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HEADLINE: GAY AIDES 'OUTED' IN BATTLE OVER BAN ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGES

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BODY:

As a Senate vote nears on a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages, some **gay** rights activists are "outing" closeted homosexual staffers who work for members of Congress who support it.

"Frankly we're giving as good as we get. If they want to have a debate on family values, we'll have one," said John Aravosis, a political consultant and **gay** activist. "They want to make us second-class citizens and **gay** people are aiding and abetting in the effort."

"We're doing it to expose hypocrisy," said **Michael Rogers**, another leader in the outing campaign.

However, the tactic is being denounced by other advocates of homosexual rights and causing angst among some **gay** and lesbian workers on Capitol Hill who fear for their jobs.

"It's not going to help the cause at all," said Lynden Armstrong, an aide to Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and a founder of the **Gay** and Lesbian Association of Senate Staffers, or GLASS Caucus. "It's not going to change the minds of any member" because they will vote to satisfy their constituents or their own convictions.

"Coming out is a very personal process that people go through," said Armstrong. "It can be emotionally and psychologically difficult. ... It is not fair that they are doing this."

"We oppose using sexual orientation as a weapon," echoed Steven Fisher, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest **gay** rights group.

Aravosis and Rogers, conducting separate outing efforts, have targeted 20 offices of House members and senators or committees where they say key aides are closeted **gays** or lesbians and where the lawmakers or committee chairs support the amendment. They are exposing the aides on Internet sites or through **gay** newspaper ads.

Aravosis is the national co-chairman of DearMary.com, named for Mary Cheney, who is openly **gay** but working for the re-election of her father, Vice President Dick Cheney. President Bush supports the constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage and wants to make **gay** marriage a campaign issue. Rogers has conducted his outings on his "BlogActive" at www.michaelrogers.us.

"We want to create a climate where the price of anti-**gay** prejudice is too high for Congress," said Aravoris, a former staff lawyer for Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Ala. "I worked on the Hill over 20 years ago and **gay** people are everywhere. Unfortunately, too many of us are working for the enemy."

The amendment seemed headed to defeat in a test vote on Wednesday -- falling not only short of the 67 "yeas" needed for a two-thirds majority to change the constitution but also below the 60 needed to cut off debate.

"This issue is not going away," said Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee, tacitly conceding defeat. "Will it be back? Absolutely, yes," he added.

The proposal, backed by the president and many conservatives, declares that marriage in the United States "shall consist only of a man and a woman." It further states that neither the federal nor any state constitution "shall be construed to require that marriage or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon any union other than the union of a man and a woman."

Not surprisingly, the outings have stirred considerable interest and controversy in the politically active **gay** community of the nation's capital. In an editorial, the community's newspaper, the Washington Blade, supported the outings.

"If ever there were a definition of a **gay** Uncle Tom, it would fit these people. These are not dishwashers or short-order cooks at Cracker Barrel, facing poverty if their redneck bosses learn they're big homos," the Blade editorialized. "These are smart, talented, well-educated professionals who could find success in any number of highly paid positions on or off the Hill but who instead have chosen to devote their professional lives to advancing the careers of politicians who would strip them and their friends of basic civil rights protections and even redress of their grievances in the courts."

But a different view was offered by a **gay** aide for a Republican senator supporting the amendment. The staffer works on an environmental issue completely unrelated to **gay** marriage and admits there is a "trade-off" in "diverting my eyes from all other issues" in order to work on what is most important to her.

However, the outing campaign has diverted attention from the "real issue" here, said the staffer, who asked not to be identified.

"We're focused on outing **gay** people when we ought to be outing the people who are really doing damage to the institution of marriage," she said. How many heterosexual members of Congress are divorced or having affairs? she wondered.

What could **gay** marriage do to the institution that is worse than what Bill Clinton, Kobe Bryant, Kid Rock and Britney Spears have done or than the concept of "starter marriages" among some young people? she said.

"The people who are doing the outing are missing the point. The issue is marriage," she said. "It is difficult for me, as someone who has always played by the rules, to be told that I'm less than a full person" and not "eligible for the status of marriage."

The outings were also condemned by Christopher Barron, communications director for Log Cabin Republicans, a **gay** GOP group.

"This plays right into the hands of the evangelical right," he said.

At this "watershed moment" in the movement for **gay** and lesbian rights, Barron said, some activists are not devoting their energy to defeat the amendment but "instead to turn on other **gay** and lesbian folks."

"It's disappointing and not very helpful," he said.

But Rogers said the tactic is justified.

"I sat patiently by for years as they trashed my community in Congress," he said. "And now they're talking about changing the Constitution of the United States of America" to deny **gay** rights.

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