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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

LEGISLATING THE RISK OF LGBT TEACHERS
IN 1950s AND 1970s AMERICA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

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ABSTRACT

The existence of gay and lesbian teachers remains for many a dangerous notion. Indeed, education and schooling are terrains in which homosexuality has historically been highly charged. Underlying this are problematic assumptions about the suitability of gays and lesbians as school workers, assumptions that feed into larger questions about gays and lesbians in general. This thesis will explore these assumptions – and their consequences for gay and lesbian teachers – against the backdrop of both the 1950s, when the burgeoning Cold War created an “age of anxiety,” and the 1970s, when the rise of the religious right began to transform American politics and rally a nascent gay rights movement. In doing so, I will attempt to “map” the cultural, religious and political discourses which have supported prejudices against gay and lesbian school workers.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RISK OF GAY AND LESBIAN TEACHERS

It isn't about some gays getting some rights. It's that everyone else in our state will lose rights. For instance, parents will lose the right to protect and direct the upbringing of their children. Because our K-12 public school system, of which 90% of all youth are in the public school system, they will be required to learn that homosexuality is normal, equal and perhaps you should try it. This is a very serious matter, because it is our children who are the prize for this community. They are specifically targeting our children. (Representative Michelle Bachmann, March 6, 2004)

Heterosexuality is not normal. It's just common.
(Dorothy Parker)

Introduction

Who should be allowed to teach our children? Underlying this question – a question that continues to stir passions to this day – is an implicit understanding that teachers matter. If, as Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggest, education is the terrain where we define our present and shape our future, if it is a place where we make sense of our lives as a community and a nation, then teachers, in fact, matter a great deal. The American tradition has long affirmed the essential role of schools – and thus, the essential role of teachers – in the socialization of young people into the

standards and values of their larger community. Indeed, in *Ambach v. Norwalk* (1979), the US Supreme Court affirmed that teachers serve not only as instructors, but also “as role models, exerting a subtle but important influence over their students’ perceptions and values.” Similarly, Khayatt (1992) notes that, “teachers are hired not only on the basis of their professional competence, but also as models of the ideological values they represent.” If schools are used as institutions to transmit dominant values, then identifying and hiring teachers who will uphold those values is essential. To do otherwise could very well be dangerous.

Given this understanding of schools, it is perhaps not surprising that the presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teachers is not just problematic, but a risk. The remarkable political and cultural gains won by the LGBT rights movement over the past decade have not yet, it seems, fully taken root in schools. A 2010 poll conducted by Research 2000 suggests that 77% of self-identified Republicans believe that gay men and women should not be allowed to teach in public schools (Moulitsas, 2010).¹ That same year, Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) infused his “take back the country” message of fiscal responsibility with an evangelical plea to “make headway to repeal some of the things we’ve done, because politics only works when we’re realigned with our Savior...If someone is openly homosexual, they shouldn’t be teaching in the classroom. If an unmarried woman who’s sleeping with her boyfriend gets pregnant, she shouldn’t be in the classroom...” (DeMint, 2010). Today, as Blount (1995) notes, LGBT educators often

¹ It is interesting to note that only 73% of those surveyed in the same poll expressed opposition to gay marriage. The idea of LGBT teachers clearly remains – to many – threatening.

face overwhelming resistance in their schools and communities (Blount, p. 20). Twenty-one states plus Washington, D.C. outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation, and sixteen states plus Washington, D.C. outlaw discrimination based on gender identity or expression (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Even in these jurisdictions, job security, safety and community support are often tenuous.

Pedagogy = Pederasty?

Beyond generalized feelings of discomfort or unease, even beyond specific feelings of religious disagreement, what *exactly* is it about the idea of LGBT teachers that fuels such anxiety?

On one level, the very idea of an openly gay teacher unavoidably introduces sex – and thus, non-normative sexuality – into the classroom. This alone, perhaps, makes a homosexual teacher dangerous. As Jennings (2005) notes, by their very existence, gay teachers transgress the values they are expected to inculcate in their students and, in doing so, contradict a central function of schooling in society. (Jennings, p. 12)

Furthermore, as Jennings argues, LGBT teachers still confront lingering suspicions about their motives and behavior, suspicions that, while based on false presumptions, remain powerful. The premise that homosexuality is as a chosen behavior, for example, that it is a lifestyle to which one must somehow be recruited, nurtures fears about interactions between gay adults and children.

“Those who can’t reproduce, teach,” might be one way of framing this fear. Articulated another way, the assertion that “homosexuals cannot reproduce – so they must recruit. And to freshen their rank, they must recruit the youth of

America” (Bryant, p. 62) was a signature claim of Anita Bryant’s “Save the Children” campaign in the 1970s, and its potency continues to be invoked, to great effect.² The Family Research Council’s pamphlet, “Homosexuality in Your Child’s School” concludes with the assertion that, “Pro-homosexual activists in our schools do indeed recruit children. What they seek to do is recruit children – 100% of our children – as soldiers in their war against truth, common sense and moral values. That’s one recruitment drive that has no place on the campuses of America’s public schools.” (Family Research Council, 2006).

Jordan (2011) observes that, “The most effective American rhetoric for condemning civic toleration of homosexuality has repeatedly warned of dangers to the young” (Jordan, xiii). This hints beyond fears of recruitment, pointing even more deeply to what Blount calls the “pedophilia bugaboo.” It is an anxiety that, as noted by Anita Bryant, is tied to the “those who can’t reproduce, teach” meme, but has even more sinister implications: “Admitted homosexual teachers could encourage homosexuality by inducing pupils into looking upon it as an acceptable lifestyle. A particularly deviant-minded teacher could sexually molest children” (Bryant, 115). Litvak (1995) describes this rhetoric as one that helps create a “culture perpetually haunted by the possibility that pedagogy might turn into pederasty” (Litvak, p. 27). It is a rhetoric that, it seems to me, acknowledges the unique power that teachers possess as mentors, educators and role models; it is also a rhetoric that understands

² A television ad produced by the organization Protect Marriage in support of their successful 2008 campaign to overturn the California Supreme Court’s legalization of same sex marriage featured “rosy-cheeked boys bounding home to tell their parents they learned in school that a prince can marry a prince – and that they wanted to do the same when they grew up” (retrieved from <http://www.startribune.com/politics/165028496.html?refer=y>)

that teaching is in itself a kind of recruiting. Indeed, it is a kind of seduction.

In many ways, gays and lesbians were “made to stand for everything that many heterosexual Americans felt was wrong with this country: an increasing sense of social breakdown, growing sexual permissiveness and the weakening of family and authority structures” (Miller, p. 409). Even as gays and lesbians as a whole were making significant strides toward social acceptance throughout the latter twentieth century, the experience of LGBT educators remained difficult. Gay teachers operated under a specter of discrimination, job loss, public humiliation and irreparable damage to their reputations if the nature of their orientation was revealed. Rather than facing the prospect of being fired and “exposed,” gay and lesbian educators typically resigned quietly (Blount, p. 110). Questions regarding suitability of gays and lesbians as role models for young people served as the basis for this “systemic discrimination” (Miller, 409), but there were deeper concerns at work.

This paper will explore how these concerns about homosexuality – and, in particular, homosexual teachers – have intersected with the American cultural and political landscape at two key moments in the latter half of the last century. First, I will discuss the Cold War, when charges that the Roosevelt and Truman administrations were havens for homosexuals proved a potent political weapon and sparked a “Lavender Scare” more vehement and long lasting than McCarthy’s Red Scare. In particular, I will examine the Florida State Legislative Committee’s investigation and discharge of dozens of gay and lesbian teachers. I will then move to California in the 1970s to discuss the clash between two nascent social

movements – one advocating gay equality, the other advocating a more aggressive integration of conservative Christianity into American politics - in the debate surrounding Proposition 6, an initiative designed to prohibit gays and lesbians from teaching in California's public schools. I will explore how the Briggs Initiative forced voters to address important questions regarding not only homosexuality, but also the role of education – and educators – in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO

THE COLD WAR PERSECUTION OF HOMOSEXUALS

This country is more concerned about the charges of homosexuals in the government than Communists. (Charles S. Murphy, Special Counsel to the President, *Special Memorandum to President Harry S Truman*, July 11, 1950)

1950 was the year everybody in the United States worried about homosexuality. Is he? Did they? Am I? Could I? (John Cheever, *Diaries*)

The fifties were the bad decade. (Gore Vidal, *United States*)

According to the Kinsey Report

Days after making national headlines by exposing his knowledge of 205 “card carrying Communists” harbored by the US State Department, Joseph McCarthy asserted to his Senate colleagues that the presence of homosexuals in the government provided an equally urgent threat to national security (Johnson, p. 3). It was the homosexuals in the government, McCarthy argued, who maintained the strongest ties to Communist organizations, and it was the homosexuals who, even if they themselves weren’t Communist, could be used, blackmailed or manipulated by communists to further their cause.

McCarthy's take on the political climate of the day is, I think, a savvy synthesis of anti-Communism, national security concerns and post-war anxieties that Robert J. Corber (1995) terms the "Cold War consensus" (Corber, p. 4). And, as Corber notes, central to the success of the Cold War consensus was its politicization of homosexuality (Corber, p. 5). It is likely that homosexuality could not have been so easily politicized had it not been for the 1948 publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey, an Indiana entomologist previously known, if at all, for his research on gall wasps, set out to map the previously unsurveyed sexual landscape of the nation, and in doing so, forever changed social, cultural and political discourse related to sex. Its impact was seismic, as was the controversy it engendered.

It was a massive (and surprising) popular success. Over 250,000 copies were sold. Its publisher, W. B. Saunders, a venerable firm whose primary mission focused on medical school textbooks, had never seen anything like it. Two presses were kept running constantly to keep up with public demand (Burroway 2008). Cole Porter's invocation of Kinsey in his characteristically racy and witty lyrics from *Kiss Me, Kate* (1949) suggests just how much of a cultural touchstone Kinsey's work was:

According to the Kinsey Report
 Every average man you know
 Much prefers to play his favorite sport
 When the temperature is low.
 But when the thermometer goes way up
 And the weather is sizzling hot
 Mr. Gob for his squab,
 A marine for his queen,
 A G.I. for his cutie-pie is not
 'Cause it's too darn hot

The hullabaloo surrounding the Kinsey Report was not based on

sensationalized or sordid depictions of sexual behavior. Far from it: Kinsey's sex talk is largely clinical, dispassionate, and dry. It was, in fact, Kinsey's very dispassion that was, for some, why the Report demanded their vilification. Kinsey's calm, reasoned, scientific analysis was shockingly non-judgmental. In page after page of hard data on "how many" and "how often," *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* demonstrated that a dizzying array of sexual behaviors, fantasies and attitudes were, in fact, commonplace. By mapping the previously un-surveyed sexual landscape of the nation, Kinsey was able to ensure his readers that their private sexual "transgressions" marked them as neither deviant nor exceptional (Clendinen & Nagourney, 203).

Among Kinsey's most explosive data were those related to homosexuality. 37% of the men interviewed reported having had at least one homosexual encounter in their adult life. Moreover, and quite famously, Kinsey asserted that his data demonstrated that about 10% of the adult population is almost exclusively homosexual in orientation (Kinsey, p. 690). For gay men and lesbians, this was – and in many ways remains – the "shot heard round the world." After Kinsey, assumptions that nearly everyone conformed to traditional sexual morality, and that those who didn't were an exceptionally peculiar (or queer) minority, could no longer hold. Homosexuality was presented as one of many ordinary, even natural sexual behaviors (D'Emilio, p. 879).

The impact of this cannot be overstated. There was now scientific evidence that appeared to confirm what many gay people of the time were experiencing: the sense of belonging to a group. Moreover, by revealing that millions of Americans

exhibited a strong erotic interest in their own sex, the Kinsey Report implicitly encouraged those still struggling with their sexuality to accept their orientation and search for sexual comrades. In effect, Kinsey's work thus gave an added push at a crucial time to the emergence of an urban gay subculture. And, as John D'Emilio notes, Kinsey also "provided ideological ammunition that lesbians and homosexuals might use once they began to fight for equality" (D'Emilio, p. 883).

D'Emilio also notes that, for the general population, Kinsey's data on homosexuality served not to ameliorate hostility toward gay men and women, but to magnify suddenly and vividly the danger that they allegedly possessed (D'Emilio, p. 882). Further, Kinsey's report served to reinforce conservative concerns about the loosening of morals in the post-war United States. For those already worried about communism, Kinsey's revelation regarding the relatively large percentage of American men who had engaged in homosexual conduct served as a further wake-up call, prompting demands for a battle on two fronts against those who threatened the nation.

Enter Joseph McCarthy.

The Lavender Scare

In Boise, Idaho, in 1955, a schoolteacher sat down to breakfast with his morning paper and read that the vice-president of the Idaho First National Bank had been arrested on felony sodomy charges. The report quoted the local prosecutor's intention to "eliminate all homosexuality from the community." The teacher never finished his breakfast: "He jumped up from his seat, pulled out his suitcases, packed

as fast as he could, got into his car, and drove straight to San Francisco” (Marcus, 2002, p. 14).

He wasn't alone. But even in San Francisco, things weren't perfect. From the late 1940s throughout the 1950s, Bay Area police raided bars, patrolled cruising areas, conducted street sweeps, and trumpeted their intention of driving the “queers” out of the city. (D'Emilio, p. 92). Indeed, this period was marked by similar crackdowns throughout the country. In the early years of the Cold War, notes anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin, anxieties regarding sexual difference rose to a fever pitch. As a result, “erotic communities whose activities did not fit the postwar American dream drew intense persecution” (Rubin 1984, p. 3).

If, as Gore Vidal asserts, the 1950s was the “bad decade” for homosexuals (Vidal 1993, p. 122), it is due in large part to anxiety surrounding the “homosexual menace” (Rubin, p. 5). Paraphrasing a popular Cold War appellation, David Johnson has described the flurry of congressional investigations, executive orders, and sensational exposes in the media designed to root out homosexuals employed by the government as the “Lavender Scare.”

The Lavender Scare, argues Johnson, helped fan the flames of the Red Scare. In popular discourse, Communists and homosexuals were often conflated. Both groups were perceived as hidden subcultures with their own meeting places, literature, cultural codes, and bonds of loyalty. Both groups were thought to recruit to their ranks the psychologically weak or disturbed. And both groups were considered immoral and godless. Many people believed that the two groups were working together to undermine the government (Johnson, pp. 10-12).

Republicans in Congress, Johnson notes, warned of the threat posed to national security by homosexuals in the State Department as early as 1947, at the very start of the Cold War. But it wasn't until McCarthy's bombshell in 1950 that they took action. Pressing for more information that could help illuminate McCarthy's assertions regarding communist and homosexual subversion, the Senate learned while questioning John Puerifoy, the head of the State Department's loyalty-security program, that the department had purged ninety-one homosexuals from its ranks in the previous three years.

Puerifoy's testimony fueled what *New York Post* columnist Max Lerner termed a "Panic on the Potomac" (Johnson, p. 20). It was a panic that, for many conservatives, confirmed Republican accusations that the Roosevelt and Truman administrations were "honeycombed with homosexuals" (Johnson, p. 17). This proved to be a potent political weapon. It resonated with many conservatives who were already resentful of New Deal and Fair Deal bureaucracies and felt antagonism toward a Washington filled with "long-haired men and short-haired women" who were imposing their ideas on the country. Fearful that America was in a state of moral decline, they pointed to the New Deal as well as New Deal policy makers, as the source of the problem. In this sense, notes Johnson, the demonization of gay and lesbian civil servants became emblematic of a larger attack on the New Deal (Johnson, pp. 120-122).

As the hysteria mounted, conservatives soon pressed Congress to pass, and Truman to sign, the Miller Sexual Psychopath Law, expanding the criminalization of consensual sex between adult homosexuals in the federal district. They also helped

initiate a "Pervert Elimination Campaign," which "mandated the harassment and arrest of men in [Washington's] known gay cruising areas" (Johnson, p. 59). Most important, Republicans in the senate convinced their colleagues to launch a full-scale investigation of gays in the government.

Under the chairmanship of Senators Clyde Hoey (D-NC) and Homer Ferguson (R-MI), the resulting "Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations" (most commonly referred to in contemporaneous press accounts as the "Hoey Committee"), heard testimony from a range of witnesses, almost all of whom supported what was to be the committee's eventual conclusion: the "homosexual tends to surround himself with other homosexuals...if a homosexual attains a position in Government where he can influence the hiring of personnel, it is almost inevitable that he will attempt to place other homosexuals in Government jobs" (Congressional Record, 1950). At President Truman's behest, physicians representing the American Medical Association provided dissenting testimony. Describing homosexuals as "not much different – either in intelligence or in moral character – from the general population" (Johnson, p. 115), their testimony placed them in opposition to the prevailing medical opinion of the day. Indeed, it wasn't until 1974 – twenty-four years after the Hoey Committee testimony – that the American Psychiatric Association narrowly voted to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness.

Several intelligence officers from the military and the nascent Central Intelligence Agency presented a portrait of the homosexual as a national security risk – in spite of the not being able to cite a single instance of a gay federal employee who was blackmailed into revealing state secrets. This characterization of

homosexuals ultimately became the major focus of the Hoey Committee's final report: Since homosexuals were susceptible to blackmail by enemy agents and could thus be coerced into revealing government secrets, they presented a serious security risk. Further, homosexuals anywhere in government were "unsuitable" employees because of their "moral weakness and cliquishness." Warning that "one homosexual can pollute a Government office" (Johnson, p. 117), the Hoey Committee report intensified congressional and public interest in a complete purging of gays from federal positions.

Johnson estimates that, by the end of McCarthyism and the Lavender Scare, thousands of homosexuals lost their government jobs solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. Many others were dismissed for their general "unsuitability." Even more resigned rather than face dismissal. Gays also lost positions in private corporations and universities as workplaces throughout the nation adopted the security priorities of Washington.

The Johns Committee

The successful incorporation of homosexuals into the demonology of the McCarthy era allowed "similar campaigns to be easily waged in other areas of commerce and civil service" (Johnson, p. 11). Given the discourse that drove the hysteria of the Lavender Scare, it is perhaps unsurprising that its anxieties found what proved to be a fertile terrain in the context of schooling.

In schooling, as in the discourse that informed the government's purge of homosexual workers, the congruence of the stereotypical Communist and homosexual made scapegoating gay men and women a simple matter. It could be

said, after all, that similar to the way that left wing teachers poison the minds of American students, lesbian and gay teachers corrupt their bodies. D'Emilio expounds on this "overlap of un-American characteristics":

Communists bore no identifying physical characteristics. Able to disguise their true selves, they infiltrated established structures and, in doing so, committed treason. They exhibited loyalty only to a political ideology that inspired fanatical passion. Homosexuals too could escape detection. Coming from all walks of life, they insinuated themselves everywhere in society. Slaves to their desires, they stopped at nothing to gratify their perverted sexual impulses. The satisfaction of these sexual needs dominated their lives at the expense of moral sensitivity. Communists taught children to betray their parents. Mannish women mocked the ideals of marriage and motherhood. Lacking toughness, the effete, overly educated male representatives of the Eastern establishment had lost China and Eastern Europe to the enemy. Weak-willed, pleasure-seeking homosexuals – "half men" – feminized everything they touched and "sapped the masculine vigor that had tamed a continent" (D'Emilio, p. 231).

It is precisely this kind of ease with various stereotypes – Communist, homosexual and otherwise – that seems to have motivated a special committee of the Florida legislature which, from 1956 to 1965, conducted a series of investigations to address anxieties related to difference. Its scope was extensive. After failed attempts to impede the efforts of civil rights activists and purge the state of suspected communists, this committee achieved success by ferretting out gay and lesbian teachers and staff from Florida's schools.

Known officially as the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, the committee was headed by Florida Senator Charley Johns, and, as a result, it ultimately bore his name. Established in 1956 in the wake of the Supreme Court's

Brown v. Board of Education decisions, the committee's initial charge was to impede desegregation efforts. At first the committee "investigated members of the NAACP and other civil rights activists" (Graves, p. xi). The NAACP would defy the committee, force the issue into the courts, and ultimately claim victory with a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that kept the organization's membership records in Florida confidential. Unable to make headway in their opposition to the civil rights movement, the committee next took up the mantle of the Cold War, and sought to root out Florida's communist population. This too produced few rewards.

Johns and his colleagues hit their stride in 1958, when they launched an undercover investigation into homosexuality at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Their efforts resulted in the dismissal of more than twenty faculty and staff members and the expulsion of more than fifty students (Graves, p. 6). The committee was now, finally, able to justify its existence.

It followed up on these investigations with similar, less successful, investigations at Florida State University in Tallahassee and the newly created University of South Florida in Tampa. Facing opposition from such vocal entities as the American Association of University Professors and the American Association of University Women, the committee turned their gaze to Florida's public schools, focusing their efforts on eliminating the influence of gay and lesbian teachers. Between 1957 and 1963, notes Graves, the state of Florida "actively pursued lesbian and gay school workers, subjecting them to interrogation, fired them from teaching positions and revoked their professional credentials" (Graves, p. 10).

Graves notes that the Johns Committee investigation into teachers' sexuality

“typified the actions of a government chasing after a narrowly conceived sense of security at the expense of civil liberties. Its entire operation rested on tactics of coercion and intimidation; convictions hung on the unstable trio of hearsay, circumstantial evidence and guilt by association. This history illustrates the formidable power of a government granted the veil of secrecy” (Graves, p. 46).

Committee investigators “perfected techniques of intimidation and harassment” (Graves, p. 11): Teachers were pulled from classrooms and interrogated without legal counsel, often with local law enforcement and school officials present. They were not shown the evidence, if any, the investigators had against them. They were not allowed to know the names of their accusers or question what motivated their investigation by the committee. They were coerced to identify their homosexual friends, often going back to their college years, and were forced to describe their sex lives in highly graphic terms (Graves, p. 69). Those who refused to cooperate were threatened with public hearings.

On an ironic note, the committee’s death knell came shortly after its 1964 publication of “Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida.” Intended to be an anti-gay polemic, this treatise, more commonly known as the “Purple Pamphlet,” contained shockingly graphic photographs and narratives of homosexual sex. It was deemed pornographic.

The Johns Committee may have been hoisted by its own petard, but as we will explore in the next chapter, Florida’s efforts to regulate the place of gays and lesbians in American society were far from over.

CHAPTER THREE

SAVING OUR CHILDREN

As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children. If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nail biters. (Anita Bryant, *At Any Cost*)

We will not win our rights by staying silently in our closets. We must come out. We must come out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We must come out to tell the truth about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I'm going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it. You must come out. (Harvey Milk, June 25, 1978)

On the evening of November 7, 1978, lesbians and gay men throughout the state of California gathered to celebrate the defeat of Proposition 6, an initiative designed to prohibit homosexuals from teaching in California's public schools. The controversy over Proposition 6 – also called the “Briggs Initiative” after California state senator John Briggs, who introduced the legislation – was by all accounts the greatest electoral victory yet for the nascent gay rights movement, and it galvanized the LGBT community not just in California, but nationally, and resulted in LGBT activists acquiring a new level of political sophistication (Clendinen & Nagourney, 401). At the same time, the debate also represented the increasing political power

of Christian conservatives, who began to claim their place in American culture in the 1970s – largely over issues surrounding LGBT rights. At its heart, the Briggs Initiative forced voters to address important questions regarding not only homosexuality, but also the role of education – and educators – in the United States.

Emerging Movements with Divergent Goals

In the 1960s and 1970s, a distinctly gay culture emerged on the American landscape, marked most noticeably by the formation of gay enclaves in such major cities as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and, in particular, San Francisco, which became a kind of Mecca for LGBT Americans (Shilts, p. 52). A long-time center of bohemian and alternative culture, San Francisco's status as a gay capital was solidified during World War II, when the city served as the primary point of departure and re-entry for many military personnel involved in the Pacific Theater. Rather than returning home, many of these soldiers – particularly those dishonorably discharged for homosexuality – settled in San Francisco after their service ended (Shilts, pp. 48-65). San Francisco thus became a focal point for national debates over LGBT rights.

Dramatic cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s also contributed to the beginnings of an increasingly politicized – and increasingly mobilized – Christian right (Martin, p. 12). While homosexuality was not the only issue that alarmed Christian fundamentalists – other concerns included legalized abortion, school prayer and the Equal Rights Amendment – leaders of the religious right, argues Jackie Blount, expressly identified the need to stop the gay community's political gains as a priority. Jerry Falwell, in particular, "regarded LGBT teachers as the most

politically charged facet of the larger gay liberation movement” and identified them as “the wedge issue that could divide public support for gay civil rights” (Blount, p. 134).

Anita Bryant and the Religious Right’s Backlash

In 1976, Jerry Falwell, in partnership with former beauty queen Anita Bryant, launched a highly publicized campaign to repeal Miami-Dade County’s recently passed human rights ordinance – an ordinance which, among other stipulations, guaranteed legal protection from discrimination for gay and lesbian Miamians. Their organization, which they christened the “Save Our Children” crusade, was based on “Christian beliefs regarding the sinfulness of homosexuality” as well as the perceived “threat of homosexual recruitment of children” and child molestation (Clendinen & Nagourney, p. 306). At the time a visible spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission, Bryant became the Save Our Children crusade’s most vocal advocate. Indeed, the power of her celebrity brought national attention to the debate over LGBT rights.

“What these people really want, hidden behind obscure legal phrases, is the right to propose to our children that theirs is an acceptable alternate way of life,” Bryant asserted, framing the conversation directly in terms of the effect that a societal acceptance of gays and lesbians would have on the nation’s children (Blount, p. 132). An overwhelming majority of Miamians accepted the claims of Bryant and Falwell’s campaign, and on June 7, 1977, repealed the anti-discrimination ordinance by a margin of 69 to 31 percent (Clendinen & Nagourney, p. 308)

Miami-Dade County's Save Our Children crusade marked the beginning, not the end, of organized opposition to the LGBT civil rights cause. Indeed, the issue moved to the forefront of the nation's social agenda. Following Miami-Dade's repeal of their gay rights legislation, a host of anti-gay ballot initiatives passed across the country. In Oklahoma and Arkansas, legislators banned gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools. Fundamentalist Christian groups filed five referenda to repeal anti-discrimination legislation in rapid-fire succession in St. Paul, Wichita, Seattle and Eugene, Oregon. Each initiative was successful (Shilts, p. 228).

Showdown in California

Inspired by the momentum of what judged to be an anti-gay backlash (Miller, 410), and with an eye on the governor's office, California State Senator John Briggs filed a petition bearing the 500,000 signatures needed to qualify his initiative for the general election ballot in May 1978 (Shilts, p. 212). The proposal officially became known as "Proposition 6." Although his constituency was in Orange County, Briggs launched his initiative in San Francisco, which was, in his words, "ground zero" of the "moral garbage dump of homosexuality in the United States" (Shilts, p. 219).

Briggs' language explicitly highlighted what he described as the danger that gays and lesbians brought to the public school system: "Homosexuality is the hottest issue in this country since Reconstruction. A coalition of homosexual teachers and their allies are trying to use the vast power of our school system to impose their own brand of non-morality on your children," he argued. And at first, Shilts notes, the public seemed to agree: early polls showed voters were

overwhelmingly in favor of the Briggs Initiative by a margin of 61 percent to 31 percent (Shilts, p. 231).

In crafting the initiative, Briggs used extremely broad language. Any teacher found to be “advocating, imposing, encouraging or promoting” homosexual activity could be fired (Blount, p. 135). Blount notes that Briggs’ measure would not have penalized lesbian and gay teachers who *hid* their sexual orientation. Rather, Briggs sought to penalize educators who *publicly* pronounced their sexual orientation – in gay pride parades, at rallies, to the media, through LGBT teacher organizations (such as the Gay Teachers and School Workers Coalition) and by word of mouth (Blount, p. 136). Blount also notes that the debate over allowing LGBT teachers in the classroom was, in a way, an “academic” question: gays and lesbians were already teachers in virtually every school in the country, teaching effectively at every level in both public and private institutions. Instead, the central concern became about whether or not homosexuals could assert their identities openly, and in doing so, claim their enfranchisement in the nation’s educational system (Blount, p. 137).

Activists on both sides of the issue mobilized for the fight. Anita Bryant and Jerry Falwell traveled to California on several occasions to campaign alongside Briggs (Shilts, p. 232). A coalition of LGBT groups formed partnerships with straight allies to organize a “No on 6” campaign, and the political tide began to turn in the gay community’s favor. Blount notes in particular the significant role that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) played in the “No on 6” campaign. The AFT’s view was that the Briggs Initiative was not just a campaign targeted at lesbian and gay educators, but rather a broad attack on the rights of *all* teachers. Because of

the sweeping language of the initiative, *any* teacher who publicly supported the rights of homosexuals could be scrutinized and dismissed (Blount, p. 139).

Perhaps of even greater concern to the AFT, notes Blount, was that, if Briggs' measure passed, its terms would override union contracts. Teachers union members – and indeed, union members across professions – quickly suspected that Briggs intended to weaken all unions with this measure. His previous anti-union stances seemed to confirm this possibility (Blount, pp. 139-140). Organizations such as the California Teachers Association, the National Education Association and the AFL-CIO all took a firm “No on 6” position. Indeed, as Shilts suggests, organized labors' opposition to Proposition 6 proved to be a turning point in the debate: Briggs' early lead began to evaporate (Shilts, pp. 242-243).

The “No on 6” campaign benefited from some key religious and political endorsements. Catholic leaders in San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego encouraged the faithful not to support the initiative because it violated “fundamental rights of the human person” (Clendinen & Nagourney, p. 387). Former President Gerald Ford urged a “no” vote. President Jimmy Carter also came out against Briggs during a rally for California Governor Jerry Brown, though only after Brown assured him it was “perfectly safe” to do so (Miller, p. 404).

Perhaps the most important endorsement that the anti-Briggs forces received came from an unlikely source: former California Governor Ronald Reagan. Never a gay rights proponent (he vowed to veto any decriminalization of sodomy during his eight-year term as governor), Reagan's support of the LGBT community vexed many Californians, particularly since his campaign for the 1980 Republican

presidential nomination was already underway. Gay insiders credited Reagan's help to the fact that he had no small number of gays among his top staff (Shilts, p. 243). "Whatever else it is," Reagan wrote in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, "homosexuality is not a contagious disease like measles. Prevailing scientific opinion is that an individual's sexuality is determined at a very early age and that a child's teachers do not really influence this." Reagan warned the initiative could cause "real mischief" in the classroom, allowing students to blackmail teachers by threatening to accuse them of homosexuality (Shilts, p. 243). Reagan's intervention against Proposition 6 was a decisive factor in convincing many who did not necessarily embrace the tenets of the gay rights movement to oppose the Briggs Initiative (Clendinen & Nagourney, pp. 385-389).

Non-LGBT supporters typically framed the "No on 6" debate as a referendum *against* Briggs rather than *for* gays and lesbians. As Shilts notes, "It wasn't so much that homosexuals were winning, but that John Briggs was losing" (Shilts, p. 248). San Francisco's Harvey Milk, though, used his visibility as an openly gay elected official to place the controversy specifically within the context of civil rights for gays and lesbians. Milk engaged Briggs in a series of public debates on the initiative; appeared regularly on national television to argue for gay rights; and – perhaps most importantly – served as a symbolic figurehead for the gay community in their battle to defeat Proposition 6 (Shilts, pp. 240-250).

On Election Day, the Briggs Initiative failed by more than a million votes, losing even in Briggs' own Orange County (Miller, p. 405). Gays and lesbians and their political allies held victory rallies throughout the state. In Los Angeles, where

over 2500 people convened into the Beverly-Wilshire Hotel to watch election results, Mayor Tom Bradley told the celebrants, "How sweet it is! Proposition 6 was an evil, pernicious, dangerous measure" (Clendinen & Nagourney, p. 389). In San Francisco, Mayor George Moscone addressed the gay community: "This is your night. No on 6 will be emblazoned upon the principles of San Francisco – liberty and freedom for all – forever" (Shilts, p. 250). Supervisor Harvey Milk had the last word, promising that the defeat of Proposition 6 was only the first step in achieving full equality for gays and lesbians. "The next step, the more important one, is for all those gays who did not come out, for whatever reasons, to do so now. The coming out of a nation will smash the myths once and for all" (Shilts, 250). California, it seemed, had endorsed the idea that public schools should be institutions that represent all of society (Shilts, 251).

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

It is poignant to write this conclusion shortly after an election that was filled with more than a few “look how far we’ve come” moments. Commentators have called this the “gay rights election.” In November 2012, the gay community won marriage equality ballot initiatives for the first time. (In fact, it won all four contests – in Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington.) As a nation, we elected our first openly gay or lesbian member of the U.S. Senate, a club historically restricted unlike any other in Washington. We added new openly gay members of the House of Representatives. And we re-elected the most pro-gay president in history.

It wasn’t long ago that gay and lesbian teachers were branded as deviant, as dangerous, as threats to national security. Legislation compelled them to hide. Officials sought to remove them from schools. Even as a few lesbian and gay teachers began challenging discrimination, religious and political conservatives organized to force them back into hiding. Anita Bryant proved that campaigning against homosexual teachers could galvanize political support, and conservative religious and political groups have continued to demonize gay and lesbian teachers. As recently as 2010, a US senator expressed his belief that the law should prohibit LGBT individuals from teaching in public schools.

But the story doesn’t stop there. The gay community won the Briggs

Initiative battle in California. Almost forty years later, after many similar victories and even more defeats, LGBT issues have moved into the mainstream. Lesbian and gay characters appear regularly on television shows and in movies. LGBT journalists provide us with our news on major networks. Straight professional athletes are speaking out in favor of same sex marriage rights. Lesbians and gay men no longer exist only in theory.

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