bit of rhetorical red meat to right-wing homophobes.

In the triumphalist mood in Washington following the conquest of Iraq, several representatives of the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress have found it impossible to restrain their expressions of religious and racial bigotry. Such sentiments have long been an essential political underpinning of the ultra right, and this reality is now coming to the surface, exploding Bush's pretense of "compassionate conservatism" and a more "inclusive" Republican Party.

On April 7, Secretary of Education Roderick Paige gave an interview to the *Baptist Press*, the news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, in which he declared, "All things equal, I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith."

A spokesman for Paige declined to say whether the secretary of education was suggesting that public schools should teach religion, or that school children would be better off in private religious schools. Either interpretation is a flagrant repudiation of the longstanding US tradition of separation of church and state, let alone Paige's specific responsibilities as head of the Department of Education.

Paige later declared that he fully supported the separation of church and state, suggesting that he had been speaking only of colleges and universities, not the K-12 public school system. However, the full text of his interview with the Baptist publication shows him expressing incomprehension at "animosity" toward religion in the public schools.

Two days after Paige's interview, Republican Congresswoman Barbara Cubin equated African Americans with drug addicts. She did so in the course of a debate over legislation to exempt gun manufacturers from lawsuits over criminal acts committed with firearms.

Criticizing a Democratic amendment that would have banned gun sales to drug addicts or people receiving treatment for addiction, she asked how it would be enforced: "One amendment today said we could not sell guns to anybody under drug treatment. So does that mean that if you go into a black community you can't sell any guns to any black person?"

After a black member interrupted her comments and demanded they be stricken from the record, Cubin declared that she wished "to apologize to my colleague for his sensitivities," and refused to withdraw her statement. The House later voted on a party-line vote to uphold the chair's ruling that her remarks did not violate congressional rules.

On April 18, Rev. Franklin Graham presided over Good Friday prayers in a Pentagon auditorium, at the invitation of the Pentagon chaplain's office. Several Muslim employees of the Department of Defense objected to his appearance, since Graham has made repeated comments blaming Islam for the September 11 terrorist attacks and calling Islam "a very evil and wicked religion."

Graham, the son of Rev. Billy Graham, gave the invocation at the Republican National Convention that nominated Bush in 2000, and at Bush's presidential inauguration. He heads an evangelical group that has been contracted by the US government to deliver relief supplies to Iraq. Graham has said that he will take advantage of the US conquest of Iraq to further his efforts at Christian missionary work in the Muslim world.

In another provocation against Muslim-Americans, Bush nominated Daniel Pipes, a right-wing columnist and activist, to a vacancy on the US Institute of Peace, a foreign policy think tank that is in charge of a major US propaganda effort called the Special Initiative on the Muslim World, established after September 11.

Pipes regularly fulminates against Muslim-Americans in his column in the *New York Post*, recently comparing Muslims to rapists and suggesting that the best place to start investigations into domestic terrorism was in US mosques. On April 23, at a public appearance at the University of Maryland, he criticized Bush's declaration after the World Trade Center attacks that Islam was "a religion of peace."

The Santorum incident sheds light on a section of the political base of the Bush administration that has received relatively little media attention—extreme-right Catholics. They comprise a small minority of that Church's followers, but a sizeable fraction of the Church hierarchy, which has begun an aggressive intervention into American politics.

On January 16, 2003, the Vatican issued an instruction declaring that political office-holders who are Catholic cannot disregard Church doctrine when making decisions on "faith and morals" questions such as abortion, euthanasia and gay marriage. Following this decision, the bishop of Sacramento, William Weigand, publicly denounced California Governor Gray Davis for presenting himself as a pro-choice Catholic.

At a mass on the anniversary of the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion rights, Weigand preached a sermon in which he declared, "Anyone, politician or otherwise, who thinks it is acceptable for a Catholic to be pro-abortion is in very great error, puts his soul at risk, and is not in good standing with the Church."

The bishop of Sioux Falls, South Dakota sent a letter to Senate Minority Leader Thomas Daschle demanding that he stop publicly identifying himself as a Catholic when voicing his support for abortion rights. In Michigan, officials of a Catholic college tried to block a campus appearance by newly elected Governor Jennifer Granholm, also a pro-choice Catholic.

The American Life League, a Catholic-oriented antiabortion group, has been running advertisements against twelve US senators who are Catholics but support abortion rights. The League's president, Judie Brown, praised Santorum as "a very good example of the Catholic who practices his faith 24 hours a day. He does not leave it at home when he goes to the office."

Santorum himself has publicly rejected the famous declaration by President John F. Kennedy, prior to his election, that he would separate his actions as president from the dictates of the Vatican. That approach has caused "much harm in America," Santorum told a Catholic newspaper last year. Keeping religious principles private, and not seeking to translate them into government policy, amounted to "corruption of freedom of conscience," he said.

In this upside down world view, freedom of religion is interpreted to mean the obligation to impose one's religious views on everyone else. The logical extension of such religious fanaticism is religious dictatorship or theocracy.

Besides its thoroughly antidemocratic character, this outlook is a cynical cover for the far-right political agenda. When Pope John Paul II voiced his opposition to the US war against Iraq, declaring the war unnecessary and immoral, there was no such rallying behind the Vatican by Santorum and other modern-day Torquemadas.

On the contrary, the US Catholic bishops, with typical casuistry, issued a statement declaring that while the Pope had condemned the war, the Church did not condemn the warriors. Catholic military personnel, from privates to generals, could obey orders and go about the business of killing Iraqis without concern for any damage to their souls.



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