

New National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director Matt Foreman—the first man to head the group since the late 1980s—sat down in Chicago during the Memorial Day weekend International Mr. Leather festivities to discuss his plans for the venerable queer rights organization.

Rex Wockner: What are you doing at IML? You're not wearing leather.

Matt Foreman: Well, we had a big debate over what I should wear today. [My boyfriend] Frank said, "You should wear your chaps," and I thought, "No, it's too early in the day to wear chaps."

RW: Actually, you do have some Daddy boots on.

MF: I've worn these boots for about 12 or 13 years—not this exact pair but this style. I just got these. It took me a long time to find them on the Internet.... I've got to have the round toe, not the pointy toe.

RW: Do you have anything new planned for the task force?

MF: Just strengthening what we've been doing for the last couple years...state and local organizing, beating back the right wing's referenda.... If there's one thing I really do want to do, that is to figure out ways to use our grassroots strength to leverage money from the federal government for our community. We're desperately short-changed in terms of the tax dollars that we pay and what comes back to services for our community. That's an opportunity we have in D.C. We don't really have opportunities around legislation, but we do have opportunities around funding. I also think we have opportunities around pushing back against all of the punitive HIV prevention and education stuff that's coming out of D.C. now.... We can push back with our allies; we don't have to always be on the receiving end of the right wing's bullshit.

RW: The task force has a reputation as a fairly left-wing group, and yet it gets criticized both from the left and the right. A lot of people on the left think it's not left-wing enough, especially when it comes to nongay issues, such as the war in Iraq. A lot of people on the right think the task force has long been infected with political correctness run amok. How would you respond to the critics that the task force seems to chronically attract from both sides?

MF: From the right, they're right to criticize us.... Our role is to be progressive, to push the envelope, so that more pragmatic

MATT IN THE MIDDLE

NGLTF's new executive director feels the heat from both sides of the political spectrum by Rex Wockner

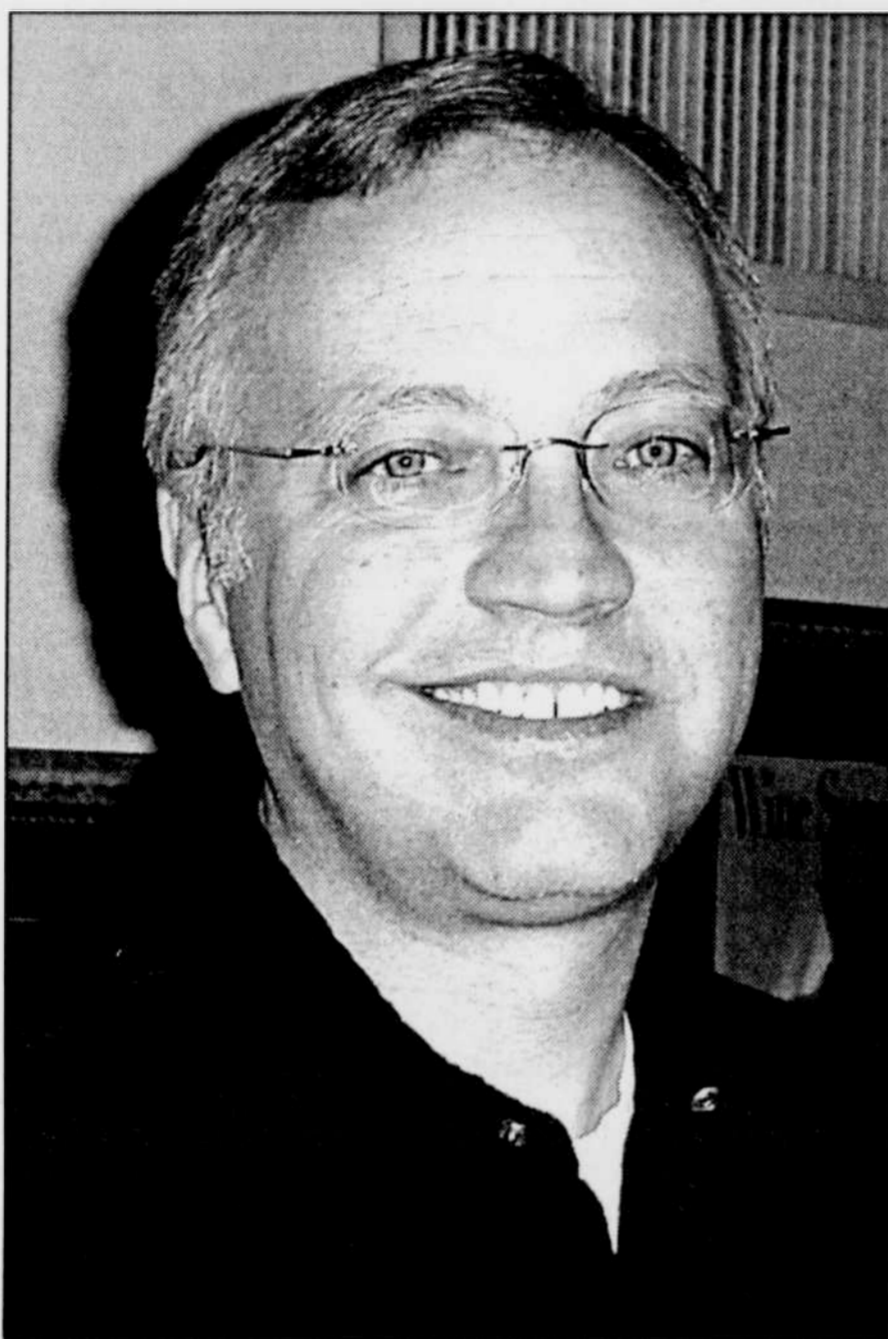


PHOTO BY NEX WOCKNER

Matt Foreman is the first man to head the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force since the late 1980s

historically, has been that the task force spends time and resources on issues that some people don't perceive as gay issues. Is that true, and is that an important part of NGLTF's mission?

MF: It's true the task force has put energy into other progressive areas in ways that other organizations haven't. I wouldn't say we've devoted an enormous or significant amount of our resources to that work.... There are not enough [queers] to make things happen without allies. You don't build allies without putting some power and credibility into their areas, such as choice and affirmative action.... That's the way in which coalition politics works, and if anyone thinks that we can move the agenda on our back alone, I think that they are sadly mistaken.

RW: The task force is fairly routinely savaged by the gay right. Their argument is that 30 percent of gays in exit polling vote Republican.

MF: Twenty-five percent.

groups can come in behind and get more from the space we've created. We damned right are progressive.... Other groups can be pushing incremental legislation and limited legislation.

On the left, it's fascinating to me—the reason why I think the task force is criticized by the left is because people who come to Creating Change and other places know that the task force actually cares what they say and is listening to them. A lot of other organizations would be utterly dismissive. I get where that's coming from.

RW: Some of the criticism from the right,

RW: And something like 80 percent of Americans backed Bush's decision to go into Iraq. When the task force aligns itself solely with the progressive approach to gay liberation or gay equality, it cuts itself off from a segment of gays who simply aren't coming from that point of view.

MF: There's a role for a national gay organization to take stands on broader issues that affect America. [But] I think we would have been much better served as a community if people who felt strongly about the war would have gotten involved with organizations that were specifically focusing on trying to stop the

war, rather than this horizontal animosity towards the task force for making a statement either for or against the war.... We don't hold ourselves out to be the mainstream, compromising, apologist organization—and the movement is better served when we have those type of organizations and then the task force and other organizations.

RW: When you talk about the task force's work on the state and local level, it sounds reactive. You want to keep us from losing these battles initiated by the right wing. What do you hope to do on a proactive level?

MF: If we beat just a couple more referenda, the right wing is not going to keep going at it, because now they're losing [them]. Proactively, we want to pass any kind of proactive legislation that we can at the grassroots level. For example, in Topeka [Kan.] we're looking seriously at resurrecting that battle again this year to pass a local nondiscrimination law. We have two planned campaigns in Ohio, to advance a nondiscrimination measure in one locality and to repeal an anti-gay ballot initiative that passed. That's just a start. There is an enormous amount of potential for advancing things, and that's where we want to be. But it's like any battle, if you can't get to the front line because you're always being beaten back, then you can't go beyond the front line. I feel like slowly but surely we are now beating them back.

I'm also interested in going after, politically, local legislators and leaders that have launched these anti-gay initiatives. "We beat you, now we're gonna go back and we're going to affirmatively punish you"—people who launch this stuff, so that they understand not only that they're not going to win, but that there are consequences to it. We would set up a PAC and go in and terrify them with a credible challenge.... So we go in, for a modest investment of money, and torture these people, which would give me endless satisfaction. And the word would go out very quickly, "You know what, this really isn't worth it."

RW: Is getting the right to marriage for same-sex couples something the task force is interested in?

MF: We want full equality under the law, which, right now, means the freedom to marry. But we're also hopeful that we create different ways in which people can form relationships and families that don't come with all the baggage and the downsides of marriage. One of the great things about where we're going is that we are creating new ways for people to relate, new ways for people to obtain rights and benefits. **RW**

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