



Newsweek Acts Up

by Terry Eastland

I suppose it was inevitable in a presidential campaign year focused more than any before upon matters involving homosexuality that one of the major newsweeklies would devote major space to the subject. No less inevitably, *Newsweek's* eight-page cover story of September 14, "Gays Under Fire," was a thoroughly botched and biased job.

For starters, take the basic premise: that "gay America's struggle for acceptance" has netted "modest gains" but provoked "a powerful backlash" (no sting left in that cliché) in the form of "a well-coordinated counteroffensive by the religious right." Throughout, that "struggle for acceptance" was sanitized by *Newsweek*, with no mention of ACT-UP or Queer Nation or any other of the gay extremist groups. Nor was there any reference to the new reading material finding its way into public elementary schools, such as *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*, which teach the moral acceptability of gay living. One would think that parents who hold opposing views might themselves be said to feel "under fire," but *Newsweek* did not present their testimony. Why complicate the story line?

Newsweek spoke of "gay-bashing," a term not only left undefined but also used so indiscriminately as to suggest that anyone disapproving of homosexuality is guilty of it. (Most in the news media would concur: on a recent "Good Morning America," Vice President Dan Quayle found himself denying that it was "gay bashing" to say homosexual life-

styles are wrong. He was later singled out in a *New York Times* headline for a related bit of incorrectness: "Quayle Contends Homosexuality Is a Matter of Choice, Not Biology.") In any event, from the examples *Newsweek* provided, it would seem that only the religious right has a problem with homosexuality. Yet a poll commissioned by the magazine belied that notion: while 78 percent said homosexuals should have "equal



rights in job opportunities," 58 percent disapproved of "legally sanctioned gay marriages," and 53 percent said homosexuality is not "an acceptable alternative lifestyle." (Ever the organ of progress, *Newsweek* commented: "Fifty-three percent still don't consider homosexuality 'acceptable' behavior." Emphasis mine.)

Playing the historian, *Newsweek* said "it's possible to trace the right wing's anti-gay campaign to a bullwhip" that was "photographed hanging from the late Robert Mapplethorpe's derriere [sic] and featured in his 1989

retrospective partially funded by the National Endowment of the Arts." Swallowing the gay activist line, the magazine advised that the bullwhip came at "an opportune moment for the religious right," because "the Berlin wall and the contras had fallen." In other words, in desperate need of new targets to fuel its paranoia, the right turned to putting gays in their place. A serious treatment of the subject would have examined the different understandings of moral authority at issue in this debate.

Newsweek did pause to say where the religious right—simplistically equated with Protestant fundamentalism—got its "anti-gay animus": the Bible. The magazine's exegesis of an unnamed passage from Corinthians (I Corinthians 6: 9-11, evidently) consisted of a single, banal sentence: "Corinthians promises that homosexuals (along with fornicators, idolaters, adulterers and thieves) shall never inherit the kingdom of God." Readers weren't informed that Protestant fundamentalist churches are hardly alone in their negative views of homosexuality. Or that, as the *New York Times's* religion writer Peter Steinfelds recently reported, there's plenty of debate over the issue in mainstream Protestant and Catholic precincts. *Newsweek* evidently didn't even bother to consult its own religion editor, Kenneth Woodward, who could have alerted its writers to what America's churches and synagogues teach about homosexuality. Such reporting might even have allowed the magazine to understand its own poll, wherein support for equal job rights did not translate into approval of homosexual "lifestyles."

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By scanting the role of religion, *Newsweek* essentially missed the story: namely, that attitudes on homosexuality are more often than not a function of religious belief. But it's so much easier to abhor the "religious right." The magazine reported several examples of violence—youths throwing rocks at an AIDS victim; a gang of ten thugs severely beating a gay man—always with the implication that the religious right supports such acts. Although anti-gay violence has been roundly condemned by religious leaders on the right, *Newsweek* included none of this abundant testimony. Again, why complicate the story line?

Public policy issues were treated just as tentatively. "Gays Under Fire" reported, for example (and wrongly, as it turned out), that "California Gov. Pete Wilson, under pressure from the fundamentalist wing of the state Republican party, is expected to veto an anti-gay-discrimination bill for the second time in a year." Again, it's those reactionary fundamentalists—but wait: *Newsweek* did not report that the bill would impose penalties even against churches that in their employment decisions discriminate on the basis of "sexual orientation." Might there not be a legitimate constitutional question here about free exercise of religion?

Likewise *Newsweek's* treatment of "domestic partnership laws." Here the magazine did mention some of the practical matters at stake, such as health benefits and inheritance rights. But it failed to discuss why the law historically has extended legal and economic advantages to heterosexual marriage and denied them to unmarried heterosexual couples, homosexual couples, and even long-term platonic roommates. Without knowing the reason for this age-old law—to encourage both the economic independence and interdependence of the traditional family unit, presumed to be vital to the transmission of civilization—readers will have no idea why there should be any deep-seated opposition at all to legal sanctioning of homosexual marriage.

Newsweek also skimmed over a major point of contention concerning federal civil rights law. Is discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation akin to discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, national origin, sex, and disability?

Conservatives argue that if equal employment opportunity laws were to be amended to include sexual orientation, it would create yet another victim group demanding quotas for itself. Gay activists say they want equal treatment, not special treatment. *Newsweek* conveyed this much, but like others covering this issue didn't go far enough. In the current affirmative action climate, as employers become increasingly vulnerable to disparate-impact lawsuits from women and minority workers, there would be nothing to stop gay plaintiffs from acting similarly and charging employment discrimination if they felt their protected group was "underrepresented."

In depicting gays as aggrieved victims, *Newsweek* was merely following the journalistic norm. In July, for instance, the *Washington Post* reported on a Vatican statement on homosexuality recently sent to U.S. Catholic bishops. The *Post's* account began: "The Vatican has declared its support for discrimination against gay people in such areas as

public housing, family health benefits and the hiring of teachers, coaches, and military personnel." The Vatican's actual terms were quoted two paragraphs later: "There are areas in which it is not unjust discrimination to take sexual orientation into account, for example, in the consignment of children to adoption or foster care, in employment of teachers or coaches, and in military recruitment." In short, in the *Post's* thinking, the words "is not unjust discrimination" are synonymous with support for discrimination—which makes sense if the only conceivable interpretation is that the Vatican victimizes gays.

The *Post* ran an unforgettable headline the day after the Republican convention: "Voters Decry GOP 'Gay-Bashing.'" The subhead read: "Rhetoric Seen as Desperate, Ugly—but Maybe Effective." Voters decry it but think it's effective? Clearly, some voters decried it and thought it would be effective with other voters. A small point, perhaps, but why can't headline writers be more coherent? Probably because they're reflecting their paper's editorial views. □



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Lessons in Liberty

by Cathy Young

One year after a gang of hardliners botched their coup and the Soviet empire dissolved into proto-plasm, the jailed plotters busy themselves composing verses, memoirs, and op-ed commentary, and are often quoted in the still-kicking *Pravda*. Just as there are governments in exile, suggests *Novoye Vremya* editor Alexander Pumpyansky, these men are acting like a "government in prison." Gorbachev's hapless prime minister Nikolai Ryzhkov (whose official employment record, *Novoye Vremya* reveals, bears a unique entry: "Resigned in connection with changes in the Constitution of the USSR") has also published a memoir, *Perestroika: A History of Betrayals*, a book said to be selling briskly.

The once-almighty Communist Party of the Soviet Union is defending its record in a Moscow court; what public interest there is in the case, notes Kronid Lubarsky in *Novoye Vremya*, resembles the public's morbid fascination with the trial of the "Rostov maniac" Andrei Chikatilo, the serial killer/rapist/cannibal. Moscow newspapers advertise auctions of state properties slated for privatization (bidding for a donut shop in Moscow starts at 1.2 million rubles, or about \$5,300). A cartoon in the generally pro-capitalist *Izvestia* shows two bloated *biznesmeni* toasting each other as they sit on tall bar stools from which chickens, sausages, and vodka bottles are suspended, while befuddled ordinary citizens scramble along the floor to get at these goodies.

In the August 18 *Independent Gazette*, several Moscow intellectuals ponder the question, "What did the new revolution give our country?" Valeria

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Novodvorskaya, the impetuous leader of the Democratic Union once known for her ritual public immolations of portraits of Lenin and Gorbachev, hasn't mellowed out: she finds the new régime corrupt, mendacious, and guilty of "the overthrow of the democratic government of Georgia" (oh, please!), and is "impatiently waiting for a third revolution." Animated feature director Yuri Norshtein probably speaks for the majority: "I've had it up to here with revolutions; I want a normal, quiet life." Mikhail Roshchin, playwright: "We remain serfs of the state, of its structures, its vacillations and whims." Marietta Chudakova, literary critic: "Freedom does not distribute rations; it is merely a precondition for a life of dignity. . . . Only fools and cynics who cannot see beyond their immediate self-interest continue to assure the world that it was all in vain."

The weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* posed a similar question to the man in the street. Only one of the half-dozen respondents, 41-year-old factory worker R. Zainulin, lamented "the disintegration of a great state." The most optimistic, curiously, were the oldest, such as V. Gudkov, a 50-year-old locksmith: "What we have is freedom. Freedom of speech, for instance. True, we're as poor as we always were. But that summer, when we learned about [the coup], my wife and I were scared that for the rest of our lives, we'd be disenfranchised people, dependent on the government." Less cheerful was V. Slavina, a 36-year-old clerk: "In the past, we used to live in fear, afraid to say a word and getting kopecks for our work. Today, it's shout whatever you want and no one listens."

A more scientific and very comprehensive poll, though conducted back in April, was reported in the *Independent Gazette* on August 8. Asked about their personal situation, 13 percent said that

things were "good"; 63 percent, "fair"; 15 percent, "bad"; 3 percent, "intolerable." The country's condition was viewed as more dire: 33 percent rated it as near-critical, 60 percent as critical or catastrophic, and only 3 percent as normal.

All but 11 percent said they had been strongly (56 percent) or somewhat (33 percent) affected by the changes. Twenty-three percent thought life had become "fuller and more interesting," and 22 percent said that they had been able to improve their and their families' economic situation. Twenty-three percent also felt that they had managed to "get rid of the constant feeling of dependence on the bosses." As for specific benefits, 32 percent (mostly outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, presumably) had received a plot of land enabling them to feed themselves and their families. Eight percent had been able to "become entrepreneurs, invest money, and receive profits," while 10 percent—whether or not they overlap with the preceding eight is unclear—had become "property owners, shareholders, or partners in a cooperative." Not quite the picture of passive, fatalistic Russians we keep hearing about.

Respondents were also asked about their attitudes toward the Yeltsin government. Overall, just 15 percent expressed support for the current government, while 27 percent condemned its policies as "damaging to Russia's interests" and 58 percent were undecided. On economic reforms, both the positives (at 30 percent) and the negatives (at 43 percent) were higher, with 27 percent undecided. As for specific measures, military cutbacks were favored by 62 percent with 15 percent opposed; encouragement of entrepreneurship, by 54-23 percent; privatization of state properties, by 47-23 percent; privatization of housing, by 46-