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## Gerald Ford: Treat gay couples equally

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**By Deb Price / The Detroit News**

Former President Gerald Ford believes the federal government should treat gay couples the same as married couples, including providing equal Social Security and tax benefits.

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Ford's views, expressed in an exclusive telephone interview, make him the highest-ranking Republican ever to endorse equal treatment for gay couples.

"I think they ought to be treated equally. Period," Ford declared. Asked specifically whether gay couples should get the same Social Security, tax and other federal benefits as married couples, he replied, "I don't see why they shouldn't. I think that's a proper goal."

Now 88, Ford was a longtime Michigan congressman and Republican leader of the U.S. House before being appointed vice president and then rising to the presidency in 1974 after Richard Nixon's resignation.

From his office in Rancho Mirage, Calif., Ford comfortably discussed a range of gay issues. He said he supports federal legislation to outlaw anti-gay job discrimination: "That is a step in the right direction. I have a longstanding record in favor of legislation to do away with discrimination."

Although he doesn't know if any of his White House appointees were gay, Ford said, "I applaud that President Bush has appointed three people who are gay. ... That is a big step in the right direction. The atmosphere was totally different 25 years ago, and the issue never arose." The former president added that having gay assistants wouldn't have mattered to him "as long as they were competent."

These days, Ford said, he and his wife Betty have gay friends.

Ford also expressed hope that his Republican Party will continue to expand its outreach to gay voters.

"I have always believed in an inclusive policy, in welcoming gays and others into the party. I think the party has to have an umbrella philosophy if it expects to win elections."

Ford warmly described his inclusive attitudes after I contacted him about what has come to be seen as a stain on his presidency -- his much-criticized response to the gay man who saved his life on Sept. 22, 1975.

Three days after the thwarted assassination attempt, Ford wrote to thank Bill Sipple for his "selfless" heroism.

Yet Ford has been accused of not honoring the Vietnam combat veteran as publicly as he would have had Sipple been heterosexual.

Sipple, who had been active in San Francisco's gay movement but closeted back home in Detroit, was rejected by his mother after a gay San Francisco official revealed Sipple's sexual orientation to a newspaper columnist after the shooting.

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Crumbling over his mother's rejection in the wake of national media attention, Sipple died a broken man in 1989 at 47. He treasured the Ford letter, which hung in his dilapidated apartment.

Ford blasts as "untrue" and "unfair" the charge -- which has become urban legend and has been repeated by some historians and gay activists -- that he would have honored Sipple more publicly if he hadn't been gay. "I had gone to San Francisco to make a speech before the San Francisco foreign affairs group," Ford recalled. "I came out of the St. Francis Hotel and was about to get into the limo. The shot was fired (by Sara Jane Moore). The Secret Service got me to Air Force One quickly. I later learned ... Bill Sipple hit her hand and, as a consequence, the shot went above my head. ... I wrote him a note thanking him. ... As far as I was concerned, I had done the right thing and the matter was ended. I didn't learn until sometime later -- I can't remember when -- he was gay.

"I don't know where anyone got the crazy idea I was prejudiced and wanted to exclude gays," Ford said.

Jerry Ford's bold embrace of gay Americans is an historic breakthrough for a nation dedicated to equal rights. And it underscores the increasingly visible support of gay Americans by prominent Republicans.

*Deb Price's column is published on Monday. You can contact her at (202) 662-7370 or [dprice@detnews.com](mailto:dprice@detnews.com).*

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