



# Pride and Politics

## Gay Rights 30 Years After Stonewall

There's a tiresome old question on the left: While we are sympathetic to the cause of gay rights, don't our priorities lie elsewhere? In the teeth of the globalizing economy, the argument goes, there are many more pressing matters: sweatshops, desperate poverty, out-of-control military spending, you name it. To fall for "identity politics" is to succumb to just another of capitalism's ways of dividing its critics.

But the interests of the left's diverse constituencies often overlap in fruitful ways. This is not a new phenomenon; the 19th-century gay socialist Edward Carpenter longed for a liberation movement that would put together the pieces of the revolutionary puzzle. On the thirtieth anniversary of Stonewall, this special issue of *In These Times* demonstrates that queer liberation helps to unify, not divide, progressives in the fight for security and dignity.

## Taking Care of Business

By Hans Johnson

The King of Beers was in trouble. A Bud Light ad showing two men holding hands no sooner had appeared in a St. Louis gay newspaper in April than Jerry Falwell was railing against "homosexual images coming into our homes through reckless advertising" and the Family Research Council was denouncing Anheuser-Busch's "steps to promote homosexuality."

Instead of calling in the Clydesdales, the brewer with the multimillion-dollar promotional budget called on the public to phone in reactions to the brouhaha. And the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the nation's largest gay lobbying

group, rushed to the company's defense, urging activists to write Busch praising the ad.

Welcome to a widening front of the gay rights movement, where gay groups like HRC direct grassroots advocacy not to Capitol Hill but corporate headquarters. The shift in focus stems in part from a GOP logjam blocking national legislation to recognize hate crimes and ban workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. But the shift is also about business—and the gay movement's tightening embrace of it. The bid to save the Bud ad, which the brewer seems poised to resurrect once the dust settles, is the latest in

a series of gay groups' appeals to the rank and file to stand up for firms like American Airlines and Disney.

With these moves, national gay organizations show a readiness to applaud corporate baby-steps—even though such praise may rule out needed criticism of corporate conduct in other quarters, like wages and working conditions. And they have a rapport with big-money interests that the middle-class eccentrics, poor drag queens and courageous weaklings—who helped launch the gay rights movement in a Manhattan bar raid 30 years ago—might find bewildering.

Too often extolling companies as agents of change, instead of citizens and elected delegates, reflects a cynicism toward representative democracy. This game plan, suited more to investment brokering and board room lobbying than a freedom struggle, bodes ill for the movement.

**I**t wasn't always this way. As recently as 1994, Peri Jude Radevic, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, roundly criticized NAFTA, then pending in Congress, as hurtful to working people, including gays. Radevic, who resigned shortly thereafter, failed to make the case for connecting sexual orientation bias with workers' rights. But her remarks touched off a fruitful debate among gay people about the ties between their movement and other struggles for freedom and human dignity.

That debate largely has died out. In its place rage discussions about gays' stake in the marketplace and which vendors and brands are most ardently wooing gay consumers. Exemplifying this move is William Waybourn, former executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, who now runs a for-profit business placing corporate ads in gay publications.

Gay groups, too, have become boosters of speculative claims that the community has excess disposable income to throw at everything from computers to cruise tickets. Rarely do they cite studies indicating that gay people may actually make less than their straight counterparts due to workplace discrimination (see "The Myth of Gay Affluence," page 20). Personal contributions to the cause—once likely to be measured in years of service logged, demonstrations led and, yes, even protest buttons branched—are now more often tied to total dollars donated.

Granted, the dollar daze is more apparent at the national level than elsewhere in the movement. An emphasis on local organizing by a new coalition of state-level gay organizations, banded together under the banner "Equality Begins At Home," may put a check on the big-money strategy.

All of the changes during this decade are not lamentable. The Clinton years have taken gay politics from megaphones to club membership, as gay groups matured from under-resourced outsiders with a penchant for purist stances to well-connected insiders eager to claim victory from modest, incremental gains. And despite its dim-witted endorsement of New York Republican Sen. Al D'Amato last year, the HRC has made some smart staff moves under Elizabeth Birch, who came to her post from Apple Computer. To help the movement's prime mover pull its weight, Birch launched a training program for young activists and hired veteran organizer Donna Red Wing.

Still, the prominence of money in the gay groups' priorities raises troubling concerns. To its credit, HRC's support for Busch came with a call for the company to grant domestic partnership benefits to its employees. But in its haste to support corporations, the group has failed to pursue low-budget, high-impact outreach bids like its 1998 Pacific Northwest Equality Tour. That project netted the group favorable publicity and participation from hundreds of new allies in all walks of life. Why not do it again?

Back in May 1992, candidate Clinton told a gay audience that it was time for them to be "big" people, to face the massive legislative challenges on civil rights that lay ahead. Perhaps the movement has taken his injunction too far, growing disdainful of the small or less powerful, reluctant to tell its tales of suffering at the risk of seeming as if it really needed someone's help. If, for example, last fall's overwhelming approval of ballot measures outlawing gay marriage in Alaska and Hawaii are any indication, the movement does need that help.

**T**hat money has come to dominate party politics in the Clinton era is beyond dispute. But the growing sway of money extends beyond ballot races into the realm of interest-group politics. Many gay leaders, rather than take action against the sea of troubles this trend portends, prefer to wade into the waves of lucre. "Money feeds activism, and activism provides leverage that generates money. The two aspects work hand in hand," Jeff Soref, chairman of a New York gay group and a major Democratic Party donor, recently told the *National Journal*.

But since when did gay activists have to become rain-makers? When gay leaders and gay groups got too busy making and raising money to talk to their neighbors about real-life pressures and fears, that's when. This is ironic for a movement still so close to the suffering of the AIDS crisis, which broke down walls of privacy and silence, yielding a more sensitized public and a political movement spanning ethnicity and class.

In the late '90s, however, a popular theory of activism posits dollars as the ticket to education and influence. Playing by these rules—and with the Federal Election Commission and many state over-

sight bodies in shambles, this increasingly means no rules—isn't cheap. A few campaigns have benefited from massive cash infusions, including a 1995 campaign in Maine that brought in hundreds of thousands of dollars from out of state to defeat an anti-gay statewide ballot referendum.

Yet seldom does the democratic process provide a progressive outcome in return for sheer dollar investment. Instead it yields loose change. In Maine, a 1998 bid to preserve a new state anti-bias law squandered nearly half a million bucks broadcasting ineffective ads. This came at the expense of networking with outlying parts of the state, where capable activists clamored in vain for the most meager campaign resources. According to several participants, one reason the 1998 campaign foundered was the

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narrow, short-term focus of the 1995 bid, which failed to educate voters about the toll of discrimination and harassment.

A similar spending approach afflicts HRC. According to spokesman David Smith, in the last year the group has spent more than \$100,000 responding to anti-gay TV and print ads that claim homosexuals can be "cured." Smith argues that the ads—part of an air-war in which activists, like the rest of the public, are merely spectators—have paid dividends in sowing pro-gay attitudes. But the HRC's budget would be more wisely spent tending to the grassroots. Such is the lesson of a shoe-string campaign in Ypsilanti, Mich., last May, where spirited activists preserved an anti-discrimination ordinance, beating back anti-gay forces that included a last-minute foray from arch-homophobe Reggie White of the Green Bay Packers.

**F**or gay politics, reliance on money and coziness with business have more concrete perils, too. The case of Don Fisher, founder of The Gap, proves cautionary. Fisher, who has supported some AIDS- and gay-related service work where he lives in San Francisco, did gays a favor last year when he endorsed the openly gay James Hormel, Clinton's pick for ambassador to Luxembourg, whose nomination has been blocked by far-right members of Congress.

But Fisher also donated several thousand dollars to a 1998 California "paycheck protection" ballot measure that would have choked off union contributions to political candidates and hamstringed the Democratic Party. Fisher coughed up \$200,000 in soft money for GOP campaigns in 1998, but only \$10,000 for Democrats. More importantly, Fisher's firm, the ubiquitous mid-line apparel retailer, faces compelling criticism for its use of low-wage, offshore labor at the same time its domestic ad campaigns target hip, multi-ethnic urban customers.

Gay groups, who have welcomed contributions from Fisher in the past, are quiet on his corporate practices and giving patterns, both stinging insults to organized labor. His high regard among gay leaders reflects the creeping classism of a movement more wedded to the buck than it wants to admit.

Of course, the gay movement is doing a lot of things right. It has developed a grassroots network throughout the nation and inspired similar struggles around the world. Its successes in legal reform, guided in part by gay groups like HRC, have helped make life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness more tenable goals for three generations of gay people.

Gay groups' growing expertise in showcasing the brutish and callous tactics of their adversaries has proved especially refreshing. In April, Robert Knight of the Family Research Council told the *New York Times* that efforts to reduce hate crimes among teenagers were intrusive and "a hate crime against parents." But he only called to mind the tear-stained face of Judy Shepard, whose gay son Matthew was brutally beaten to death last year in Wyoming. Gay groups have astutely cultivated her as an advocate for gay rights.

Yet a movement that has done so much to reduce once-acceptable forms of cruelty in our society has high standards to meet. The pursuit of money and cooperation with big business sidesteps the plight of people exploited or left behind by the booming economy. It also leads gay groups to downplay the cultivation of personal connections with voters, connections that money can't buy. For a movement that grew out of the struggles of people with virtually no money and very little to lose, that's a sad departure from a noble legacy. ■

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## The Pentagon's Sexual Obsession

By Nathaniel Frank

**T**his spring marks the fifth anniversary of the Pentagon's "don't ask, don't tell" policy regulating the conduct of its gay troops. The policy was supposed to allow gay military service for the first time, prohibit anti-gay harassment and strictly limit investigations of soldiers' sexuality.

But in an effort to prevent the dreaded subject of homosexuality from ever surfacing in the barracks, the policy also imposed a regime of gay-only silence and celibacy requirements, demanding that gay—but not straight—soldiers keep their sexual orientation secret and remain celibate both on and off the base.

The policy has been a disaster. Since taking effect in 1994, discharges for homosexuality have swelled each year, reaching a peak last year of 1,149 oustings—3 to 4 per day. This is the highest rate of discharge since 1987. Meanwhile, top military men complain of drastic shortfalls in enlistees. American taxpayers are funding new ads, bonuses and other incentives to attract troops to fill vacancies, which exist partly because gay soldiers were expelled. The army now offers \$3,000 up front to any "reasonably able young man or woman who enlists."

The prohibitions on harassment and the limitations on investigations of soldiers' sexuality are ignored by military leaders who enforce discipline and tolerance in other realms of the service on a regular basis. The Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), an education and watchdog group that documents violations of the policy, has taken the lead in pressing

the Pentagon to enforce its own regulations. While commanders spend millions of dollars and thousands of hours investigating soldiers with suspicious sexualities, not a single person has been disciplined for one of the 2,485 violations the SLDN has documented of the asking, pursuing or harassing prohibitions—all violations of military law. In fact, when a soldier suspected of being gay or lesbian reports being harassed, many commanders use the occasion to investigate the harassment victim. While the policy was designed to protect the privacy of gays and straights alike by turning the gay issue into a non-issue, the sexuality of our nation's uniformed men and women remains a near-obsession in the armed forces.

Though "don't ask, don't tell" was hammered out as a temporary compromise between President Clinton and Congress, there have been no serious efforts to lift the remaining restrictions since its implementation. Though two federal district judges struck down "don't ask, don't tell" for violating the free speech and equal protection clauses of the Constitution, eight other challenges in five federal appellate courts have upheld the statute's constitutionality. The Supreme Court repeatedly has refused to consider challenges to the policy. Since the policy is federal law, and no longer an internal military regulation, it would take far greater effort to repeal it than before the government became involved. Even if the executive branch wanted to end the ban altogether, the barriers now in place make the prospect of change grim. ■

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# Fear of a Queer Planet

By Salim Muwakkil

**D**uring the first Black Radical Congress (BRC) last June in Chicago, a group of black nationalists professing Rastafarian beliefs temporarily disrupted events with an impromptu protest of a proposed BRC tenet that stated: "We want an end to homophobia and discrimination against lesbians and gay men."

The protest attracted little support, but it reflected an ongoing tension among black radicals. Some deny that gay rights are relevant to the well-being of the black community. And this is among black radicals, who are comfortable challenging other social traditions of capitalist America. Among more traditional African-Americans, gays are treated with undisguised hostility.

This conflict has long plagued progressive African-Americans. For example, gay rights was an extremely divisive issue at the 1986 founding of Jesse Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition. Jackson is one of the few black clergy who openly supports gay rights, but pro-gay language that appeared in his group's charter was vigorously opposed by other clergy and was significantly altered before it was approved.

There is little doubt that the black clergy's inordinate power reinforces widespread anti-gay biases. Since the black church historically was the only social institution relatively free of white control, it became the center of most community activity. Thus, many issues important to African-Americans are framed by the moralistic context of Judeo-Christian scripture.

While predominantly white denominations debate the inclusion of homosexuals, African-American churches refuse to talk about the issue. According to the Rev. Tim McDonald, head of Concerned Black Clergy in Atlanta, not one major black denomination has formally considered the inclusion of homosexuals. "The perception is that homosexuality is not a reality in our church," McDonald says. "Too many black churchgoers tell themselves that homosexuality is a problem white folks have, not black folks."

Other religions, like Islam, share Christianity's doctrinal aversion to homosexuality. Many conservative black nationalists, particularly members of the Nation of Islam, cite scriptural texts as a basis for their anti-gay prejudices.

Secular nationalists offer cultural reasons. "Homosexuality is a deviation from Afrocentric thought because it makes the person evaluate his own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness," wrote Molefi Kete Asante in his landmark book *Afrocentricity*, the manifesto of the Afrocentric movement. Asante, and many of his ilk, argue that homosexuality is a product of "European decadence."

Some of the crudest expressions of homophobia emerge from black popular culture. The lyrics of many rap songs are

filled with gay-bashing. Softness is a sin for those ghetto-centric purveyors of hard-core rap, and in their minds, homosexuality is the embodiment of softness. Even those hip-hop artists who profess progressive values pepper their rhymes with occasional "faggots" and other expressions of homophobic bigotry.

At the heart of much of this antagonism to gay issues is the notion that sanctioning homosexual behavior threatens an already imperiled black family. "Our families already are falling apart and our debilitated communities are the results," says Harold Lucas, a prominent Chicago activist. "Adding another barrier to black family life is akin to genocide."

Cornel West, professor of religion and African-American Studies at Harvard University, notes the homophobic influence of the church and the nationalists. But beneath, he sees a larger cultural crisis that presents black men with limited options of self-image and resistance. African-American men historically have been denied access to the social establishment—and often have gained entrance based on physical demonstrations of strength or virility. Thus, machismo has always been a strong component of the black masculine mystique.

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Homophobia is an affliction that deeply permeates this culture and, because of their peculiar history, African-Americans are particularly vulnerable. African-Americans, more than anyone, should understand the perils of prejudice, but many remain loathe to compare the black freedom struggle to the gay rights movement. That's why the BRC's forthright expression of solidarity with the fight for gay and lesbian freedom was a breath of fresh air and a sign that the black freedom movement is truly following the logic of liberation.

But any serious challenge of homophobic attitudes must begin in the black church, where those notions are sanctified and faithfully reproduced. Perversely, the devastating march of HIV/AIDS through the black community has forced the black church to confront its hostility toward homosexuality and triggered some progressive movement within that venerable institution. There also is an incipient movement among younger and more educated clergy to bring an end to the hallowed tradition of gay bashing that for too long has demonized gay African-Americans even as it spoke of God's love. ■