

INDEPENDENTLY SPEAKING

Another coming out*I can no longer call myself a conservative,
nor a Christian, nor a Republican*

by Marvin Liebman

About 14 months ago, I began writing a monthly column for lesbian and gay publications around the country. I called the column "Conservatively Speaking." Why this title? I believed that my major credential in the gay community was my autobiography *Coming Out Conservative*, and the fact that I was a mover and shaker in the U.S. anti-communist and conservative communities for many years before I came out at the age of 67. There were many gay men who could write a column, but there were not many gay conservative men around, over 70, who wanted to share their thoughts in the gay and lesbian press. I certainly had that spot covered—with no competition.

Most of the publications printed my columns, either regularly or sporadically. However, most of the publications never used "Conservatively Speaking" as the column header, but simply published what I had to say under my own name. I realized that the word "conservative" repels most lesbians and gay men, as do such words as "Christian" and "Republican." Rightly or wrongly, these terms had become code words symbolizing bigotry, fear and loathing of gay men and lesbians.

But I am conservative, Republican and Christian. God knows, I'm gay, too. Isn't it possible to be all four, or have I become a living oxymoron? The answer eluded me for some time, but is now obvious: No, it is *not* possible, at least for me, not in today's world.

In my coming out letter to my friend William F. Buckley Jr., which was published in his *National Review* in July 1990, I aired a premonition that had been haunting me for a long time. "I feel that our cause might sink back into the ooze in which so much of it rested in pre-*National Review* days," I wrote to Buckley. "In that dark age, the American Right was heavily, perhaps dominantly, made up of bigots, anti-Semites, anti-Catholics, the KKK, red-necks, Know Nothings, a sorry lot of public hucksters and religious medicine men. Now, times are changing. There is no longer the anti-communist cement to hold the edifice together. The great enterprise...is in danger of sinking back into an aggregate of bigotries."

Alas, my prediction has been realized. The words "conservative," "Christian" and "Republican" are being held hostage by the same forces that controlled the "American Right" before Buckley and his band of true believers (of which I was proud to be part) made conservatism more mainstream and respectable. Of course, even now, there are still those among the Republican ranks, like Sen. Arlen Specter, who attempt to hold the fort against the barbarians. But, they are vastly outnumbered by the descendants of those from a half-century ago who would drag the country back into the swamps of intolerance and division. Can the valiant defenders prevail? I don't believe they can, not in the foreseeable future.

Where does this leave me?

I cannot associate myself with Rush Limbaugh and other new "conservative" leaders, nor with Pat Robertson and his "Christian" brigades, nor with Jesse Helms and his new "Republican" majority. The only identity of which I am absolutely certain is that I am a homosexual in a country which has little patience with us gay folk.

Millions of gay men and lesbians—perhaps a great majority of our would-be community—are in

the closet, terrified of coming out and standing openly with their sisters and brothers against the forces that would see us obliterated. Make no mistake: The ultimate goal of our enemy is to make us disappear, back to a closet that will make today's seem wide open by comparison, or dead. Hysterical? I don't think so.

Where does that leave me? Us? I can no longer accept such labels as conservative, Christian or Republican, which draw much of their coherence from hostility towards people like me. No gay man or lesbian in the United States should any longer accept any of these labels, which have become mere code words for attacks on our collective dignity. We can accept *no* labels any longer. We must give our allegiance and support *only* to those individuals and groups who *publicly* stand with us against bigotry and fear of lesbians and gay men.

Forget the hand wringing over Congress and the federal government. We must focus on our own neighborhoods, our cities, and our states. This is where we will find allies, men and women who have seen our faces, who know who we are. Here we develop the coalitions and power bases that make elected officials—local, state and national—sit up and take notice. Here, too, we must find and nurture new leaders to replace the figureheads of our national lesbian and gay groups who have accomplished little and at great cost.

No longer can we give our votes, our contributions, and our efforts for the pursuit of vague promises. We mustn't sell the soul of our community for "tolerance." Although we desperately need allies from the U.S. mainstream, we must be satisfied with only their full and *open* support for our cause against our enemies. Indeed, as we have done so often in the past, we will give them our unbridled aid for their steadfast support.

In the past—and sometimes to the consternation of my African American

friends—I have compared the gay rights movement to the black civil rights movement of the '60s. I still believe that they are comparable, and we have much to learn from the history of this great quest, both from its setbacks and its victories. Now, however, I believe it even more urgent to draw a comparison between our community and the Jews and homosexuals of Europe in the '30s and '40s. Then, as now, the majority cried out that those who predicted death and misery were crazy, that such things as mass extermination could not happen, that hysteria was dangerous. Until the very last, until they choked on the lethal gas in the extermination "showers," they did not accept the fact that the Nazi state despised them to the point of eradicating them from the face of the Earth.

The Jews and homosexuals of Europe were victims. We are not. We must never be grateful for mere crumbs off the table at which we have no place. Neither must we let ourselves be shamed from claiming our identity as gay or lesbian, content instead to seek shelter under tents whose stakes are planted in the backs of our brothers and sisters.

I can no longer call myself a conservative, nor a Christian, nor a Republican. I am a gay American, and I will retain my independence from any other label. You may, from time to time, still come upon my thoughts in the gay press. Henceforth, however, my column will be called "Independently Speaking."

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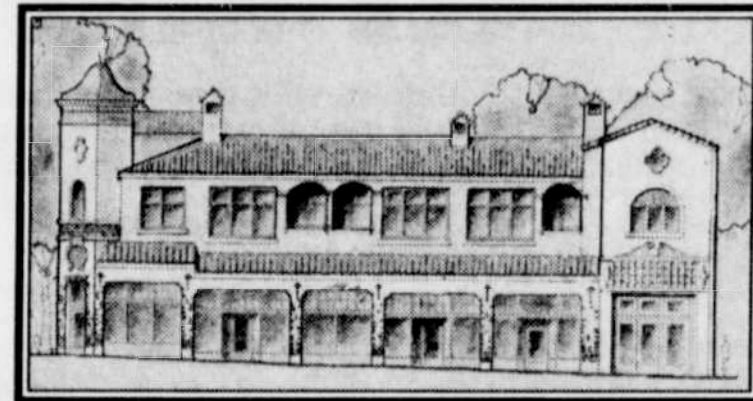
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