

just out

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GUEST COMMENTARY

Promise and peril

Queers must prepare for battle over same-sex marriage

There's never been a time of greater promise and greater peril for our community. In just a few short weeks, the confluence of marriage in Canada, the Lawrence decision and the expected marriage ruling from the Massachusetts Supreme Court has dramatically altered the national and intracommunity debate about our lives, our families and our legal rights.

On the one hand, depending on what Massachusetts does, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people could be married right here in the good ole U.S.A. within weeks, just like what happened after the pro-gay marriage decision in Ontario in May. On the other hand, images of our couples getting hitched in Boston will undoubtedly provoke a backlash the likes of which we have never seen. No doubt, Congress will feel extraordinary pressure to again "defend marriage."

And they have lots of options to inflict harm—anything from denying federal funds to any state that recognizes our marriages or anything close to it, like civil unions, to approving a constitutional amendment to cement our second-class citizenship for decades to come.

Within our community, many see this opening for marriage as the shining pathway to equal rights under the law. Others see it as the antithesis of liberation, the epitome of assimilation and forever short-circuiting the progress we have made in winning new forms of legal recognition and protections for families that don't come with all the negative baggage of marriage. And still others are ambivalent, downright confused or both. Where does all of this leave us?

First and foremost, let's admit the extraordinary peril we face. Gay rights and abortion have always been the new right's top whipping boys. Every small step we've won has not only been excoriated as another mortal blow to Judeo-Christian values but also served as an extraordinarily potent fund-raising and organizing tool. Since Lawrence, the right has gone into overdrive. "The sacrament of marriage cannot be defiled! Armageddon is at hand!"

Make no mistake, this backlash won't be just about "gay marriage." It will be about defaming and demonizing us in every hideous way possible and to roll back the limited rights we've won in some parts of the country.

If Massachusetts goes for marriage (or if New Jersey does in a couple of years), the right will demand that Congress send to the states for ratification a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to "one man and one woman." (Beware: This amendment is read by most legal

experts to not only outlaw the recognition of "gay" marriage, but anything that comes close to it, like civil unions or the comprehensive domestic partnership bill moving forward in California.) At the moment, it looks like our side has the Senate votes—34—to block it. But in the 37 states with Defense of Marriage Acts and in Congress in 1996, we've seen our "friends" repeatedly run for cover when the "M" word is trotted out.

(Imagine the impact if we have to fight the amendment state by state. Progress on everything else will grind to a halt as our community's scarce financial and people resources are sucked dry in ugly, expensive and purely defensive battles.)

Pundits may be right that the Bushies do not want this to be an issue in the 2004 race. Maybe so, but if Massachusetts breaks our way, they won't have a choice. The right will raise this as a do-or-die issue, and if you think this administration will choose us over them, I have a nice bridge to sell you. (Moreover, Karl Rove won't hesitate to deploy this issue to make sure the right turns out in droves for Bush if there's continued slippage in the president's approval ratings.)

What can we do?

First and foremost, everyone in the community, no matter where he or she is on marriage—for, against, don't know or don't care—must unite to fight the backlash. If we do not, we will lose. Period.

Second, because we cannot win this by ourselves, each of us must speak openly and directly to our families, friends, neighbors and co-workers. As the national atmosphere becomes poisoned with endless lies, defamations and distortions, each of us needs to

say to those in our lives, "They are talking about me, and I need you to take a stand for me."

Third, we must demand that politicians—who we have supported for so long and from whom we have received so little—also stand up for us. No deals. Democrats, in particular, need to be told quite clearly: "If you let us down now, at this critical time, that's it. No deals. No excuses."

And finally, every national LGBT organization must set aside its own turf issues, rivalries and addiction to media coverage and dedicate itself and its resources to a collective campaign to turn back the bigots.

Folks, this is the big one. Together, we can win. ☐

MATT FOREMAN is executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

REFLECTIONS

15 years ago in...



- Randy Sullivan, the 1st Congressional District delegate to the Democratic National Convention, led the fight in Atlanta for increased awareness and knowledge of issues of interest to gay men and lesbians.

- The gay and lesbian presence at the 1988 Democratic National Convention was the strongest it ever has been. More than 100 openly gay men and lesbians were delegates or alternates to the convention.

- The Advertising Council has announced a "tough and sensitive" AIDS prevention campaign that will be ready this month. It is designed to reach all sexually active people in the United States, with a particular emphasis on teen-agers, minorities and women of childbearing age.

- Mary Ann Humphrey, who held a position as an equal opportunity/affirmative action officer in the U.S. Army's Civil

- Affairs Unit, is one of the many gay people to experience discrimination, military style. She said, "The military thinks that a gay person is going to affect the morale of the rest of the troops."

- The Oregonian failed to publish even one line about June's Gay and Lesbian Pride march, which drew 4,100 participants.

- Bethroot Gwynn and Hawk Madrone lead a Personal Theater Workshop for women Aug. 11 in which the inner characters of the self can come out and play.

- The National Transvestite/Transsexual Hotline is a 24-hour free information service for female impersonators, transsexuals and transvestites. It has more than 22,000 members nationwide.

- The Lesbian Boarding House is reopening in Northeast Portland and is seeking donations of beds, bedding, yard care and household items.

- Sanford Director presents the 13th annual Turnabout Aug. 14 to benefit the Pride of the Rose Scholarship Fund. The show is for people who have never performed before as a member of the opposite sex.

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