

## **Your woman or your rooster?**

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### **Columbia, South Carolina**

#### **A hard choice, it seems, for some South Carolina politicians**

South Carolina is a rather traditional, male-minded place, with a particularly ornery legislature, but even some conservatives are a mite embarrassed by the odd double chalked up by the state's House Judiciary Committee last week. First, its members stopped a bill that would have increased the penalties for wife-battering; then they took the time to approve one protecting gamecocks, by making cock-fighting a felony.

This unfortunate juxtaposition has infuriated feminists (and many other people too). The rooster may be the mascot of the University of South Carolina's sports teams; but the state regularly finishes very high (sometimes even top) in rankings of the number of women killed by abusive partners. Women have held demonstrations and barraged lawmakers with furious e-mails and telephone calls.

Given such pressures, the chastened politicians have rushed to reintroduce a revised domestic-violence bill, hoping to get it through by the end of the session on June 2nd. The Republican House Speaker, David Wilkins, who, rumour has it, may be George Bush's next ambassador to Canada, released an appropriately diplomatic statement assuring the women of South Carolina that both issues--their safety and the protection of gamecocks--were being taken very seriously.

#### **Not very bright, really**

Unfortunately for Mr. Wilkins, others in his party have been less apologetic—notably John Graham Altman, an assemblyman from Charleston who was instrumental in squashing the original domestic-violence bill. First, he declared that the bill was not needed because a battered woman should never go back home to be hit again. Then, when asked by a female television interviewer whether politicians thought that a gamecock's life was worth more than a woman's, he replied: "You're not very bright, and you'll just have to live with that." Despite the ensuing uproar, Mr. Altman has refused to apologise to her.

This is not the first time that the crusty 70-year-old lawyer has been in trouble. In 1997, when he was trying to keep the Confederate flag flying over the State House, he told black legislators to "quit looking at the symbols. Get out and get a job. Quit shooting each other. Quit having illegitimate babies." Other recent highlights in a long career include describing Martin Luther King as "an enthusiastic, serial adulterer", condemning a hate-crimes bill for making "white heterosexuals second-class citizens", and proposing a "Choose Death" licence plate for pro-choice drivers.

The Republicans say their new revised bill would make domestic violence a felony on the third offence; which is slightly better than the current system in South Carolina where it is only a misdemeanour, unless it is "of a high and aggravated nature". Women's groups have promised to follow the legislature's progress carefully; one posse is organising a protest outside Mr Altman's home.