



Obama once backed gay marriage

Gay bishop to speak at pre-inauguration event

By CHRIS JOHNSON and LOU CHIBBARO JR.

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Barack Obama will be inaugurated Jan. 20 as the most gay-friendly president in American history. Throughout his campaign, he took positive stands on a variety of gay and transgender rights issues, from passing inclusive hate crimes and workplace non-discrimination laws to overturning the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and the federal Defense of Marriage Act. Obama also advocated federal rights for gay couples, although he has said he does not support gay marriage.

But a document that emerged this week suggests Obama once supported full marriage rights for gay couples.

Obama told a Chicago gay newspaper in a questionnaire response provided during his 1996 Illinois state Senate race that he favored "legalizing same-sex marriages, and would fight efforts to prohibit such marriages."

Obama's signature is on the typed response to Outlines, a gay newspaper that purchased and merged with the Windy City Times in 2000. Windy City Media Group revealed the document Jan. 13.

Obama's press office had no immediate comment on the document. An office staff member requested and was given a copy of the document Tuesday, but issued no response before press time.

The old document received a tepid response online Tuesday. Comments posted to Politico.com, the first mainstream outlet to report the story, labeled the revelation "a non-issue" and described the story as "not really news."

But Peter LaBarbera, president of the anti-gay Americans for Truth About Homosexuality, was surprised when a reporter shared the relevant document passage with him.

LaBarbera said Obama's opposition to Proposition 8, the California initiative that banned same-sex marriage, was indicative of the president-elect's continued fight against efforts to ban gay nuptials.

But he said Obama could be haunted by his explicit support of same-sex marriages in 1996.

"This is the last thing that Obama needs right now — an even greater promise to the gay-activist community," LaBarbera said. "I think he's kind of overstretched as it is, and now you've got another promise that he won't be able to keep."

A spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign deflected questions Wednesday.

“The questions being posed deal with a possible inconsistency in President-elect Obama’s record and the only one who can really answer that is the president-elect’s team,” said Brad Luna.

‘THAT, ALONE, IS CHANGE’

Obama’s decision to invite Rev. Gene Robinson, an openly gay bishop of the U.S. Episcopal Church in the New Hampshire diocese, to give the invocation at a pre-inauguration event has won praise from gay leaders.

It comes after many of the same leaders assailed Obama for deciding on Rev. Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Church in California and a supporter of Proposition 8, to give the invocation Tuesday.

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, said in a statement Monday reflection put into that Robinson “models what prayer should be — spiritual action for justice.”

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, called the decision to invite Robinson to give the invocation a “stellar choice” in a statement Monday.

“For the first time in history, an out gay man will lead the nation in opening the transfer of power from one administration to another,” she said, “and every person watching in the [United States] and around the world will have seen it. That, alone, is change.”

But some conservative leaders were not happy with the decision. Matt Barber, director of cultural affairs with Liberty Alliance Action and Liberty Counsel, said in a statement Wednesday that Obama “belittles” the Bible by inviting a gay bishop who is unrepentant of “his aberrant sexual appetite for men” to speak at the pre-inauguration event.

Among the 800,000 attendees expected at the pre-inauguration event, which will take place from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., are Obama and Vice President-elect Joe Biden.

Shin Inouye, a Presidential Inaugural Committee spokesperson, said Obama selected Robinson to give the invocation because he “has provided the president-elect with his advice and counsel on many occasions, and is one of our nation’s prominent religious leaders.”

“His participation reflects the fact that the President-elect and Vice President-elect are committed to holding inaugural events that celebrate our common values and reflect the diversity and history of our great nation,” Inouye said.

Robinson, who didn’t respond to a request to comment, was quoted Monday in the Concord Monitor as saying that “it’s important for any minority to see themselves represented in some way.”

The bishop reportedly said that he doesn’t believe Obama included him in the inauguration festivities in response to the Warren criticism.

Robinson told the Concord Monitor that he didn’t yet know what he would say during his invocation, but he knew he wouldn’t use a Bible.

“While that is a holy and sacred text to me, it is not for many Americans,” Robinson said. “I will be careful not to be especially Christian in my prayer. This is a prayer for the whole nation.”

Sen. Hillary Clinton, during her confirmation hearing Tuesday to become the next Secretary of State, pledged to “take a hard look” at State Department policies toward gay personnel, although she did not commit to taking any action on the issue.

Partners of gay Foreign Service officers are not eligible for many benefits that are given to the spouses of straight Foreign Service officers. Among other things, partners of gay Foreign Service officers are not included in travel orders, eligible for health insurance, or entitled to emergency or medical evacuation, according to Michelle Schohn, head of Gays & Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies.

Clinton said the issue was brought to her attention during the transition period to the Obama administration.

"I've asked to have more briefing on it because I think that we should take a hard look at existing policy," she said. "As I understand it, but don't hold me to it because I don't have the full briefing material, but my understanding is other nations have moved to extend that partnership benefit and we will come back to you to inform you of decisions we make going forward."