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Job Protection For Gays

By Barry Goldwater

Last year, many who opposed lifting the ban on gays in the military gave lip service to the American ideal that employment opportunities should be based on skill and performance. It's just that the military is different, they said. In civilian life, they'd never condone discrimination.

Well, now's their chance to put up or shut up.

A bipartisan coalition in Congress has proposed legislation to protect gays against job discrimination. Congress is waking up to a reality already recognized by a host of Fortune 500 companies, including AT&T, Marriott and General Motors. These businesses have adopted policies prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation because they realize that their employees are their most important asset.

America is now engaged in a battle to reduce the deficit and to compete in a global economy. Job discrimination excludes qualified individuals, lowers workforce productivity and eventually hurts us all. Topping the new world order means attracting the best and creating a workplace environment where everyone can excel. Anything less makes us a second rate nation. It's not just bad—it's bad business.

But job discrimination against gays and lesbians is real, and it happens every day. Cracker Barrel, a national restaurant chain, adopted a policy of blatant discrimination against employees suspected of being gay. Would anyone tolerate policies prohibiting the hiring of African Americans, Hispanics or women?

Today, in corporate suites and factory warehouses, qualified people live in fear of losing their livelihood for reasons that have nothing to do with ability. In urban and rural communities, hatred and fear force good people from productive employment to the public dole—wasting their talents and the taxpayers' money.

Gays and lesbians are a part of every American family. They should not be shortchanged in their efforts to better their lives and serve their communities. As President Clinton likes to say, "if you work hard and play by the rules, you'll be rewarded" and not with a pink slip just for being gay.

It's time America realized that there was no gay exemption in the right to life,

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the Declaration of Independence. Job discrimination against gays—or anybody else—is contrary to each of these founding principles.

Some will try to paint this as a liberal or religious issue. I am a conservative Republican, but I believe in democracy and the separation of church and state. The conservative movement is founded on the simple tenet that people have the right to live life as they please, as long as they don't hurt anyone else in the process. No one has ever shown me how being gay or lesbian harms anyone else. Even the 1992 Republican platform affirms the principle that "bigotry has no place in our society."

I am proud that the Republican Party has always stood for individual rights and liberties. The positive role of limited government has always been the defense of these fundamental principles. Our party has led the way in the fight for freedom and a free market economy, a society where competition and the Constitution matter—and sexual orientation shouldn't.

Now some in our ranks want to extinguish this torch. The radical right has nearly ruined our party. Its members do not care enough about the Constitution, and they are the ones making all the noise. The party faithful must not let it happen. Anybody who cares about real moral values understands that this isn't about granting special rights—it's about protecting basic rights.

It is for this reason that more than 100 mayors and governors, Republicans and Democrats, have signed laws and issued orders protecting gays and lesbians. In fact, nearly half the states have provided some form of protection to gays in employment. But of course many others have not, including my own state of Arizona.

It's not going to be easy getting Congress to provide job protection for gays. I know that firsthand. The right wing will rant and rave that the sky is falling. They've said that before—and we're still here. Constitutional conservatives know that doing the right thing takes guts and foresight, but that's why we're elected, to make tough decisions that stand the test of time.

My former colleagues have a chance to stand with civil rights leaders, the business community and the 74 percent of Americans who polls show favor protecting gays and lesbians from job discrimination. With their vote they can help strengthen the American work ethic and support the principles of the Constitution.



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