

## **No mention of marriage in Bush address**

January 25, 2007

President Bush's sixth State of the Union address Tuesday, January 23 was a subdued affair, and one of his most effectively delivered speeches. But on the central issue of Iraq, it appears to be too little, too late in terms of shaping broad public debate and opinion on that issue.

Notably, the president said nothing about same-sex marriage, as he has in previous speeches when he urged Congress to pass a constitutional amendment banning such unions.

Gays and lesbians who watched both the president and the Democratic response by newly elected Virginia Senator James Webb heard little on issues specific to their community.

Bush began graciously by noting the historic nature of Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) as the first female speaker of the House, and with a reference to her father, the late Thomas d'Alessandro Jr., who served in the House under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman.

Further into the speech he said, "We must continue to fight HIV/AIDS, especially on the continent of Africa – and because you funded our Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the number of people receiving lifesaving drugs has grown from 50,000 to more than 800,000 in three short years. I ask you to continue funding our efforts to fight HIV/AIDS."

He called for funding to combat malaria and build democracy overseas, as well as "continue to support the expanded trade and debt relief that are the best hope for lifting lives and eliminating poverty."

But there was no specific mention of the problems of HIV within the United States. "I'm sad to say that my president's talk on AIDS in these speeches does not translate into dollars, and certainly hasn't brought any decline in the number of new HIV infections in the U.S.," said Judith Dillard. She is an AIDS advocate from Texas and a board member of the national Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project.

Bush proposed changes in the tax laws that would make it more affordable for people to directly obtain health insurance that is not tied to their job. He also would use federal funds to support innovative state programs to provide coverage to the poor and sick who might not otherwise be able to obtain health insurance.

Bush devoted a major portion of his speech to the war in Iraq, but there was no mention of allowing LGBT service members to serve openly in that conflict.

"While the president rightly salutes our nation's service men and women, he continues to implicitly push gay service personnel into the shadows by supporting a policy of silence and exclusion," said Steve Ralls, spokesman for the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. "Until gay Americans are welcomed in our fighting forces neither our military, nor our nation, is as strong as it could be."

A parsing of Bush's text revealed some interesting omissions this year.

While God and faith were given a prominent role in previous State of the Union speeches, they were surprisingly absent this year. The sole mention of God was in reference to one of the "heroes" – basketball star Dikembe Mutombo – in quoting someone else saying, "Mutombo believes that God has given him this opportunity to do great things." The now naturalized American citizen built a hospital in his native Congo.

Other once-popular words that were banished from the president's lexicon were religion and marriage. Two years ago Bush praised traditional marriage and called for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriages. This year, word is that no one is even willing to reintroduce that amendment in Congress. If it could not pass under Republican control, it certainly would not under Democratic control.

**"Perhaps the election results served to check the president's use of dangerous wedge politics since he chose not to lobby for a federal constitutional amendment to ban marriage rights for same-sex couples," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "While this is positive news, it hardly erases the last six years of legislative and policy attacks our community has suffered under this administration."**

Webb delivered the Democratic response. His principle focus was a scathing critique of Bush's failures in Iraq. What the Democrats did not offer is a unified alternative to that policy.