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Unmarried Americans Need Tax Relief Too

By Tomas F. Coleman

Politicians in Washington have focused most of their talk about tax relief on "working families." With the budget surpluses as large as they are, there is nothing wrong with giving tax relief to the American people.

But it is the individual who pays taxes, not families. Employees withhold income tax from an individual's pay check. Payroll taxes are taken from an individual's salary to fund the social security program. When an individual dies, federal estate taxes are taken from his or her estate.

So why all the focus on tax relief for working families? Politics, of course. Apparently the leaders of both major political parties are ignoring some basic demographic information as they haggle over who will get tax relief and who will not.

There are 80 million American taxpayers who are single or unmarried. We constitute 40 percent of the nation's full-time work force and about 45 percent of the nation's households. Tens of million of us live alone. But most of us live in unmarried family households – with a child, a parent, a relative, or an unmarried partner.

We are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. We are voting Americans. We deserve tax relief too.

Unmarried Americans are treated unfairly by federal and state tax laws. We can't file a joint return with an unmarried household member and thereby gain a tax "bonus" as many married couples do. We must pay income tax on domestic partner employment benefits while married people get tax free benefits at work. We may be deprived of the right to claim someone as a dependent or to file as "head

of household" because Uncle Sam disapproves of our living arrangements.

Many of us forfeit a huge chunk of our hard-earned assets to the federal treasury in death taxes when we die – sometimes as much as 60% – while a married person can leave an unlimited amount of wealth to a surviving spouse tax free.

President Bush discussed his tax plan recently at a joint session of Congress. It would lower the income tax rates for wage earners in all tax brackets. It would also repeal the death tax – a system that currently exempts transfers between spouses while taxing transfers of wealth from an unmarried person to an unmarried partner, a child, a parent, or a close friend. The current system reeks with marital status discrimination.

That's not fair.

When they focus on the so-called "marriage penalty" which a minority of married couples pay when they file a joint return, many politicians – Democrats and Republicans alike – say that the tax codes should be "marriage neutral."

If that is so, then why does the tax plan of the Democrats contain a marital exemption from death taxes on those estates which their plan would continue to tax? This surely will not please wealthy gay and lesbian Democrats who can't marry and therefore will forfeit major assets to the government while their married heterosexual counterparts remain exempt.

Ending the tax ends the discrimination!

There are other inequities, like discriminatory definitions of "head of household" in the income tax code, and unfair taxation of unmarried wage-earners in the social security tax, which neither party is discussing.

Please, let's get all the cards on the table if we are serious about tax relief for all Americans. If politicians are going to talk about fairness, then they should make sure that their sales pitch to the American public reaches out to everyone – including unmarried Americans.

Actions speak louder than words. So in the final analysis it is even more important that the ultimate product of Congressional deliberations results in a reform package that is fair to everyone, regardless of our marital status or our family configuration.

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