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Senate acts on gay rights issues

Rejected bill would have made discrimination against gays illegal

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate gave final congressional approval today to a bill that would deny federal recognition of same-sex marriages and let states refuse to sanction such unions licensed in other states. In a separate vote the Senate rejected a bill outlawing job discrimination against gays.

The anti-discrimination bill failed on a 49-50 vote. It would have banned employers from using sexual orientation as a basis for hiring, firing, promotion or compensation.

"This bill would validate a lifestyle that is unacceptable," Majority Leader Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss. said.

"Discrimination because of sexual orientation is very similar to other kinds of discrimination we have prohibited," said Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., the bill's sponsor.

The Senate passed the Defense of Marriage Act — which would define marriage in federal law as a legal union between one man and one woman — 85-14. The House passed the bill in July, and President Clinton has said he will sign it.

During debate on the Senate floor, supporters called the marriage bill a common-sense response to a lawsuit going to trial today that could lead Hawaii to become the first state to issue marriage licenses to gay couples.

"The traditional family has stood for 5,000 years," Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, said. "Are we so wise today that we are ready to reject 5,000 years of recorded history? I don't think so."

Gay marriage "flies in the face

of the thousands of years of experience about the social stability that traditional marriage has afforded civilization," said Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va.

The bill does not bar any state from legalizing gay marriages within its own boundaries.

But other states would be freed from having to recognize them as lawful. Homosexual couples would remain ineligible for spousal benefits under the Social Security and Medicare programs or for any other federal benefit now reserved for married couples.

The Senate also was to vote today on a bill that would ban job discrimination against gays.

Lott denied allegations that the marriage bill was motivated by bigotry against gays.

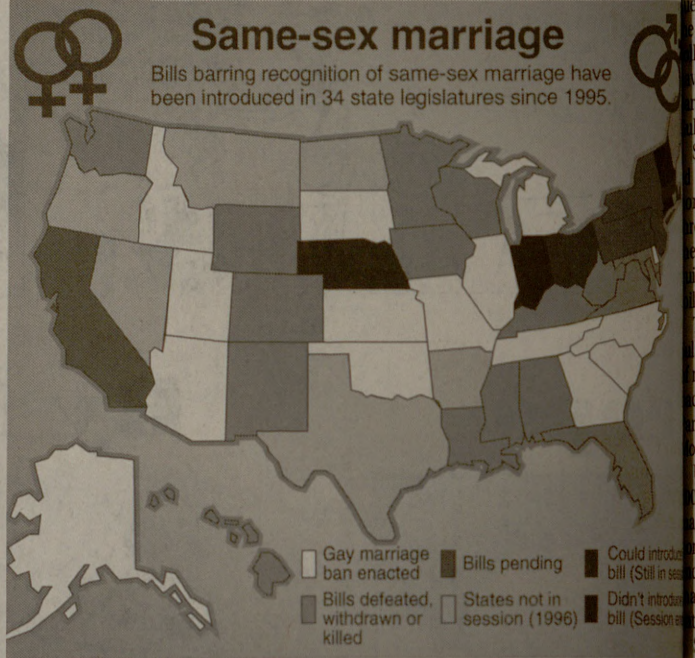
"This is not prejudiced legislation. It is not mean-spirited or exclusionary," he said. "It is a preemptive measure to make sure that a handful of judges in a single state cannot impose a radical social agenda upon the entire nation."

Gay rights activists and conservatives said they lobbied lawmakers until the last minute today.

"We're definitely lobbying with every ounce of our being," said David Smith, a spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, one of the country's largest gay political groups.

"We have delivered 12,800 letters from HRC members and others throughout the country to senators today, and we're very much on the phone nationwide," Smith said Monday.

Conservative groups also were busy lobbying, decrying homosexuality as immoral. A



group of black ministers complained about the way some gay activists likened their struggle for fair treatment to the civil rights movement.

"As an African American, I am deeply offended by homosexual claims that they suffer the same discrimination that people of color have suffered," said the Rev. Lester James, a regional director of the Traditional Values Coalition.

"Politicians who invoke the images of the civil rights movement and throw around terms like 'racist' or 'bigot' are taking something decent and honorable and using it to disguise bizarre sexual behavior."

The Family Research Council spent the day making phone calls to senators, group spokeswoman Kristi Hamrick said.

"We've certainly been working on this around the clock," she said.

Gay rights groups, however, were optimistic of winning the battle over the Senate measure outlawing job discrimination against homosexuals.

Smith said his group received word that at least two senators would vote for the bill and members were hopeful they could get the seven more needed for passage.

Kennedy originally planned to introduce the measure as an amendment to the Defense of Marriage Act. Republican's objected, believing the anti-discrimination language would offend conservatives and kill the marriage bill.

After two days of negotiations, the Republican leadership agreed to have the Senate vote separately on the two issues. The House has yet to vote on the idea.

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