

# Why Gay Leaders Don't Last

## THE FIRST TEN YEARS AFTER STONEWALL

by David Jernigan

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**S**Ocial movements need leadership. Leaders offer role models, images of power and purpose. They also provide organizational acumen and direction, and for the press, a focal point for the articulation and publicizing of the concerns of the traditionally disfranchised. Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Geraldine Ferraro and many others in the women's movement have served this function; Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson and others have done so in the movement for black liberation. Although not always chosen democratically, they have nonetheless spearheaded impressive organizational efforts bringing political muscle and social change to disfranchised groups.

In this time of health crisis, more gay men and lesbians occupy positions of visible leadership than ever before. Yet there is still no gay or lesbian leader of national significance who leads gay and lesbian people. The gay movement has seen many leaders come and go. Some, like Harvey Milk, were killed off by forces outside the gay community; many more, though, apparently were forced out of visible



Front row: Marty Robinson (1), Jim Owles (2), and Arthur Evans (3), original members of the Gay Activists Alliance, September 1970, New York

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RINK FOTO

José Sarria, left, 1984

leadership by "burnout," frustration, their own inability to maintain the allegiance of their followers, and a myriad of other reasons—stated and unstated.

Are there structural features peculiar to the gay movement that have made long-term, national leadership difficult? Do gay and lesbian people tend to attack or abandon our leaders more than others? Or is the lack of national leaders merely the result of the movement's relative youth? If there are any features of the gay movement that have rendered leadership particularly difficult, what does this tell us about the nature and state of the gay movement itself?

These are important questions which our movement must address. This essay offers at best a preliminary attempt to answer them, by looking at visible leadership in the gay movement in its first decade post-Stonewall. There are thousands of gay and lesbian people who played crucial roles in the movement in some form during this period. While their contributions should not go unrecognized, there is a good argument for emphasizing visible leadership. As a heavily stigmatized people, gay men and lesbians have had to use visibility as a major stratagem in taking on the negative images which gay oppression has painted of us. Positive image-building, and the development of visible, positive role models has been key.

Several themes about leadership can be drawn from our history as a movement:

1) The development of leaders as role

models has been complicated by a changing and evolving understanding—both within and outside of the gay movement and community—of what it means to be gay or lesbian. This changing understanding is inseparable from the trajectory and gains of the gay liberation movement itself. As the movement made concrete gains, the possibilities for being publicly gay and publicly a gay leader broadened. Ironically, this progress in liberation led to changing and often conflicting "job descriptions" for the gay leader. Within the movement, disagreements over the definition of the gay identity have contributed to the failure of leaders to achieve broad national backing.

2) Within the gay movement, the internalization of gay and lesbian stereotypes by gay and lesbian people has impaired our ability to recognize and support leadership. Attacks on leaders have been endemic, and often have come in the same language as that of the external oppression. Leaders have faced charges of immaturity, of puerile fascination solely with things sexual, of being untrustworthy, of not being really committed to gay people, of not being "really gay," or conversely, of being "too gay."

3) Throughout the history of the movement, there has been a general ambivalence about leadership: Do we need it? Is it inherently oppressive? This, as well, has led to punishing those who take initiative.

4) Notoriety has been repeatedly confused with leadership. The importance of seizing media attention and turning stereotypes on their heads led to a series of so-called leaders who in fact were media creations with no organizational base and no strategy beyond their own self-presentation.

### Early Models of Leadership

While the Stonewall riots in 1969 are generally considered the starting point of gay liberation, the leadership which emerged post-Stonewall actually fashioned itself in reaction to the "homophile" leadership of the fifties and sixties. In the homophile period, the relationship between the level of oppression which gay

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men and lesbians faced and the kinds of leadership that emerged is clear. Low profiles were the norm for homophile movement leaders. Despite the founding of a wide variety of homophile organizations in the fifties and sixties, by 1969 membership in gay organizations barely surpassed 5,000 men and women, with only a few hundred publicly identified as gay men or lesbians.<sup>1</sup> With so few members, there is a sense that every person who chose to become a part of the movement was a "leader," whether by actively founding an organization, editing a newsletter, or simply being among the first to join a professedly homophile group.

The homophile movement's dominant strategy lay not in developing gay and lesbian leaders, but rather in finding heterosexual experts—mental health practitioners, lawyers, educators and the like—to attest to the trustworthiness and respectability of homosexuals. Visible homosexual leadership first emerged in San Francisco in the early sixties, when drag entertainer José Sarria ran as an openly gay candidate for city supervisor in the wake of a campaign by police and Mayor Warren Christopher to "clean up" the city's "homosexual problem." Sarria, the first openly gay candidate in the nation, garnered only 6,000 votes, but his campaign inaugurated a tradition of openly gay electoral activism in San Francisco.

Sarria offered an early model of using the notoriety of open homosexuality to gain attention for gay rights. His candidacy provided an early focal point for organizing, as the self-sacrificial acts of other firsts—such as the first openly gay football player, army sergeant, public official—would do later.

Outside of San Francisco, the most visible leaders headed the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C. (MSW), and the Mattachine Society of New York (MSNY). MSW founder Dr. Franklin Kameny, an astronomer fired by the Army when his homosexuality was discovered, lobbied the legislative and executive branches to end discrimination against homosexuals in federal employment. MSW's brand of direct action consisted of small groups of "appropriately groomed" gay men (in coats

and ties) and lesbians (in skirts) picketing in front of the White House, or at Independence Hall in Philadelphia every Fourth of July. MSNY president Dick Leitsch also took on discrimination and legislative issues, but he carefully differentiated his own personal lobbying activities from the liberation activities occurring in other movements in the sixties:

Power lies not in the number of members or the total of names on a list....It lies in how effective your organization is in achieving the goals of the homophile movement. This is not a plea for "gay power" or "lavender power." It is a plea for those charged with leadership positions in homophile organizations to make the voice of the homosexual heard in the community.<sup>2</sup>

That Leitsch felt he had to make this differentiation is indicative of changes occurring outside the homophile movement which were expanding possibilities for visible gay and lesbian leaders. A new generation of leaders would reject the behind-the-scenes approach of the homophile activists in favor of the public and confrontive tactics used by the black and women's liberation movements.



Frank Kameny, 1986

PATSY LYNCH / COURTESY OF THE ADVOCATE

### Leading With Little to Lose

Rioting by New York City bar patrons who were responding to a routine police raid on the Stonewall Inn on June 27, 1969 brought the gay movement literally into the streets and into the mainstream of New Left protest. Whereas "gay" and "gay is good" had been used by homophile activists, in the hands of gay liberationists the term "gay" came to define a lifestyle, a personality, a commitment to a myriad of personal and social changes. "Homosexual," conversely, represented life without liberation, gay people without the gay consciousness or identity which came with liberation. For the first time, gay began to mean an identity that was self-determined, staking out a

social territory by confronting dominant images of gay people.

Differing views of identity formed a strong line of demarcation between the gay and homophile movements. That "gay" was initially synonymous with confrontation is important to understanding the philosophy of the movement and the style of leadership which emerged in the first years after Stonewall. Simply to identify publicly as gay was a political act—a confrontation. The early gay liberation organizations capitalized on this as an almost exclusive organizing strategy. They encouraged and required gay visibility to confront societal stereotypes about gays. Gay pride parades epitomize this approach: mass visible confrontations of the dominant culture, establishing social space for open homosexuality. Leadership and organizational issues were secondary to the struggle to establish a beachhead of gay visibility.

The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was the first major gay political organization founded post-Stonewall. Its chief targets were gatekeepers of social space: the police (a popular countercultural/New Left target anyway); the medical/psychiatric establishment; the media (one early effort focused on persuading the *Village Voice* to allow the word "gay" in news articles and personal advertisements); and the New York City Council, where activists lobbied for legislation protecting gays from discrimination in housing and employment.

GLF's New Left politics led to a commitment to rotating leadership, free-form discussion sessions, and ad hoc project groups and cells—rather than to the development of any sort of hierarchical structure. This lack of organization frustrated its own members' efforts to turn their organization's promise of a movement into reality. Such an atmosphere intentionally militated against the development of

individual leadership. The odyssey of two gay male leaders of the period is instructive: Marty Robinson and Jim Owles had left MSNY for the more militant and confrontive atmosphere of GLF. They left GLF within a year of its founding because of its sexual politics and structural weaknesses. According to historian Toby Marotta,

they had come to believe that since GLF's "structureless structure" permitted anyone to introduce any concern at any time, it ensured that no consensus could be protected from the unsettling arguments of newcomers and that nothing could be made binding on any who disagreed with decisions reached. In the end, Robinson, Owles, and others who set out to form a reformist alternative to GLF were motivated almost as much by their desire to have a group that was effectively organized as by their ideas of what its aims should be.<sup>3</sup>

Robinson, Owles and ten others set out to establish a gay liberation organization serving gay people. Like the homophile leaders (and unlike GLF), they wanted a single-issue focus—gay liberation—but using the confrontational politics and rhetoric that had informed GLF's efforts. They wanted to organize more explicitly on behalf of gay people in the present, as opposed to attaching a gay caboose onto the New Left railway. They eschewed any reference to revolution in the title they chose for the new organization: the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA).

It was in GAA's structure that the twelve founders most clearly strayed from prevailing models in the women's and gay movements, and more specifically, from the rotating monthly chairs and ad hoc committees of GLF. GAA's reformist constitution created titled leaders: a president; vice president; secretary; treasurer; and delegate-at-large (elected annually and paid small stipends). It also established standing committees which eventually grew to cover such areas as women's issues, publicity, the street, political action, legal issues, community relations, municipal and state government, and state and federal affairs. This structure enabled the members of GAA to work for the single goal of gay liberation on a variety of different fronts simultaneously and

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Del Martin, center, 1984

with greater success than the more diffuse GLF.

Although it encouraged activism in many forms, GAA became best known for its tactic of simply making GAAers—and thereby gay people and gay concerns—visible. While GLF had been content to present gay issues as part of the revolutionary program of the New Left, GAA members went everywhere in pursuit of a hearing for gay people. GAA's signature was the "zap," a tactic somewhat akin to a gay kamikaze raid on "establishment" figures and strongholds. Taking advantage of their ability to "pass" in largely heterosexual crowds, GAA members infiltrated everything from political rallies to meetings of the Village Independent Democrats, to the offices of *Harper's* magazine and the studio audience of the "Dick Cavett Show."

The zaps succeeded at making gay individuals and gay issues more visible than ever before. They required participants to be more visible as gays than ever before, sometimes just in a crowd or a meeting, sometimes—as with Cavett—visible to a national audience. Mere participation in a zap could bring an individual high status within the movement. Individuals who chose to zap commanded respect from within the movement for their decision to be radically "out." In the social climate of 1969 and 1970, the decision to zap—or in any other way be fully and radically out—meant eschewing traditional career paths and throwing

one's lot in with the movement.

The zaps were less successful, however, as a route to building a mass movement. Zapping encouraged notoriety rather than leadership. Those who participated had little to lose, and were self-selected. Only those with the means and leisure to put in long hours for next to no pay, but also to accept that for the foreseeable future most standard career routes would be closed to them, could afford to take leadership.

Zapping was also primarily a male activity. The growing visibility of the men, their sexism, and the growing self-consciousness of lesbians as a result of the women's movement led to early schisms along gender lines. While the men achieved notoriety and prominence, the legwork of building a movement—staffing committees and work groups, providing services and so on—seemed to come "naturally" to the lesbians, just as traditional forms of visible leadership came "naturally" to the men. Tension between the male and female wings fueled many of the early attacks on movement leaders. Lesbian activist Del Martin's letter of farewell to the men in 1970 exemplifies the ways in which movement activists echoed the language and stereotypes of gay oppression in their criticisms of each other:

[I had hoped] that you were my brothers and that you would grow up, to recognize that freedom is not self-contained....I will not be your "nigger" any more. Nor was I ever your mother. Those were stultifying roles that you laid on me, and I shall no longer concern myself with your toilet training....As I bid you adieu, I leave each of you to your own device. Take care of it, stroke it gently, mouth it, fondle it. As the center of your consciousness, it's really all you have.<sup>4</sup>

Gay oppression defined gays as "immature"; it is no coincidence that a recurring criticism of gay leaders within the movement is for their alleged "immaturity."

Women left the united movement in large numbers in the early seventies. Their departure to form separate liberation groups, either around lesbian or more generally feminist issues, was part of the proliferation and fragmentation of organizations and activities which characterized the early seventies. Dif-

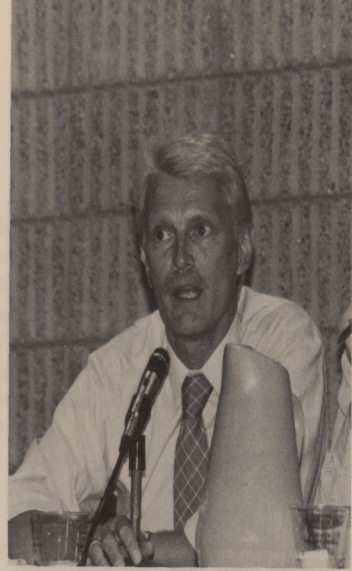
fering perceptions of gay experience and identity fed this fragmentation as well. Early movement writings were rife with "analyses" of who gay people are and what they are "really" like. Yet each such analysis implied a different strategy for organizing and leading. For instance, as Marotta writes, two of the co-founders of GAA began early on to move in very different directions:

Owles gauged that most homosexuals thought they managed rather successfully and needed to be seduced into believing that they had anything to gain from becoming involved in politics. [Arthur] Evans, on the contrary, held that most homosexuals harbored repressed rage and that one had to prick gay facades to tap deep-seated anger and trigger political involvement.<sup>5</sup>

The deep disagreements over basic issues left the small group, which took leadership early on in New York, scarred by division and mutual attack. Jim Owles served two terms as president of New York's GAA. What was notable about his defeat in the 1971 GAA presidency race was not so much that fellow GAA founders Marty Robinson and Arthur Evans were also defeated, but that Owles is reported to have said that "he was running to stop Robinson from being elected, and Evans...said he was running to stop Owles."<sup>6</sup>

In 1972, GAA elected Dr. Bruce Voeller, a research biologist and former associate professor at Rockefeller University, to be its next president. While Voeller began his term as a well-credentialed radical activist, again issues of organization and leadership led to an exodus from a leading gay liberation organization. Voeller and several other GAA officers had grown increasingly dissatisfied with GAA's diffuse focus and politics, and with the limits on the executive's power to act without express consent of the membership. In a dispute over the latter issue at the group's regular business meeting on October 4 of that year, Voeller suddenly resigned. News and Media Relations Committee chair Ron Gold's resignation followed Voeller's. Vice-president Nathalie Rockhill had already resigned a month earlier for "personal reasons."

Together, the three then approached Dr.



Bruce Voeller

DAVE WALTER / COURTESY OF THE ADVOCATE

Harold Brown about a concept they already had been discussing. Brown had served as administrator of health services in the Lindsay administration from June 1966 to December 1967, and then as professor of public administration at New York University School of Medicine. On October 3, 1973 he announced his homosexuality and pledged his support for the gay rights movement in a major public address and a front page interview in the *New York Times* which appeared the same day. His announcement stunned the non-gay world and elated the gay press. The *Advocate* called Brown's coming out "perhaps the biggest single boost since a similar revelation by novelist Merle Miller nearly three years ago [also on the front page of the *New York Times*]."<sup>7</sup> Brown told the *Times* that his decision to come out had been prompted by the efforts of GAA to get a gay civil rights bill passed by the New York City Council. He later told the *Advocate*:

Though I had helped [GAA members] behind the scenes, really I was like the other successful homosexuals I know [Brown subsequently claimed that between a quarter and a third of Lindsay's top advisers in the sixties had been homosexual]. I stayed hidden and let these gallant boys and girls work hours and days and even be beaten up in a fight that I really should have joined.<sup>8</sup>

While many of the public coming outs simply led to notoriety, Brown's act actually inspired organization. On October 15, 1973, the National Gay Task Force was born. Brown was the first chairman of the board; Voeller, Rockhill and Gold were among its first paid staff



people, with Voeller as executive director. Brown's prestige and support enabled Voeller and company to put together the most credentialed openly gay group the movement or the non-gay world had ever seen. NGTF's founders planned an annual budget of \$200,000, part of which would pay five full-time staff members.

NGTF was the most ambitious and tightly organized effort of the movement thus far. Modeled on the NAACP, it aimed to be a nationwide membership organization advocating for gay people. The planned relationship between membership and staff represented a major structural innovation over the GAA model. In NGTF, the members, who qualified as such by paying membership fees, would elect the board. The board then supervised the staff work. In practice, this set-up left a great deal of power and discretion in the hands of the executive director—Voeller—and the staff.

Voeller claimed that democracy within the new organization would eventually come through power of the purse—whether and how many gay people elected to join and pay annual membership fees. If joining was an indication of interest, however, most gay people wanted no part of NGTF. At the end of 1974, its staffers were working for \$87.50 a week—less than they could have received on welfare or unemployment. NGTF received \$65,858 in 1975, far below its projected \$200,000 budget. At the end of 1976, NGTF had 2,500 members. In contrast, NAACP had 442,000, and NOW had 55,000.<sup>9</sup> Low wages and lack of support took their toll on the NGTF staff. By mid-1975, Voeller was the only original staffer remaining. At the New York gay pride parade in 1975, the crowd greeted mention of two entities with resounding hisses and boos: the Catholic Church, and Bruce Voeller.

NGTF's early failures can be written off, to some extent, to the growing pains of a new organization. But other factors militated against its success as well: GAA co-founder Arthur Evans' attacks on the structure of NGTF exemplify the ambivalence about leadership and the anti-authoritarian trend in the

movement, as well as resentment at a perceived elitism and hegemonism:

By the deliberate design of its founders, NGTF will be tightly controlled from the top down (much like a big-business corporation.) Those on the top will have "M.D." or "Ph.D." or "the well-known" attached to their names. The founders make no secret of one of their basic goals: to create a group where gay members of the professional class will be "comfortable."<sup>10</sup>

The *Advocate's* New York correspondent at the time, George Whitmore, commented on the movement's ambivalence towards the Task Force and the leadership style it represented:

Perhaps the Task Force brags too much about its accomplishments, but the fact is that it is accomplishing something. Others obviously disagree. Is it unpopular because it brags? Because it isn't radical enough? Because it's political? Your guess is as good as mine. I am positive that gay people don't want leaders. A simple recitation of the list of past leaders would illustrate that; most of them flaked out, burned out, or lost their credibility—fast.<sup>11</sup>

Had NGTF restricted its activities to the high-level lobbying and pressure campaigns for which it was probably best suited, it might have attained a higher level of popularity in the movement and community at large. But the organization's survival depended on a high profile and visible successes. Voeller's attempt to set up a nationwide emergency phone tree to be used for rapid community mobilization irritated the organizations it was designed to unite and sidestepped the basic issues of organizational democracy—what would be considered an emergency and who would decide. The need for visible victories led to a string of questionable press releases which undercut NGTF's credibility within the movement.

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## Leadership of the Elect?

The aggressively public tactics of GLF and GAA drew attention to the events unfolding in New York. New York also seems to have been the center for early theoretical discussions about the nature of the movement. However, on the West Coast, and particularly in San Francisco, a corps of leaders was developing whose accomplishments and visibility would soon eclipse those of the New Yorkers. Since Sarria's 1962 supervisorial campaign, organizations such as the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) and the Tavern Guild nurtured a growing tradition of electoral work, and helped promote a community aware of itself as a legitimate political minority with a specific political agenda. The leaders who developed in San Francisco were expert at the very back-room lobbying activity which Evans and others in New York had decried.

By 1969, the concept of a gay voting bloc in San Francisco had already gained some credence. In late 1971 SIR co-founder Jim Foster came up with a new innovation—a gay Democratic club. According to Foster, "We organized the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club for a single purpose:" to be eligible to attend the statewide convention of the California Democratic Council, an influential non-party coalition of grassroots Democratic Party activists, in early 1972. Alice, under Foster's leadership, drew on the expertise he and others had developed in the past eight years of mobilizing gay voters by taking campaigns to the heart of the gay community: the bars, baths, and businesses in the growing gay ghetto. On the strength of his

work with Alice, Foster won a delegate seat at the Democratic National Convention in Miami where he and Madeline Davis, a lesbian delegate from upstate New York and a member of the Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier, argued on national television (albeit at six a.m.) for a gay rights plank in the party platform. In

June 1972, Foster protégé Earl (Rick) Stokes garnered 44,469 votes in a losing bid for a seat on the San Francisco Community College Board. Although Stokes was unsuccessful, his showing was strong enough to dispel any doubts about the existence of a formidable gay voting bloc in San Francisco.

The differences between the New York and San Francisco experiences are instructive. One finds far less discussion and disagreement concerning identity issues in San Francisco during the late sixties and early seventies. The resulting higher level of unity facilitated the growth of a stronger political movement. Furthermore, the focus on electoral activism offered a route for mass participation in the gay movement that was considerably less risky than the radical coming out policy encouraged by GLF, GAA and their imitators. In the privacy of the voting booth, gay people could participate without publicly disclosing their gayness. The California electoral activists also could point to clear victories, including having a central role in the repeal of the state's anti-sodomy law in 1975.

But the electoral strategies also carried with them their own brand of leadership self-selection. Again, those who took visible leadership tended to be those who could afford to. In New York, the early leaders could afford it because they had nothing to lose, but in San Francisco it was because they had well-developed financial bases, either within the gay community or from independent wealth.

David B. Goodstein, who beginning in 1971 would provide much financial and managerial skill to the burgeoning lobbying and electoral work, was a former stockbroker and attorney who lost his job when he mentioned to his employer's wife that he was a homosexual. Goodstein subsequently used his professional skills as well as his considerable private fortune, first, to set up the Whitman-Radcliffe Foundation, originally a fundraising arm of the efforts to abolish California's anti-sodomy law and later a major social-service provider, and then to buy out the *Advocate* and convert it into a major nationwide magazine and a mouthpiece of the emerging gay "middle



Rick Stokes, 1982



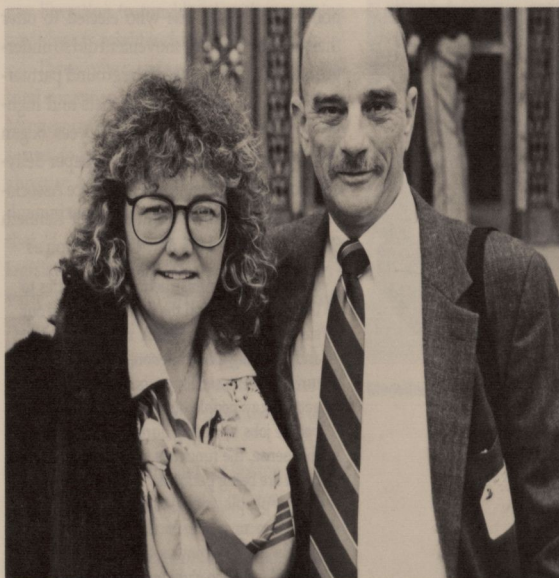
class." Goodstein founded Whitman-Radcliffe, and hired Foster to be its first executive director, with the "conviction that the gay movement had to find ways to build organizations controlled by stable, responsible persons who could enlist the support of Gays who are economically and professionally successful."<sup>12</sup>

Foster and Stokes, the two other most visible Alice leaders, did not come from wealthy backgrounds. Both, however, built their positions on the wealth of San Francisco's sizable gay ghetto—Foster by convincing bar and bathhouse owners to donate a portion of their profits and time to protecting their patrons through Foster-backed political organizations, Stokes by investing in one of the city's most popular bathhouses.

These men were frequently the first gay activists that non-gay politicians met. This, and their efforts to ingratiate themselves with those politicians, gave them increasing connections and clout as the gay movement grew. The result of this dual self-selection process was the creation of two strands in the gay movement, each working from different class positions and a very different view of how to effect change.

At times, they worked in tenuous coalition, as at the 1972 Democratic convention when 20 people sat-in outside while Foster and Davis watched the gay rights plank go down to defeat inside. But more often they were at odds. The radicals accused Foster and company of selling out street people and transvestites, and of using the movement to further their own careers. *The Advocate* generally sided with the "moderates." An early 1973 editorial referred to the radicals as immature "destroyers." Again, the language of accusation reflected social stereotypes of gay immaturity:

But perhaps to some, helping gays isn't as important as the fun of pulling down the pillars, the joy of parliamentary maneuvering, the vicarious pleasure of plotting, then the final tantrum. Now *there's* the real fun—the climax of it all—more fun even than sex. Remember how mom and dad always caved in at the final tantrum? Wasn't that great? Isn't



Elaine Noble and Jim Foster, 1978

it still great, boys and girls? Wipe your nose, Johnny, your mental age is showing.<sup>13</sup>

This kind of attack seems to have led many gay and lesbian people to eschew movement participation entirely, and to view those who participated in visible leadership positions with ridicule, at worst, and embarrassment, at best. In the midst of a particularly acrimonious struggle between the two camps over control of the Whitman-Radcliffe Foundation, Foster remarked,

the fact of the matter is that when you look around, we are an infinitesimally small number of people compared to the gay community as a whole. If you doubt me, just go to the bars, the restaurants, the operas, the theatres....And the fact is, that somehow we have to convince these people who have money not to be hostile to us, not to look upon us as some kind of embarrassment—which *they do*.<sup>14</sup>

Conditions outside the gay movement also militated against broad participation. As long as the "job description" for a gay leader entailed loss of the freedom to pursue major

non-gay careers, those who elected to offer their talents to the gay movement did so underground. An interesting underground partnership between openly-gay activists and high-ranking closeted gay city employees began mid-1974 in New York City. In a paper delivered to the American Political Science Association in June 1975, political scientist Kenneth Sherrill described the new organization as

a gay political infrastructure that has ties to the government and the organizations of our state's political parties. A relatively recent and growing phenomenon, this infrastructure has been used for purposes ranging from getting gay people out of jail to getting gay people jobs to cutting bureaucratic red tape. In a sense, the functions of the political machine are being performed by gay politicians for gay people, yet the vast majority of politicians are unaware of this, and most gay people do not know where the functional equivalent of the clubhouse is.<sup>15</sup>

Until early 1974, all of the members of this infrastructure, dubbed the "New York Study Group," held executive-type positions in New York City or State government. They fell into one of two categories: either they held "sensitive establishment political jobs" and were "not known to have a gay sexual orientation by

anyone other than members of the Study Group and possibly their immediate family and closest friends," or they had "establishment political jobs and have made their gay sexual preference known on the job and elsewhere—but not made it dramatically known."<sup>16</sup>

In 1974 Ethan Geto, Democratic party activist and special assistant to the Bronx borough president, proposed expanding the group. A member of the second category, Geto was then "living platonically" with GAA president and former student activist Morty Manford. Impressed by Manford, Geto convinced the Study Group to add a third category of members: officers of New York gay organizations. Eventually the Study Group included members of NGTF, GAA, Lesbian Feminist Liberation (an organization founded by disaffected lesbian GAA members), and the National Coalition of Gay Organizations (started by Manford in 1976 to coordinate demonstrations at the Democratic convention). None of the other members of these organizations knew of the Study Group's existence, or that their associates were members. All members pledged to maintain the confidentiality of those not "out" publicly.

David Goodstein, 1978



RICK GROSSE/COURTESY OF THE ADVOCATE



A sharp awareness of the price of visible gay leadership continued through the mid-seventies. When a closeted delegate to the 1976 Democratic National Convention was asked whether he would ever consider being an openly gay candidate, he replied, "Are you kidding? I want to get something done. If I were to come out that would have to become the main thrust of my politics...any other issue would get buried."<sup>17</sup> Even as the weight of oppression eased over the course of the decade, those willing to be openly gay resisted being stereotyped as "politically gay." An openly gay Carter press aide complained in 1976 that

I only have so much time in my life to be politically gay. The movement has to understand that there are those of us who want to work the establishment side of the street...Sure it's fun to demonstrate when all it takes is one Sunday afternoon. But the way to change things is to work with campaign people on a one-to-one level. It takes more time, but it will produce far more change."<sup>18</sup>

Openly gay or lesbian political leadership, thus, remained heavily conditioned by the perceived limits (such as unemployment or pigeonholing) which gay oppression continued to place on those who chose it.

### Notorious Or Not Gay Enough

Five gay or lesbian people achieved national prominence in the mid-seventies. None of them came from the ranks of the gay movement, and none of them lingered on the national stage past 1978. Two of these—Army sergeant Leonard Matlovich and football player David Kopay—gained notoriety rather than leadership status. Their notoriety helped push forward the ongoing debate with the dominant society over what gayness was or could be, and was derived in part from the fact that they were, as *Advocate* news editor Sascha Gregory-Lewis put it, people "heterosexual America can swallow."<sup>19</sup> By providing personal testimony that gay could be "normal," in terms of at least some aspects of the male sex role, they encouraged others who did not identify with the early seventies radical image of

gay liberation to consider that the emerging gay identity might include them as well.

Three others gained fame through electoral successes. Allan Spear was elected to the Minnesota State Senate in 1972, where he still serves today. He came out publicly in 1974 shortly after being re-elected. Spear downplayed his homosexuality, commenting that "I don't want to be typecast as a gay legislator. I'm a legislator with concerns in a variety of areas, who also happens to be gay." Aside from stints on the boards of NGTF and Gay Rights National Legislation (GRNL), he eschewed national politics entirely, despite pressure from movement moderates to cut a wider swath.

Elaine Noble parlayed her Boston political connections into a successful bid for a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1974, making no secret of her lesbianism. She elected not to run for a third term in 1978, citing a House redistricting plan that put her in competition with one of her closest political allies, Barney Frank. (Seven years later, having reached the U.S. House of Representatives, Frank would acknowledge his own homosexuality, but prior to this he was assumed to be, and supported the assumption that he was, heterosexual.)

Movement moderates besieged Noble with speaking engagement offers which carried the weight of imperatives. At the same time, both Noble and Spear came under heavy criticism from activists to their left in their home cities. The attacks on Noble and Spear generally came in the form of "not gay enough." In Minneapolis, former University of Minnesota student body president Jack Baker attacked Spear for not moving fast enough on gay rights and for not including the right to adopt children and civil rights protection for transvestites and transsexuals in his legislative efforts. In Boston, Noble's efforts at backroom lobbying, combined with her failure to get a gay rights bill through the House, brought her the dubious distinction of being the second most criticized public figure by Boston's collectively-run newspaper, *Gay Community News*.

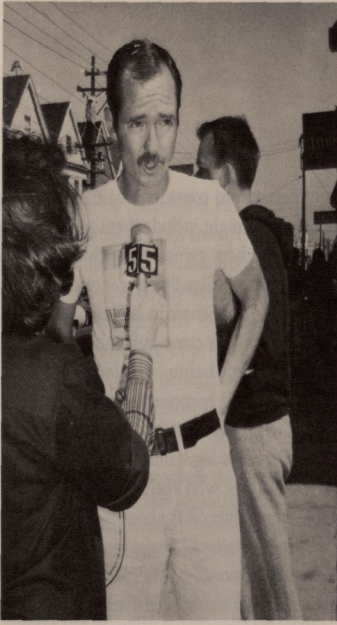
MORGAN GWENWALD



Madeline Davis

**A closeted delegate to the 1976 Democratic National Convention who was asked whether he would ever consider being an openly gay candidate replied, "Are you kidding? I want to get something done."**





Leonard Matlovich, 1980

Noble's reflections on her experience are illustrative of the confusion in the "job description" of a gay leader which arose from the badly-divided movement. Noble felt she was in a

no-win situation with gay people. If I tried to be the best politician I could be, some gay people gave me flak because I wasn't being gay enough or responding enough to the gay community....The gay community expected me to be on call 24 hours a day. It was like they felt they owned me....The irony of it is that these gay people didn't elect me. The majority of the gay people who are out in the gay community not only don't live in my district, they don't vote in my district....[Those gay people who were unhappy with me were] only a handful of individuals, but a handful's enough to make your life miserable....The only thing I can say is that a handful of people are far more comfortable being represented by somebody who is a straight male. It's sort of like blacks. There was a time in history when blacks, some blacks, felt they'd rather have a sympathetic liberal white speak for them. I think that's where we are....The level of self-hate right now among gay people is so damned high that if, when you start trying to work in a sane manner, you ask, "What are you doing constructively?" it has a self-hate backlash.... They can't swing at the straight world, so they swing at the person nearest them.<sup>20</sup>

The ambivalence about leadership, which Spear and Noble faced, grew in the mid-seventies with the rising influence, on young gay

activists, of the women's movement's philosophies about collectivism and its own ambivalence about strong individual leadership. Even as they took leadership, these young activists avoided leadership roles. UCLA student Dave Johnson in 1974 singlehandedly convinced his university to fund a Gay Awareness Week and organized it himself. But he told the *Advocate* he feared a leadership role, because leading did not fit his definition of being gay. Johnson described his gayness as

making a personal statement about myself...it involves not just talking about collectivism, not just talking about breaking down stereotyped roles, but actually doing it, in my own life. Men are bribed to be non-human, bribed with power. I was bribed, and the most radical thing I can say is I'm gay, which means I will not take your power; I will not take your domination. I'm going to be a human being; I'm going to love my way; I'm not going to play your roles.<sup>21</sup>

A significant segment of the gay and lesbian press—notably Boston's *Gay Community News*—was ready to attack any visible and reasonably forceful gay or lesbian leader for taking the bribe from the patriarchal society, and it gave little positive press to visible leaders of either sex. Distrust of any model of strong personal leadership was also a feature of most leftist gay organizations of the period. One of the founders of Bay Area Gay Liberation (BAGL), a mid-seventies group of gay leftists in San Francisco, spoke for many of his comrades when he told the *Advocate* that in his view, "it's probably healthier to have an extreme distrust than an extreme trust of leaders."<sup>22</sup>

### Harvey Milk and the Flexible Identity

Although his untimely death in 1978 brought him greater national coverage than anything he did while living, Harvey Milk was nonetheless the most compelling and successful gay leader to emerge in the mid-seventies. Superficially he appeared to be a bundle of contradictions who alienated nearly every sector of the movement. He was a small businessman at odds with San Francisco's gay business asso-



ciation, the Golden Gate Business Association (GGBA), and a leftist who refused to work with the main gay left group in San Francisco, BAGL. These paradoxes were, in fact, part of Milk's success: not accepting a label as a certain type of gay leader, he proved able to work with a broad range of individuals and groups—gay and non-gay.

In August of 1973, the pony-tailed proprietor of Castro Camera took very practical issue with the Jim Foster/Alice club philosophy of backing sympathetic non-gay politicians instead of encouraging gays to run for office themselves. Harvey Milk decided to seek election to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. In a column for the city's gay newspaper, the *Bay Area Reporter*, Milk wrote:

Masturbation can be fun, but it does not take the place of the real thing. It is about time that the gay community stopped playing with itself and get [sic] down to the real thing. There are people who are satisfied with crumbs because that is all they think they can get when, in reality, if they demand the real thing, they will find that they indeed can get it.<sup>23</sup>

With five seats open, Milk placed tenth in the 1973 supervisorial elections, winning 17,002 votes. Out of step with the Alice club's strategy, Milk was denied its support. The two non-gay politicians backed by Foster and Alice placed seventh and eighth. Foster blamed Milk for his candidates' losses.

**"Masturbation can be fun, but it does not take the place of the real thing. It is about time that the gay community stopped playing with itself and [got] down to the real thing."**

Undaunted, Milk spent the next four years building a personal political base by running for office at every available opportunity. In 1975, he placed sixth in the supervisorial race. In 1976, he challenged Foster's choice, non-gay Art Agnos, for a state assembly seat and lost by 4000 votes. Milk's presence on the political scene split gay electoral efforts at the same time that his populism attracted to electoral work gay leftists who had previously shunned reformist politics. Within the gay community, he built a coalition based in his own neighborhood in the Castro, and included some of the gay constituencies that Foster et al. would have preferred to forget: transvestites (José Sarria was an early endorser), and recent gay immigrants to San Francisco (like Milk himself) with few financial resources but a strong interest in preserving and strengthening the safety of the ghetto.

But Milk's support stretched far beyond the gay community. Although he made no secret of his gayness, he seldom mentioned gay issues outside of the gay community, and his campaign literature did not indicate his homosexuality. For this, the *Advocate* dubbed him "the 'missing person' in gay lobbying efforts" and charged that he was "reluctant, outside the gay community, to speak to gay issues."<sup>24</sup> Milk debunked the concept of the "gay vote," claiming that

there's a myth in San Francisco about the gay vote, a myth about the number of gays in San Francisco, a myth in San Francisco about the gay precinct. I live in a "gay precinct," and if 20% of the voters are gay here, that's high.<sup>25</sup>

Like Minnesota's Allan Spear, Milk refused to be merely a gay candidate. He combined fiscal conservatism and small-government populism with a strong pro-labor stance and a championing of the city's ethnic minorities. Gradually he garnered major endorsements from labor, Hispanic, and Chinese organizations.

Milk worked tirelessly in three elections without success, but each time building a slightly larger base of support. Foster and the Alice club continued to oppose him; in response to their attacks, Milk countered that

**Milk used stereotypes of gays—both positive and negative—to attract attention to himself and his causes. He aggressively courted publicity, and used his gayness before and after his election as a media angle.**

Foster and his entourage were part of machine politics, and that their end of the gay movement was dominated by "those who have the most money [who think it's enough] to show you can do it [be a successful gay person]. That's not what the gay movement is about."<sup>26</sup>

The success of a district elections initiative paved the way for Milk finally to win a seat on San Francisco's Board of Supervisors. In November of 1977, he beat Rick Stokes, the gay attorney who was the ex-president of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, founding president of the Golden Gate Business Association, bathhouse investor, and Foster protégé. In his victory speech, Milk likened his gayness to Kennedy's Catholicism, saying, "If I do a good job, people won't care if I am green or have three heads."<sup>27</sup>

Milk thus established electoral credibility, but combined this with a growing notoriety. He used stereotypes of gays—both positive and negative—to attract attention to himself and his causes. He aggressively courted publicity and used his gayness before and after his election as a media angle. He was expert at coming up with quotable phrases like his standard opening line on the stump: "Hi, I'm Harvey Milk, and I'm here to recruit you." A former Broadway producer, Milk viewed politics as theater, and himself as a symbol. In his own way he carried forward the tactics of GAA in the early seventies, "zapping" the media with a constant stream of press releases, interviews and quotable speeches.

As a gay leader, Milk was unique in the mid-seventies: self-selected, but with electoral support; unafraid to be open, but with the political savvy not to let himself be limited by the confines of the gay movement or the gay ghetto. He drew on the traditions of the gay community and identity, employing camp humor and tapping into a communal sense of outrage at the injustice of oppression. But certainly one of the keys to his success was his ability to adjust his gay identity, when necessary, in order to work in coalition with and attract the support of other disfranchised groups.

In the crucial fight against the 1978 Cali-

fornia Briggs Initiative [which would have prohibited employment of gay people in public schools], Milk became a key statewide spokesperson. After his successful election effort, he turned his mobilizing know-how to recruiting even more volunteers to canvass against the Briggs Initiative. By June his San Francisco Gay Democratic Club had surpassed Alice in numbers, and ran major canvassing operations every weekend. Leftists in San Francisco formed the Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative (BACABI) and worked closely with the Milk machine. BACABI clones appeared in at least eight other California cities, using similar tactics and working in loose coalition. Wealthy gays joined with liberal non-gays to form Concerned Voters of California (CVC) to fight Briggs. CVC emphasized its compatibility with the grassroots effort, and devoted its resources to a statewide media campaign.

Milk challenged Briggs to one-on-one debates anywhere in the state. Whether the venue was conservative or liberal, he greeted Briggs with a prepared set of one-liners designed for their quotability. In response to Briggs' claim that the average homosexual had more than 500 sexual partners Milk remarked, "I wish." When Briggs argued that homosexual teachers would engender homosexuality in their students, Milk replied that if children really emulated their teachers, there would be many more nuns in the world.<sup>28</sup>

In the anti-Briggs campaign, the gay movement seemed at last really to have it all: money; unity; and a visible, capable, and credentialed spokesperson. Thousands of gay people took the risk of being publicly identified to assist in the campaign. The combination of unprecedented gay unity and visibility, and equally unprecedented bipartisan support from non-gays, left Briggs and his initiative completely isolated. By election day, he had garnered endorsements from only three organizations: the state Nazi Party, the KKK, and the Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs Association. On election day, the ordinance went down to stunning defeat, losing by a two-thirds margin.

Elsewhere, gay rights ordinances were



repealed in Eugene and Wichita. But the movement's successes far outweighed these setbacks. Well-organized, amply-funded, and united campaigns run by professionals, defeated the backlash, not only in California, but in Seattle as well. In his *Advocate* column, Goodstein crowed that "we have entered a new phase of our community's development...1978 is marked by our community's being spearheaded by young, middle-aged and older gay men and women of substantial education, economic means and professional skills."<sup>29</sup>

The resources and discipline brought to bear in California and Seattle were impressive. In the wake of these major electoral challenges, the movement's national organizations also experienced a renaissance. NGTF swelled to a staff of fourteen and a budget of \$350,000. At Milk's suggestion, grassroots activists across the country began to plan their first coordinated effort since the early seventies: a 1979 march on Washington, D.C.

Yet, for all the activity, the organizational growth and concrete progress made in 1978, by the end of that year only one major leader had emerged into national visibility: Harvey Milk. On November 27, 1978 former fellow Supervisor Dan White shot and killed Milk and pro-gay Mayor George Moscone. The aftermath of Milk's death and White's trial brought the first gay riots since Stonewall, but part of the tragedy of Harvey Milk's life and death is that there was no replacement ready to fill his shoes as an outrageous, aggressive, and visible movement spokesperson.

### Lessons To Be Learned

Why was Harvey Milk the only gay leader of this period to even approach national prominence? What can be learned from his case, as well as from the negative examples of others, of relevance to the gay liberation movement today? The paucity of leadership in this period was certainly in part simply historical. The changing relative safety—or lack thereof—to identify as gay affected the development of leadership. The decisions of early leaders to go

after visibility affected the risk/reward ratio of leadership. As they established a beachhead of visibility, and as more diverse kinds of gay and lesbian people came out, the job description of a visible gay leader began to change.

The early activists inadvertently caused their own obsolescence. By aping the rhetoric and forms of the civil rights and women's movements, they helped gay activism win legitimacy first in left-wing and then in liberal circles. Within four years, advocating for gay rights (not liberation) became a respectable form of political activity in the left wing of the Democratic Party. In the mid-seventies, NGTF and the gay democratic clubs began to present opportunities for activism as a part-time activity. This increased participation in the movement overall, but also transformed the job description of movement leader from a self-sacrificing "new human" living the revolution to the more traditional model of administrator,

Harvey Milk, Castro Street Fair, 1978



RINK FOTO

fundraiser and organizer of large groups of people towards specific goals. Leaders could either move with the changes, as did Owles in initiating New York electoral activism and Voeller in founding NGTF, or be left behind.

The definition of a "gay leader" reflected the evolution of the gay identity itself. Beyond the obvious commonality of engaging in homosexual behavior, no one knew for certain what gays had in common. In the face of oppression, the pre-Stonewall homosexuals had created a subculture with "back regions" of relative safety, and stigma symbols—words with double meanings, tonal inflections, clothing, or hair styles—to identify themselves to each other without risking discovery by the larger society.<sup>30</sup> When the post-Stonewall activists repudiated the homophile movement, they rejected these invented commonalities as well, replacing them with their own set which could serve more visibly to identify gays to each other and the rest of society. Those who disagreed with the new definition of being gay were dubbed "not really gay." They were "self-oppressed." That is, their definitions of their own gayness still retained vestiges of the oppressor-defined homosexuality of the pre-liberation era.

As the movement grew, definitions of gay identity proliferated. Homosexuality remained oppressor-defined, but the possibilities for what homosexual identification could mean mushroomed as gay men and lesbians with diverse public images achieved greater visibility. Initially, the meaning of "gay" within the movement was quite narrow: while GLFers assumed an inherent gay affinity with New Left ideals, GAA's founders assumed an inherent gay unity around issues of sexual liberties and gay civil rights. The *Advocate*, particularly during Goodstein's tenure, attempted to mold the gay identity into something approaching middle-class respectability: "You are employed and a useful, responsible citizen. You have an attractive body, nice clothes and an inviting home."<sup>31</sup>

Yet unity within that movement was always very tentative. Essentially, the movement had only two basic goals in common:

eliminating the proscriptions against homosexual behavior and eradicating the stigma attached by the society to those who either appeared to engage, or admitted to engaging in such behavior. Not surprisingly, efforts aimed at achieving these narrow goals were the most successful undertakings of the movement. Efforts to build a "gay politics" beyond this least common denominator were largely unsuccessful. The factionalization of the movement may be attributed to the lack of an *a priori* common viewpoint provided by being gay. "Being gay" meant something very different to gay feminists, gay democrats, gay businesspeople, gay professionals, or gay leftists.

The development of leadership was further complicated by the fact that each conflicting view of "being gay" not only entailed its own gay agenda, but also its own image of the gay leader. Each faction felt and often expressed a need to project its vision of what gays are really like through exemplary figures (designated "leaders" by most, except for some of the left and feminist factions). If the leader promoted by one faction—NGTF's Voeller, for instance—exemplified the wrong qualities in the eyes of another faction, say the left-feminists running *Gay Community News*, the dissidents not only refused to follow him, but also considered it a necessity to repudiate him as a true member of the collectivity, as a "real gay." To succeed, a leader not only had to prove he or she could weather failure, criticism, and repudiation from fellow gays, but also had to be able to be gay visibly without embracing any unitary definition of gayness. Only Harvey Milk proved equal to the task.

### Implications For 1988

Which of the four themes concerning the non-development of visible national leadership identified here remain relevant today? The growth and diversity of the gay movement and gay and lesbian communities has provided an answer of sorts to the first one. In proliferation, the gay identity has defined itself as diverse. The life or death threat posed by AIDS has markedly changed the risk/reward ratio of

**The development of leadership was further complicated by the fact that each conflicting view of "being gay" not only entailed its own gay agenda, but also its own image of the gay leader.**



coming out. Rock Hudson exemplifies the degree to which post-diagnosis coming out loses much of its sting.

The notoriety which ten years ago went to Matlovich, the sergeant, today attaches to Matlovich, the person with AIDS. People with AIDS have taken important steps in leadership in recent years, but as long as cure and treatment remain distant hopes, this is a constituency which will be spokespersons on the basis of their condition rather than because they are able to provide long-term visible leadership.

To a certain extent, the AIDS crisis has required moving beyond our ambivalence about strong leadership, as it has made evident the need for visible and forceful advocates on the national and local scene. AIDS has also provided a place for the professional and organizational gay and lesbian leader, as it has required the development of permanent and effective service institutions within the gay community. In the training of service volunteers, we have the first organized leadership development in the gay movement outside of

the gay churches.

We are still not unified around a gay liberation agenda, and are reluctant to claim as leaders or true fellow gay liberationists those who disagree with our agenda and our vision of the gay identity. The attacks continue to come in the language of internalized oppression. Throughout the AIDS crisis, those who have argued for safer sex have been targeted as "erotophobic" and "self-hating," the latest variants on "not really gay."

Milk's success came in creating a specific agenda for gay liberation in the context of a broader progressive agenda for all people. His refusal to be a "gay candidate" is instructive: his non-gay support helped him to weather the factionalism of the gay community. His solitary status in the seventies, and to a certain extent, in the movement's history since, speaks to our need to unify, to build coalitions, to laugh off attacks from without and within, and to offer support and assistance rather than criticism and rejection to those willing to lead nationally and visibly. ▼

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<sup>1</sup> John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1981), p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> *The Advocate*, 10/28/70 - 11/10/70, pp. 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Marotta, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> *The Advocate* #79, 1/5/72, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *The Advocate* #125, 11/21/73, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *The Advocate* #125, 11/21/73, p. 2. See also Howard J. Brown, *Familiar Faces, Hidden Lives: The Story of Homosexual Men in America Today* (New York: Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> *The Advocate* #204, 12/1/76, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *The Advocate* #124, 11/7/73, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> *The Advocate* #134, 3/27/74, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Interviewed by George Mendenhall in *The Advocate* #128, 1/2/74, p. 14 [11 months prior to Goodstein's purchase of *The Advocate*].

<sup>13</sup> *The Advocate* #106, 2/28/73, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *The Advocate* #106, 2/28/73, p. 21. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Lee H. Solomon, "The Closet Politics of New York's Study Group" in the *Advocate* #216,

6/1/77, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> *The Advocate* #196, 8/11/76, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Sascha Gregory-Lewis, "The Cannibalization of a Hero" in *The Advocate* #180, 12/31/75, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Interview by Sascha Gregory-Lewis in *The Advocate* #233, 1/25/78, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *The Advocate*, #143, 7/31/74, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> *The Advocate*, #181, 1/14/76, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> *The Advocate* #191, 6/2/76, p. 4 of political supplement.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *The Advocate* #187, 4/7/76, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in *The Advocate* #187, 4/7/76, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *The Advocate* #230, 12/14/77, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Shilts, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>29</sup> *The Advocate* #259, 1/25/79, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> See Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 81, 100 for a fuller discussion of back regions and stigma symbols.

<sup>31</sup> *The Advocate* #156, 1/29/75, p. 3.