

Obama backs gay marriage

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Obama's announcement Wednesday that he supports same-sex marriage has been quickly elevated by the American liberal establishment and the media into a watershed moment in his presidency.

The president announced on ABC News that, "for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married," adding that his position on the issue had "evolved" over the course of his presidency.

While the administration sought to frame Obama's remarks as a reaction to unscripted statements from Vice President Biden over the weekend, the timing of the announcement had all the hallmarks of a calculated political decision—an attempt to divert attention from the economic and social crisis, while bolstering Obama's support among the more privileged sections of the middle class for whom issues such as gay marriage are the principal political questions.

The *New York Times* set the tone for the response of the liberal establishment in its coverage on Thursday. Its editorial proclaimed that with his statement, Obama "took the moral high ground on what may be the great civil rights struggle of our time."

A companion article in the *Times* asserted that Obama's endorsement of gay marriage "was by any measure a watershed." The newspaper continued, "The very riskiness of what Mr. Obama did—some commentators were invoking Lyndon B. Johnson's embrace of civil rights in 1964, with all the attendant political perils—made it hard to understate the historic significance of what took place at the White House on Wednesday."

The attempt by the *Times* to present the issue of gay marriage as on par with the mass struggles of the civil rights movement of the 1960s is, as a historical matter, absurd.

However, it is notable that, even within this framework, Obama's statements were typically

cowardly and craven. He framed the issue not as a question of democratic rights, but rather as the "evolution" of his "personal" attitude, which he couched largely in religious terms. The administration also stressed that it considered the issue a matter of "states rights," making the president's statements, in terms of practical implementation, meaningless.

There was also an element of crass financial calculations in the decision to make the statement. On Wednesday, Obama sent out a message to supporters highlighting his new position on gay marriage and requesting donations. According to the *Washington Post*, the campaign received a "massive surge of contributions" in response.

On Thursday evening, Obama was in Hollywood for a fundraiser at the home of actor George Clooney, expecting to net the campaign a record-setting \$15 million in a single day.

The Associated Press commented, "Hollywood is home to some of the most high-profile backers of gay marriage, and the 150 donors who are paying \$40,000 to attend Clooney's dinner Thursday night will no doubt feel newly invigorated by Obama's watershed announcement the day before." The AP added that over the course of a number of fundraisers in the next several days, gay marriage will be the dominant issue, "culminating in yet another fundraiser Monday in New York sponsored by gay and Latino Obama supporters."

The gushing enthusiasm among these layers for Obama will be translated in different forms by the publications and organizations that function as the "left" supporters of the Democratic Party—from the *Nation* magazine to the International Socialist Organization.

Issues such as gay marriage serve a definite and important function in American politics. For most of the population, regardless of sexual orientation, they are of decidedly secondary importance. According to a

recent PEW poll, gay marriage ranked 18th in the list of important issues, coming far behind the economy, jobs, health care and war.

The pro-Democratic Party organizations seek to promote issues of identity and lifestyle as a means of obscuring the basic class issues and diverting attention from the thoroughly reactionary policies of the Obama administration on every front. In doing so, they seek to exploit the general support for equality and the expansion of marriage rights, particularly among young people. The Democratic Party uses such issues in the attempt to establish points of difference with the Republicans, under conditions in which the two parties agree on all fundamental issues.

Obama's statements, however, do not alter in the slightest his administration's relentless assault on the working class, which will escalate in the aftermath of the elections, regardless of who wins. Obama has expanded the anti-democratic and militarist policies of the Bush administration. He has declared it the right of the US president to assassinate US citizens, send drone missiles to the far reaches of the globe, and hold anyone indefinitely, without charge.

Six months before the elections, the conditions of the working class are dire. Trillions have been handed to the banks, followed by an attack on health care, education and social programs. Millions of people are without work, and the economy is once again stalling. The political establishment has absolutely nothing to offer by way of solutions to this crisis. Obama outlined earlier this week a series of corporate tax cuts packaged as a "jobs program." Mass unemployment, meanwhile, has been used to drive down wages and boost corporate profits to record levels.

For the upper middle class layers that work relentlessly to promote the Democratic Party, all of this is of little consequence. In fact, they have supported and will continue to support the Obama administration not in spite of these reactionary policies, but precisely because of them. To this end, identity politics serves a critical function.



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