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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
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President's Radio Address

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THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. The United States Senate this past week began an important discussion about the meaning of marriage. Senators are considering a constitutional amendment to protect the most fundamental institution of civilization, and to prevent it from being fundamentally redefined.

This difficult debate was forced upon our country by a few activist judges and local officials, who have taken it on themselves to change the meaning of marriage. In Massachusetts, four judges on the state's highest court have ordered the issuance of marriage licenses to applicants of the same gender. In San Francisco, city officials issued thousands of marriage licenses to people of the same gender, contrary to the California family code. Lawsuits in several states, including New Jersey, Florida, Nebraska, and Oregon, are also attempting to overturn the traditional definition of marriage by court order.

In 1996, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Defense of Marriage Act, and President Clinton signed it into law. That legislation defines marriage, for purposes of federal law, as a union between a man and a woman, and declares that no state is required to accept another state's definition of marriage. Yet an activist court that strikes down traditional marriage would have little problem striking down the Defense of Marriage Act. Overreaching judges could declare that all marriages recognized in Massachusetts or San Francisco be recognized as marriages everywhere else.

When judges insist on imposing their arbitrary will on the people, the only alternative left to the people is an amendment to the Constitution -- the only law a court cannot overturn. A constitutional amendment should never be undertaken lightly -- yet to defend marriage, our nation has no other choice.

A great deal is at stake in this matter. The union of a man and woman in marriage is the most enduring and important human institution, and the law can teach respect or disrespect for that institution. If our laws teach that marriage is the sacred commitment of a man and a woman, the basis of an orderly society, and the defining promise of a life, that strengthens the institution of marriage. If courts create their own arbitrary definition of marriage as a mere legal contract, and cut marriage off from its cultural, religious and natural roots, then the meaning of marriage is lost, and the institution is weakened. The Massachusetts court, for example, has called marriage "an evolving paradigm." That sends a message to the next generation that marriage has no enduring meaning, and that ages of moral teaching and human experience have nothing to teach us about this institution.

For ages, in every culture, human beings have understood that traditional marriage is critical to the well-being of families. And because families pass along values and shape character, traditional marriage is also critical to the health of society. Our policies should aim to strengthen families, not undermine them. And changing the definition of traditional marriage will undermine the family structure.



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On an issue of this great significance, opinions are strong and emotions run deep. All of us have a duty to conduct this discussion with civility and decency toward one another. All people deserve to have their voices heard. And that is exactly the purpose behind the constitutional amendment process. American democracy, not court orders, should decide the future of marriage in America.

The process has now begun in the Congress. I urge members of the House and Senate to pass, and send to the states for ratification, an amendment that defines marriage in the United States as a union of a man and woman as husband and wife.

Thank you for listening.

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