

# just out

The IN publication for the OUT population

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## GUEST COMMENTARY

BY HASTINGS WYMAN

# Bush's benign neglect

The president's nonactivist conservatism puts the gay agenda in a holding pattern

In 1969, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democrat but nevertheless a domestic policy aide to Republican President Richard Nixon, suggested that with civil rights laws in place, the appropriate federal role toward African Americans was "benign neglect."

Let racial issues recede from the political hot seat, he advised, while black citizens take advantage of their new opportunities. It didn't take long for civil rights leaders—who favored more active policies—to denounce Moynihan, who then lost significant support among normally Democratic African American voters in his 1976 election to the Senate.

After one year of George W. Bush in the White House, it is appropriate to assess his attitude toward gay Americans. "Benign neglect" sums it up very well.

Gone is the hostility to gay people that characterized the Reagan administration—although perhaps not Ronald Reagan himself, who was, after all, a veteran of Hollywood—and the first Bush administration. No Christian conservatives are lurking in the White House shadows making sure that funding proposals to combat AIDS are squelched or that the first lady removes the red ribbon on her dress before she appears on national television.

On the contrary, President Bush appointed the first gay person to head the White House office on AIDS and an openly gay man to an ambassadorship—only the second in history. His administration let stand the executive orders providing protections for gay federal employees.

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, a Christian fundamentalist with a history of anti-gay politics, made nice with the Log Cabin Republicans. Bush just signed legislation allowing the District of Columbia to implement its domestic partners program. And the White House has backed substantial funding for AIDS programs, albeit not as much as some activists want.

Along with these positive signs, there has been a downside for gays in this administration. Bush declined to issue a Gay and Lesbian Pride Month proclamation, is opposed to the Employment Nondiscrimination Act and favors what some activists consider a weaker form of hate crimes legislation.

His proposal giving federal funding to certain programs of church groups would have allowed them to discriminate against gays. The Office of Personnel Management did not include same-sex domestic partners in the federal employees' long-term health insurance. And although survivors of same-sex relationships can apply for benefits from the government's Victim Compensation Fund, established after the World Trade Center and Pentagon tragedies, the regulations are not totally clear.

On balance, the Bush presidency is a far cry from its predecessor. Gay

men and lesbians were plentiful in the Clinton administration, holding powerful jobs in the White House and in the Cabinet departments.

Although President Bill Clinton stumbled on his attempt to allow gay people to serve in the military, after that, he rarely missed an opportunity to signal his solidarity with the nation's gay population. He was the first president to speak at a Human Rights Campaign dinner. He made a recess appointment of James Hormel as ambassador to Luxembourg to get around GOP homophobes in the Senate.

He gave the green light to the establishment of a major gay operation at the Democratic National Committee and appeared before gay groups to help fund it. His administration's gay minions promoted pro-gay legislation on Capitol Hill and made government rules work for gay people—such as awarding small-business grants to gay community centers.

So the Bush administration, suffering by comparison, gets a mixed review from the nation's gay community. The president's neglect of gay concerns certainly doesn't push the envelope for our community. On the other hand, Bush does exhibit a personal tolerance—indeed, even a warmth—toward gay people that, coming from a conservative Republican, only can have a positive effect on public opinion.

Whether this glass is half-full or nearly empty probably depends on one's political values. Those who see the federal government as having an important role in helping move gay Americans from society's sidelines to a position of full equality—and this includes most national gay advocacy groups—only can feel disappointed, perhaps bitter, about the Bush presidency.

Those who are inclined to see the government's role as peripheral to the actual day-to-day lives of most gay people, and who essentially want a live-and-let-live relationship with straight America rather than a series of confrontations, probably find him to their liking, or at least tolerable. This group likely includes the 25 percent of gay men and lesbians who reportedly voted for Bush in 2000.

He has three, perhaps seven, more years in his presidency. His non-activist conservatism, benign or otherwise, isn't going to move the gay agenda forward.

On the other hand, if his heart is in the right place, he might yet have an opportunity to place his administration more fully on the side of history with regard to gay people. If such an occasion does arise, let's hope he acts on it with at least a portion of the fervor and effectiveness he has brought to governing in post-Sept. 11 America.

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*On balance, the Bush presidency is a far cry from its predecessor*

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