

BUSH MUST DEFINE HIMSELF – AS A CONSERVATIVE

By Don Feder

In coming out for a marriage amendment to the United States Constitution on Tuesday, President Bush took his single most important step to date toward reelection.

Pundits like Dick Morris (whose stock-in-trade is offering bad advice to Republican candidates) have called on the president to define Senator John Kerry as a liberal. At this juncture, it's far more important for Mr. Bush to define himself as a conservative.

It's no secret that there have been rumblings on the right. At times, it sounds like the beginnings of an earthquake that could collapse the president's base. In 2000, Bush promised us *compassionate conservatism*. For some time now, conservative leaders have been looking around and saying: "Well, there's the compassion. Where's the conservatism?"

On issue after issue – government spending, immigration, Israel -- the administration has caused confusion and despair in the ranks of its followers. It has taken social spending to historic highs. Correctly or not, the president's immigration proposal is viewed as a blanket amnesty, hence a betrayal of national sovereignty.

The president's championing of a Palestinian state may play well in Riyadh and Damascus, but – guess what? -- the Saudis and Syrians aren't voting in the presidential election. But millions of evangelical Christians, who view the president's almost inexplicable support for Arafatistan as an abandonment of the Jewish state (not to mention the Bush doctrine on terrorism), will be voting in November, or not voting – depending on how discouraged they are.

Defining Kerry as a liberal isn't as simple as it sounds.

Yes, Kerry's voting record is to the left of Ted Kennedy's – environmental wacko, anti-enterprise, practically a poster boy for public employee unions.

Yes, Kerry spent 20 years in the Senate voting against every major weapons program and sensible foreign-policy initiative. And yes, his conduct as a leader of the anti-war movement (calling those Americans who fought in Vietnam war criminals and helping to create the conditions for the fall of Saigon) was disgraceful.

Still, in presidential campaigns, rhetoric often trumps the record. Kerry is great at posturing. (How else could a man married to a multi-millionaire pass himself off as a tribune of the middle class?)

His war record will provide body armor against Republican attacks on a broad range of defense/foreign policy-related votes.

Kerry isn't Mike Dukakis, the last Massachusetts Democrat to seek the presidency. He won't wave around his membership card in the American Civil Liberties Union. Though he's anti-capital punishment, there's no Willie Horton lurking in his past. If Kerry gets in a tank, he won't look like a child in an amusement-park ride.

Nor is the Massachusetts senator Al Gore -- an equally doctrinaire liberal who came within a hair's breadth of being elected president four years ago. Kerry won't repeat Gore's mistake of coming across as a pompous ass during the debates -- no sneering, exaggerated sighs or condescension.

No, John Forbes Kerry isn't your father's Massachusetts liberal. (He's more PR savvy.) He has lived for 20 years not in the hermetically sealed environment of the Bay State -- where even the air reeks of political correctness -- but in the rough-and-tumble world of DC politics. He may be a liberal, but he won't act or sound like the second coming of George McGovern.

All of which makes Bush's eloquent statement of support for the marriage amendment so important. Crucial in and of itself, it also represents

a change of direction for the Bush campaign -- a recognition that the president is going to have to work to solidify and energize his conservative base, and an acknowledgement that the culture will be a crucial battlefield in the upcoming campaign.

What the election will come down to isn't the undecided vote -- not the soccer moms or hockey dads -- but who can do the best job of motivating and activating his core constituency.

The left doesn't need an adrenaline boost. Liberals passionately, albeit deludedly, believe that the 2000 election was stolen from them. They are convinced that Bush lied about WMD to lure the nation into a war with Saddam Hussein. They consider this administration the greatest threat to civil liberties since the Palmer raids and the internment of Japanese Americans. They see the Bush administration as government of the rich, by the oil companies and for the defense contractors.

For them, the 2004 election will be a holy crusade.

And what of the right? Despite Karl Rove's regular handholding sessions with the Washington conservative crowd, he and the rest of the Bush campaign in the past have operated under the assumption that, in the final analysis, the right will have nowhere else to go.

GOP insiders say this in every election and, in consequence, often end up on the outside looking in at the next Inaugural Ball.

Conservatives don't actually have to go anywhere for Bush to lose. They need only stay home in significant numbers. In the last presidential election, an estimated 4 million evangelical voters who should have gone polls didn't. In the aftermath of eight years of Clinton criminality – fornication in the White House, presidential perjury, treason on technology transfers to China -- Bush didn't give them enough of a reason to vote for him.

In order to prevail in what is shaping up to be a close, bitterly fought contest, he absolutely must this time.

Enter homosexual marriage, and in its wake a panoply of related issues – judicial tyranny (legislating from the bench), God in the Pledge of Allegiance, public display of The Ten Commandments and Janet Jackson's nipple in the Super Bowl half-time show.

Mundane you may say. But elections often turn on seemingly mundane matters with deep symbolic significance.

Ordinary people – and not just evangelical Christians – see the America of their youth eroding before their eyes. Worse, they feel powerless to stem the tide. Un-elected judges are taking vital decisions – decisions that

could permanently alter the course of their society – not just out of their hands, but beyond the control of their elected representatives.

By supporting the marriage amendment – soberly and eloquently – Bush has said “Enough!” He has signaled conservatives that they have a champion in the White House. He has chosen to fight on terrain the Democrats clearly don’t want to contest.

Kerry wants an election about the economy (where are the jobs?), and why we went to war in Iraq, and what the president was doing during his service with the Texas Air National Guard, and Enron and Martha Stewart, and corporate out-sourcing and tax cuts for the rich.

He most decidedly does not want a campaign about marriage and families and children and moral values and the God of our fathers – witness Kerry’s nervous declaration that he does not support gay marriage.

On Wednesday, Kerry said he now backs an amendment to the Massachusetts Constitution defining marriage a la Genesis – as long as so-called civil unions are also enshrined in the state constitution. But, along with only a handful of members of Congress, he voted against the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) to protect traditional marriage.

Civil unions, which have never been enacted by a popular vote, constitute de facto gay marriage – all of the substance, sans the name. In

short, the senator's opportunistic move (prompted by the Bush stance) will impress no one.

The New York Times endlessly repeats the lie that Bush Sr. lost with a values campaign in 1992. But he didn't. Coming out of a national nominating convention laden with values rhetoric with a big bump in the polls, Bush blew it by dropping the issue after Labor Day.

For W., everything now depends on follow through. Will he drop the ball – or drop-kick it through the goalposts? Was his Tuesday speech a sop to the right, or the beginnings of a concerted offensive?

Will he forge ahead with more interim appointments of stalled judicial nominees (he's only made two to date), support for legislation to remove jurisdiction over establishment-clause issues from a glue-sniffing federal judiciary, and real leadership on the marriage amendment?

A marriage of family values with the president's bully pulpit is a prescription for domestic bliss -- during a second Bush administration.