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national news

"Marching On" bombs

National leaders' forum marred by bomb threats
and charges of racism

by Bob Roehr

Welcome to our rumble," said Steve Cheney in prophetic opening comments to "Marching On," the third annual forum of national gay and lesbian leaders presented by the Washington chapter of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association. Cheney is the chapter president. The May 7 event was broadcast live on C-SPAN from the National Press Club.

The eight panelists began with brief opening statements.

Melinda Paras, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said, "[We are] at a juncture where acceptance is reaching an all-time high," while at the same time it is under challenge from "the extreme right."

Cornelius Baker, interim executive director of the National Association of People with AIDS, characterized the period as one of "hopefulness," largely because of recent introductions of protease inhibitors and other AIDS-related drugs.

Carl Schmid, president of the Washington-area Log Cabin Club, said he believed "the real debate on our issues is being fought in the Republican Party." He said the community "should be spending more time educating Republican politicians and families."

Sandra Gillis, executive director of Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, said she sees that group's role as an educator "moving nongay people from ignorance to knowledge" as "critical to building a tolerant and even an accepting society."

Jeff Levi spoke as a member of the White House staff working on AIDS. He blamed both community leaders associated with the Clinton campaign and the gay and lesbian press for creating "wildly unrealistic expectations about the capacity and the speed with which society and government can change."

Keith Boykin, executive director of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, said the community had for too long "disregarded legitimate concerns" of people of color. He called for building broad coalitions across issues of social justice.

Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, claimed that we have faced "a very difficult year but because of redoubled lobbying efforts a lot of harm was diverted."

David Clarenbach, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, said, "Every time an elected official comes out, it destroys the stereotypes on which homophobia is based."

Carmen Chaves of the National Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization (LLEGO) interrupted the forum by stepping from the audience to the podium to read a prepared statement: "For a third year in a row Latino/Latina lesbian and gay leaders find themselves blatantly excluded," she charged. "We find ourselves again fighting racist tactics that keep us from our rightful place at the table.... Every time invisibility is rationalized, every time silence is excused, every time we don't take notice of who is not at the table, we shall note that we are all responsible for the creation of a healthier movement."

LLEGO had been one of the organizations

which had sought to participate as a member of the panel, but NLGJA organizers had decided otherwise. NLGJA had also not included representatives of ACT UP, the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the ACLU's Gay Rights Project, transsexual rights groups or religious organizations.

The moderator and three of the eight panelists were people of color.

After Chaves' statement an emotionally tense series of comments yielded an offer for LLEGO to join the panel, and a chair was offered to Chaves. But Chaves declined: "You don't understand what I just said, this is pointless. This is an insult."

And with that the LLEGO group left the room. "I didn't know this was an issue until now," said Baker. "I feel it is a setup not to join." Other panelists echoed those concerns, lamenting the limited communication that organizations have with each other.

Slowly the conversation began to refocus on other concerns until "Marching On" came to an abrupt end—about 15 minutes early. Two bomb threats phoned in to the Press Club prompted security to evacuate the building, and the session came to a close. Police are investigating the incident.

NLGJA maintains LLEGO's exclusion from the program had nothing to do with racism. In a letter to LLEGO, Jennifer Jaurez Robles, acting NLGJA president, said the event was organized with a focus on presidential politics and family issues "with respect to race, ethnicity, gender and political affiliation....

Our aim is to be mutually supportive and respectful of LLEGO's goals and mission so that both our groups have increased opportunities to succeed," Robles said. She also said NLGJA regretted that it could not invite all groups interested in sitting on the panel but it had tried to compensate by opening up the program for audience members to offer additional perspective.

Martin Ornelas-Quintero would have represented LLEGO on the panel if the group had been asked to participate. In an interview with *The Windy City Times* he said he would have addressed the issue of inclusion. Ornelas-Quintero said the gay and lesbian community cannot afford to narrowly define gay issues. As a gay Latino, he said, he is concerned with government efforts to close borders and declare English the official language in America.

"It's an issue to me," he said. "Therefore, it is a gay and lesbian issue. When we begin to try to separate identities, this is where we get into difficulties. It is not possible to separate identities. This is the biggest division within our movement. Continuously we hear that this or that is not a gay and lesbian issue, when in fact it is an issue."

This view seems to be shared by leaders of the country's largest lesbian and gay organizations: NGLTF and HRC. In recent years, press statements and position papers have shown the organizations' increasing interest in expanding agendas to include progressive positions on affirmative action, reproductive freedom, universal health care, immigration and welfare reform.

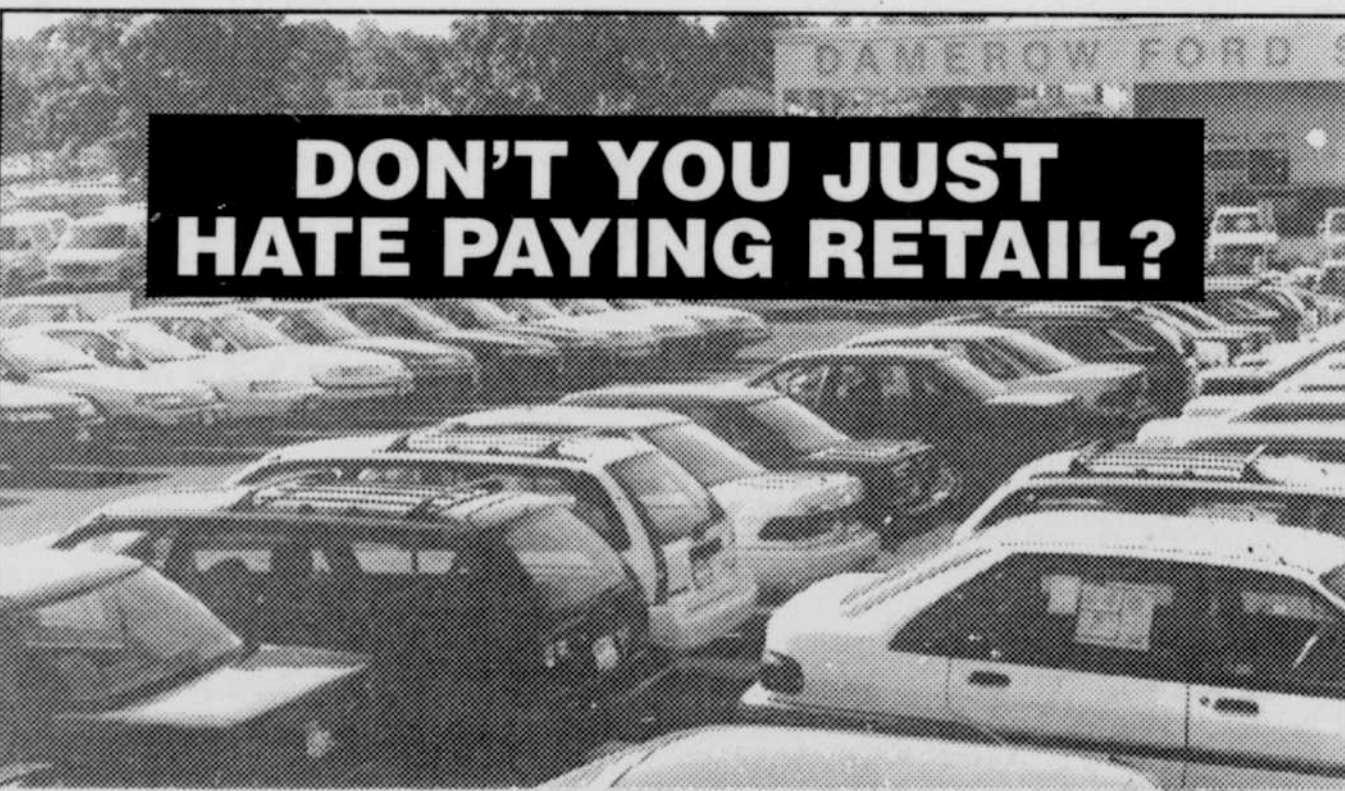
Renée LaChance contributed to this story.



PHOTO BY BOB ROEHR

Keith Boykin

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