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34 Beyond the greatest New York metropolitan area

## Some Gay Rights Advocates Question Effort to Defend Same-Sex Marriage

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

Fearing a political battle that will divert attention from what they regard as more critical issues — and one that will ultimately be lost — some influential homosexuals are questioning the high-profile campaign by major gay groups to defend same-sex marriage.

The issue of same-sex marriage has captured national attention in recent weeks with both President Clinton and Bob Dole, his likely Republican opponent, saying they oppose it. A bill called the Defense of Marriage Act, which would deny Federal recognition and benefits to marriages of same-sex couples, is moving quickly through Congress. Its passage is widely expected, and Mr. Clinton has said he will sign it.

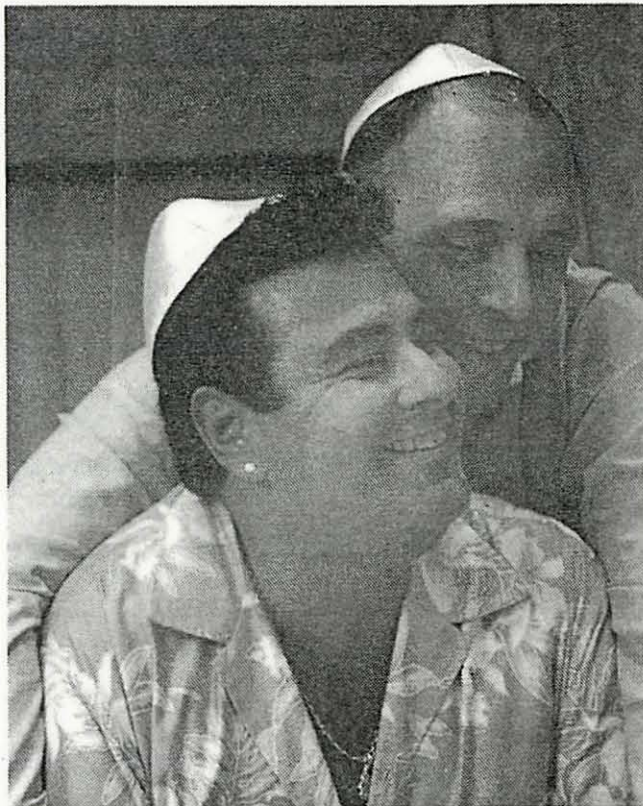
In the heat of a Presidential campaign, an issue that lesbian and gay organizers had planned to advance much more deliberately has suddenly become a top priority.

"The Defense of Marriage Act is an out-of-control freight train and will be darn near impossible to stop," said David M. Smith, the communications director for the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay group. "We're treating it as an anti-gay attack and we're going to fight it tooth and nail until the bitter end."

That all-out strategy concerns other gay-rights advocates, who have tried not to break ranks publicly but have conceded in interviews that they are troubled by the way in which the issue is playing out.

"The gay and lesbian movement is marching down the wrong path and running a disastrous course," said Keith O. Boykin, executive director of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum in Washington. "We don't have public support. We don't even have unanimity within the gay and lesbian community."

The founder of the black forum's



Linda Rosier for The New York Times

"This is the way of expressing our love," Paul N. Sibley-Schreiber, front, said of his plans to marry his partner, Mark M. Sibley-Schreiber, in a ceremony on Sunday at a gay and lesbian synagogue in Manhattan.

Colorado chapter, Debra Rose, said there were several causes "more fundamental to survival" for gay men and lesbians, like combating violence, breast cancer and AIDS.

And Mr. Boykin noted that dis-

crimination against homosexuals is still legal in most states and that sodomy is still a criminal act in many states. "We've got to get to A and B before we can get to E," he said.

Paula L. Ettelbrick, legislative counsel to the Empire State Pride Agenda, a political group in New York State, said, "It doesn't seem worth it to put all our eggs in the marriage basket."

"Everything is being judged as good or bad according to one issue," Ms. Ettelbrick added. "That's very dangerous for us politically."

Even those in the gay rights movement who question the current political strategy agree that it would be ideal if the rights, benefits and responsibilities of civil marriage were extended to couples of the same sex.

For those seeking to be married, however, its importance transcends politics.

"This is the way of expressing our love," said Paul N. Sibley-Schreiber, a 49-year-old rehabilitation counselor in New York. After 20 years together, he and his partner, Mark M. Sibley-Schreiber, 48, a software engineer, are to be wed in a religious ceremony on Sunday at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, a gay and lesbian synagogue in Manhattan.

"We want it defined under God," Paul Sibley-Schreiber said. "Besides, we're tired of living in sin."

Eighty-two percent of the 89,521 respondents to a call-in "gay census," run by a Chicago market research company called Overlooked Opinions Inc., said they "would like to be legally married to someone of their own gender." Since the sample is self-selected, there is no way to gauge how accurately it reflects the views of homosexuals generally.

Because of Mr. Clinton's opposition to same-sex marriage, Mayor Willie L. Brown Jr. of San Francisco said there might be "intense demonstrations" if the President visited the city, and advised the White House, "Don't come." The Mayor's remarks were reported on Wednesday in The San Francisco Chronicle.

Marriage so swiftly became the

emblematic gay rights issue of the season that lesbian and gay organizers were left with little time to build political alliances.

"We have lost — if, in fact, we ever had — the luxury of deliberation and reflection," said Kathryn D. Kendell, the legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights in San Francisco. "We are now fighting for our political life."

Three years ago, gay groups were caught off guard by the sudden escalation into a national issue of homo-

### A fear of political fallout from an emblematic issue.

sexuals in the military, after Mr. Clinton said he would lift the ban on openly homosexual men and women serving in the armed forces. Gay groups were ill-prepared to deal with heavy opposition. In the end, a policy of "don't ask, don't tell" was fashioned that many believe is even less favorable to gay men and lesbians in the armed services.

"What we needed to learn from the military fight is that we have to build more political power before we win any gay issue on a national level," said Urvashi Vaid, who wrote "Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation," which was published last year by Anchor Books.

Advocates of same-sex marriage maintain that conservatives forced their hand when they initiated a nationwide legislative drive to foreclose recognition of such marriages if they were legalized in any state. The object, these advocates contend,

was to close off any meaningful discussion of the issue and to drive a wedge between the President and his gay supporters.

But conservatives say the issue was forced on them because three homosexual couples in Hawaii brought the lawsuit that may lead to the issuance of marriage licenses to couples of the same sex, pending a trial later this year.

"We didn't pick this fight," said Robert H. Knight of the Family Research Council in Washington. "The only reason there is this legislative activity is because homosexual activists have tried to impose their agenda through judicial fiat."

Conservatives are not the only ones troubled by the fact that national priorities have been reordered by a court case in Hawaii.

"Why should three couples in Hawaii drive the entire gay rights movement?" said Thomas F. Coleman, executive director of the Spectrum Institute in Los Angeles, which advocates domestic partnerships. "Wouldn't it be in the best interest of the gay and lesbian community to create a new secular institution than to ask for a conservative institution dominated by religion?"

Kate Clinton, a comedian, has described the quest for same-sex marriage as "mad vow disease." In the March issue of The Progressive magazine she said that "the freedom not to marry was always one of the things I enjoyed about being gay."

Prof. Nancy D. Polikoff of the Washington College of Law at American University said the fight for marriage rights had closed off any critique of the institution itself.

"One thing our community can stand for," Professor Polikoff said, "is a principle that expands the definition of family and does not place a monogamous relationship with one partner at the pinnacle of all human relationships."