

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, May 9, 2012 4:41 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: My post at NewYorker.com: Gay Marriage: Why Obama Couldn't Wait

From: Richard Socarides [mailto:
Sent: Wednesday, May 09, 2012 04:30 PM
To: undisclosed-recipients <undisclosed-recipients;>
Subject: My post at NewYorker.com: Gay Marriage: Why Obama Couldn't Wait

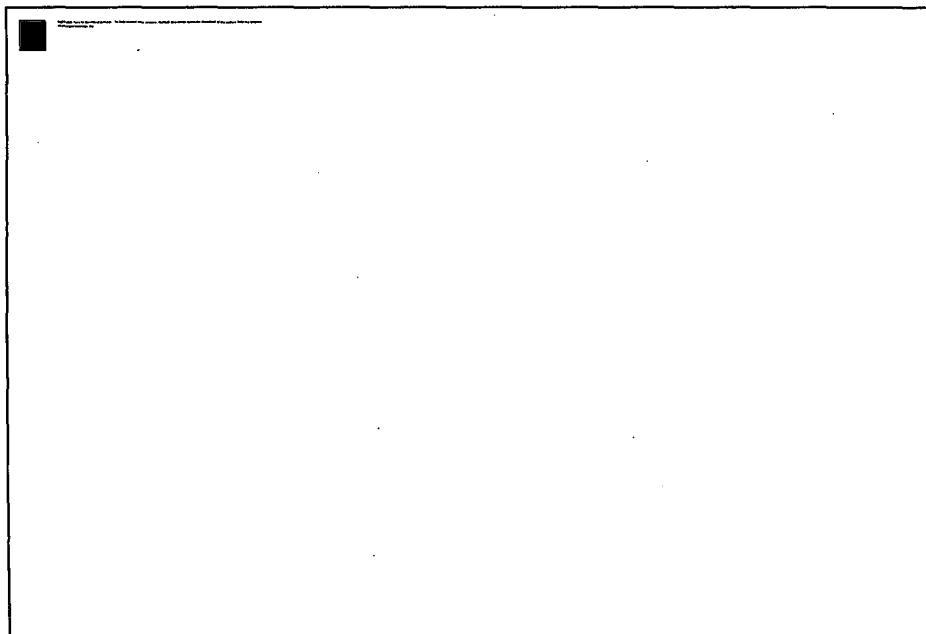
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May 9, 2012

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/05/gay-marriage-why-obama-couldnt-wait.html>

Gay Marriage: Why Obama Couldn't Wait

Posted by *Richard Socarides*



Even though the waiting was frustrating, President Barack Obama's announcement today that he fully supports marriage equality for gay and lesbian Americans is historic. It will certainly go down in record books with events like Stonewall, over forty years ago, as an important milestone in the equal-rights movement. Having a President, especially this President, take a strong moral stand in favor of rights for gays will help the country complete its own evolution on the issue and lead to a day where, once again, our understanding of American freedom will have been expanded.

Clearly, the President had, until today, been making a political calculation—one that had outlived its usefulness. In some ways, it's amazing that he was able to maintain a not-yes-but-not-no position for

as long as he did. While it was a useful electoral strategy, changes in public opinion and in the culture have created a new reality. Obama's political advisers badly underestimated the extent to which the marriage issue would remain at the forefront of the national discussion—and the determination of those of us who work on this issue to keep it there.

So while this is an important moment in civil-rights history, it is also an important moment in political history—in which the lesson, for the gay community and, perhaps, for anyone advocating for change, is that words are important, but we have to insist on action from our friends.

For a long time, Democrats have taken the gay vote for granted. Political consultants tell Democrats that gay and lesbian voters have nowhere else to go, and thus, in effect, can be taken for granted, so long as politicians pay lip service to the issue. But that is old thinking, out of touch with the new reality of the gay-rights movement. While I know most gays and lesbians would have supported President Obama, both with their votes and with financial contributions, no matter what he did on the issue of marriage equality, we were also not going to take “no” for an answer on the most important civil-rights issue of our day. That meant holding the President's feet to the fire—first on the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and then on marriage equality.

Last year, Governor Andrew Cuomo, of New York, decided to take on the issue of marriage equality as the first real test of his governorship. When people saw the leadership he demonstrated—in which victory wasn't assured, and depended on persuading people who were not already persuaded—people saw what was possible when politicians were willing to take a chance. From that moment on, you knew that Obama's evolutionary days were numbered.

Moreover, the President was receiving pressure not just from his gay and lesbian supporters, but from a broader progressive community of Democrats for whom marriage equality has become an important test. The President is going to run for reelection and ask for people's votes because of his leadership qualities as compared to Mitt Romney. That narrative was not sustainable while he maintained a muddled position on civil rights.

That is not to take anything away from the courage exhibited by President Obama today. His willingness to share with the American people his thinking, indeed his struggle, around this issue will help build a national consensus. Everyone is entitled to a journey on this issue.

I suspect that at the end of this national conversation the result will be a good one, and the process, including Obama's painstakingly slow evolution, will have been a positive experience for the country. Hopefully, it will lead us in a positive direction—which, after all, is the job of a President.

When I worked in the Clinton White House, in 1996, it was clear that President Clinton did not want to sign the Republican-inspired Defense of Marriage Act, which bans federal recognition of same-sex marriages, even ones recognized by states. He ended up signing it anyway, because it was the summer before his reelection bid and his political advisers told him it would be too much of a risk to veto the bill: he would be painted as a friend of gays and lesbians in negative campaign advertising. Sixteen years later, that was the same argument President Obama's advisers were no doubt making to him. But it is a testament to how far America has come, and to the man that Obama has become as President, that he was willing today to reject that advice and do the right thing for the country and its citizens.

Last December, I wrote a post in which I predicted that Obama would, before the election, make the announcement we heard today. At that time, I wrote, “having the President publicly endorse marriage equality will be an important symbolic and substantive turning point. It would likely accelerate the pro-equality shift in public opinion, including in minority communities. It will make it easier for federal

judges, including Supreme Court justices, to rule in favor of gay rights in the face of arguments that doing so is out of the mainstream of American political thought. And it might just help get President Obama reelected." All of this is still true today.

Photograph by Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo.

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