

Bush defends war on Iraq, edges toward gay wedding ban: In State of the Union address

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President Bush, speaking confidently and forcefully in his State of the Union address on January 20, defended the U.S.-led war on terrorism and efforts to establish democratic governments in Afghanistan and Iraq. He also affirmed his support of traditional marriage and urged Congress to codify his efforts to give faith-based organizations equal consideration for federal grants to provide social services.

The Republican president was most combative when asserting the rightness of the U.S. military invasion, conceding that “objections to war often come from principled motives” but adding that a worse fate was at hand had Iraq’s Saddam Hussein remained in power.

In an apparent response to Bush’s speech, Pope John Paul II said the next day that “the recourse to force” is the wrong way to seek peace, creating only “fear and uncertainty.” The 83-year-old Catholic pontiff, who had argued vigorously against a preemptive strike in Iraq, made his remarks at his weekly general audience.

A year ago, noted a Muslim advocacy group, Bush claimed that Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction. But his 2004 State of the Union speech referred only to “dozens of weapons of mass destruction-related program activities,” a phrase the Muslim Public Affairs Council said was “a severe diminution in rhetoric” that reflected revised reasons for waging war on Iraq.

Under pressure on the domestic front from religious conservatives, Bush came the closest yet to supporting a proposed federal amendment banning gay marriage.

“A strong America must . . . value the institution of marriage,” the president said, defining it as the union of a man and a woman. “Activist judges, however, have begun redefining marriage by court order, without regard for the will of the people

and their elected representatives. . . . If judges insist on forcing their arbitrary will upon the people, the only alternative left to the people would be the constitutional process.” The reference apparently was to a ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in November that gay couples should have the right to civil marriage.

Matt Daniels, president of the Alliance for Marriage, interpreted Bush’s words as an expression of support for the proposed amendment that his organization has championed. But Family Research Council President Tony Perkins said he was disappointed in the president’s message and voiced hope he will take more definitive steps.

Expressing disappointment on the opposite side, Cheryl Jacques, president of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay organization, said: “In more than 200 years of American history, it has never been necessary to use the Constitution to deny basic rights.”

Bush also proposed a \$300 million, four-year program to help prisoners reentering society with job training, placement, housing and mentoring—including help from faith-based organizations. Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson welcomed Bush’s focus on those leaving prison: “Thank God President Bush understands that all of America benefits when prison inmates are reformed and families are supported and restored.”

The president also touched on other areas of concern to some religious groups, including a proposal to double federal funding for sexual abstinence programs. He also urged Congress to pass a bill to benefit faith-based charities.

Bush delivered the address to a House of Representatives chamber that appeared sharply divided along partisan lines, especially when he turned to his domestic agenda. The 54-minute speech was often interrupted by raucous cheers from Republican members of Congress, who frequently stood to applaud while most of their Democratic colleagues across the aisle remained seated in stony silence.

A handful of Democrats—many of them African-American House members—offered Bush virtually no applause, even when most of their Democratic colleagues stood to applaud some of his less controversial assertions.