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San Francisco Mayor Exults in Move on Gay Marriage

By DEAN E. MURPHY

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 18 — Mayor Gavin Newsom, the man behind San Francisco's week-old policy allowing same-sex marriages, sported a wide grin on Wednesday.

Opponents of the policy had fared poorly in the courts, and the line of gay and lesbian couples waiting for marriage licenses at City Hall remained long and boisterous.

Beneath the smile, the mayor, 42 days into his job, was feeling the weight of his decision to place the city and his young career at the center of a heated national debate.

In Washington, President Bush told reporters that he was "troubled by what I've seen" in San Francisco. Some of Mr. Newsom's supporters were worried that he had veered off course. Even some same-sex couples in line for marriage licenses questioned Mr. Newsom's motives.

For Mr. Newsom, a millionaire businessman who was branded the conservative candidate in mayoral election last fall — an opponent's campaign posters tried to link Mr. Newsom with President Bush and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger — this was a road no one had imagined.

"Most politicians don't get away with doing the right thing at a time when society is not necessarily unanimously ready for that," Mr. Newsom, a Democrat, said in an interview.

The new policy was such uncharted territory that Mr. Newsom had not even told his wife, the television commentator Kimberly Guilfoyle Newsom, until he had set it in motion.

In addition to deflecting the outrage of people like the Rev. Lou P. Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition, Mr. Newsom said, he faces surprisingly icy reactions from some in his own Irish Catholic family.

"I did it because I thought it was right," he said, "and those are the easiest decisions, and the toughest political decisions. Easiest decisions because you just know it is the right thing — but the politics of it.

"My God, how do I explain this to family member X? How do I explain this to the person who married my wife and I in one of the most traditional Catholic weddings two years ago?"

In the interview in his office in City Hall, Mr. Newsom, 36, stood by the decision to recognize same-sex marriages, describing his motives as pure and principled and grounded in guarantees of equality in the state's Constitution. But he also promised to "step down" on the policy if the courts ruled against it, saying his main objective, to put a "human face" on the gay marriage debate nationwide, had been achieved.

"I just say to the president," Mr. Newsom said, " `Come out and meet with the three-plus thousand couples that have committed themselves to one another, committed to a long-term loving relationship with equal status, the same status that he and his wife are afforded. And recognize the spirit and the pride that comes with that.' "

As for conservative critics, Mr. Newsom said he wore their enmity as "a code of distinction."

"That is an honor that I am happy to accept," he said. "I mean that sincerely. I have been befuddled by conservatives who talk about taking away rights, yet they claim to be conservatives. The hypocrisy to me is extraordinarily grand."

Though Mr. Newsom long ago said he favored same-sex marriage, the topic was not a major issue in the mayoral election or in his terms as a county supervisor. Before Mr. Newsom became mayor, his career was mostly distinguished by his efforts to crack down on the homeless problem, a position that endeared him to the business community and helped secure his victory in a tight nonpartisan runoff election.

Mr. Newsom still says homelessness is a major passion, saying a day does not go by when he does not devote some time to it.

He has also spent many of his first days in office shaking up city government in other ways. He appointed the first fire chief who is a woman and dragged several department heads to a run-down housing project and demanded explanations for its disrepair. And he recently agreed to a budget request to buy automated sidewalk cleaners only after insisting on testing one himself.

But less than two weeks after his inauguration on Jan. 8, Mr. Newsom found himself sidetracked by what quickly became the defining issue of his career so far. It began with an invitation from Representative Nancy Pelosi, a longtime family friend who represents the San Francisco region, to attend President Bush's State of the Union address.

It was there, sitting in Washington, that Mr. Newsom heard Mr. Bush speak against same-sex marriages.

"I was there and I just was scratching my head, saying this was not the world that I grew up aspiring to live in, that he was talking about," Mr. Newsom said. "I just found some of the words quite divisive."

When Mr. Newsom returned to San Francisco, he said, he read the court decisions that authorized gay marriage in Massachusetts, as well as the United States Supreme Court ruling last year on sodomy. As he mulled those precedents and Mr. Bush's comments, he said, he became convinced that he had a moral obligation to open the doors to same-sex marriages.

Unlike many other big-city mayors, Mr. Newsom had the ability to do so because San Francisco is both a city and a county, and in California, marriage licenses are a county responsibility.

"He is president of the United States, and I am just a guy who does stop signs and tries to revitalize parks," Mr. Newsom said. "I know my role. But I also know that I've got an obligation that I took seriously to defend the Constitution. There is simply no provision that allows me to discriminate."

Mr. Newsom acknowledged that it was a difficult path from that realization to the first same-sex wedding ceremony at 11:06 a.m. last Thursday. He said some of his top advisers had strongly recommended against the new policy because of the political fallout.

With business acumen, money, good looks and friends in the right places, Mr. Newsom has been promoted by many Democrats as a rising star. Some people suggested he wait and let the courts tackle the issue.

But Mr. Newsom said he had no patience for a long court battle.

"It was an easy argument, I imagine, between 1948 and 1967, when we all waited around for the courts of this country to recognize interracial marriages," Mr. Newsom said. "There are certain principles in life that transcend patience, and one of them to me is the obligation not to discriminate against people."

It was not long, he said, before his entire staff was on board. Soon the excitement unleashed downstairs swept the second-floor mayor's office, so much so that on Friday Mr. Newsom broke his rule of "not making this about me" and officiated at two same-sex weddings that involved people who worked for him.

"I think it is going to be a very rocky road," Mr. Newsom said. "I think at the end of the day people will say he didn't need to do that. And, boy, look what he sacrificed to do that. Look what he could have done. Look at what, some will say, he should have done. I know that."