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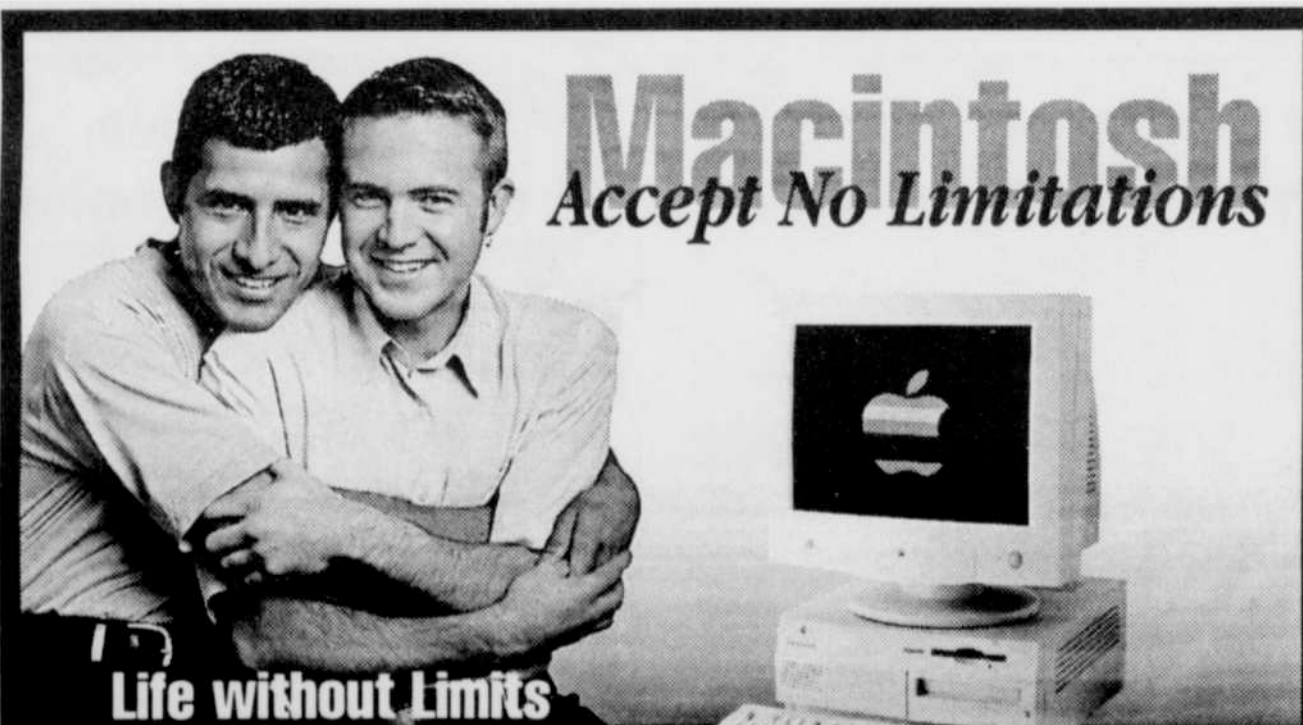
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national news

Eating and running

Clinton makes the grand gesture of attendance at an HRC dinner, but will he put his policy where his mouth is?

by Bob Roehr

I'm delighted to be here." With that simple phrase Bill Clinton became the first sitting president to attend a gay and lesbian event. The symbolism far outweighed the words he spoke, and the audience roared back its appreciation.

A capacity crowd of 1,500 tuxedoed and gowned supporters of the Human Rights Campaign paid \$250 a plate to gather at the Grand Hyatt a half dozen blocks from the White House for the Nov. 8 gala dinner.

Celebs Ellen DeGeneres and Anne Heche, dressed in matching white dinner jackets, quietly slipped in through the back door. Applause, then a standing ovation, rippled like a wave before them as they worked their way down the barely perceivable main aisle of the crowded room toward the head table.

Elizabeth Birch, HRC's executive director, told the audience, "Because our needs were almost as great as our expectations, it was inevitable that we—you and this community—would

including you and those you represent—have got to be a part of it.

He restated his support of ENDA. "Being gay, the last time I thought about it, seemed to have nothing to do with the ability to read a balance book, fix a broken bone, or change a spark plug," he told the crowd.

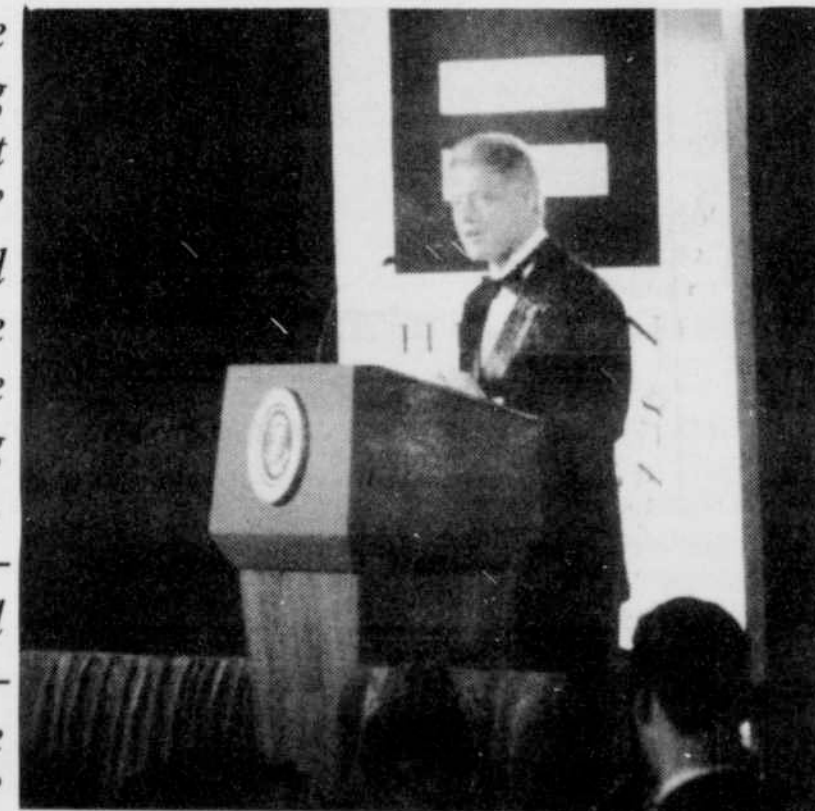
"What counts is energy and honesty and talent. No arbitrary distinction should bar the way," he continued. "When we deny opportunity because of ancestry or religion, race or gender, disability or sexual orientation, we break the compact. It is wrong and it should be illegal."

While Clinton discussed ENDA, he did not mention another bill he signed into law, the Defense of Marriage Act, aimed at preventing the legalization of same-sex unions.

At two points during his speech, Clinton was briefly interrupted by protesters from ACT UP who shouted, "People with AIDS are dying."

The chief executive shrugged it off, saying, "I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't been

"We all know there is continuing discrimination against gays and lesbians," the president told the crowd. "But we also know that if we are ever going to build one America, then all Americans—including you and those you represent—have got to be a part of it."



President Clinton

experience both shared disappointment and some disagreement. But, Mr. President, you have played a brave and powerful and indispensable role in the march toward justice for us, and all Americans. We ask only to be treated as other Americans would wish to be treated if, as they grew up, they found themselves in our place."

Birch emphasized areas of commonality with Clinton, particularly support for the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which HRC has made the cornerstone of its legislative agenda. She avoided areas in which HRC and Clinton disagree, including allowing openly gay and lesbian people to serve in the military and granting equal marriage rights for same-sex couples.

The president, his voice edged with huskiness, spoke of the numerous lesbians and gay men serving in his administration, from special assistant Virginia Apuzzo to Hal Creel at the Maritime Administration.

"I want us to come together across all our lines of differences into one America. That is my vision," said Clinton, who received a three-minute standing ovation and cheers.

"We all know there is continuing discrimination against gays and lesbians," the president told the crowd. "But we also know that if we are ever going to build one America, then all Americans—

here tonight." He defended his record to thunderous applause. It was the only time he mentioned the subject of HIV during his remarks.

Clinton also asked for support in the confirmation fight for Bill Lann Lee, his nominee for assistant attorney general for civil rights. Many Republican senators oppose Lee because of his strong support for affirmative action.

Clinton met backstage with DeGeneres, but declined to do so on camera. The actress was there to receive an award for coming out last spring.

Clinton did not express an opinion about the fact that the television comedy series *Ellen* recently portrayed its lead character as coming out of the closet. (Vice President Al Gore recently came under fire from conservatives for praising *Ellen* in a Hollywood speech.)

Also honored were Dorothy Height and Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

Outside the hotel, protesters occupied three different street corners. About 10 members of the aggressively anti-gay Fred Phelps clan from Kansas stood on one corner with signs reading "God Hates Fags."

Another group of demonstrators protested Clinton's "legitimization" of "the homosexual lifestyle," but tried to disassociate themselves from Phelps. Their signs read, "Ellen Can Change."

AIDS activists occupied the other corner.