

Conservative Homophobia

By Paul Varnell

My fellow columnist Marvin Liebman recently distributed a piece (seen in the Feb. 24 *The Front Page*) in which he announced that he was no longer willing to call himself a conservative, a Christian, or a Republican.

Those labels, he said, draw much of their coherence these days from hostility toward gays and to some extent have become code words for antigay bigotry.

The American right wing, Liebman fears, is slipping "back into the ooze in which it rested" before his friend William Buckley helped give it moral tone and intellectual rigor in the pages of the *National Review*.

Before that time and increasingly again, that "ooze" consisted of "bigots, anti-Semites, anti-Catholics, the KKK, rednecks, know-nothings, a sorry lot of public hucksters and religious medicine men.

Well, get a grip, Marvin. It is doubtful how much of *National Reviews* intellectual and moral rigor ever trickled down to the mass of conservative voters. Very likely bigots have always been there (and sometimes at the *National Review* as well), they just got less attention because gays were not an important enough issue. Even now, the "bigots and rednecks" may not be very powerful. Public opinion polls show a steady progress in support for gays.

But Liebman has a point. It does seem true that there is now little or no conservative elite willing to rule the homophobes out of court, to say, "This is simply not intellectually responsible." To the contrary, some conservative intellectuals tend to be guilty themselves.

Almost simultaneously with Liebman's column, Michael Lind, the former executive editor of the neo-conservative quarterly *National Interest*, published a fascinating piece in the left-wing magazine *Dissent* called "Why Intellectual Conservatism Died."

In his analysis, Lind offers several examples of the lowering of intellectual standards of discussion among conservative thinkers and their growing preoccupation with the themes of the "culture wars" — pornography, homosexuality, family, even evolution.

More explicitly than Liebman, Lind places the

blame on "the growing power within the Republican part of the Protestant right," particularly the evangelicals and fundamentalists of the south and west.

Whereas once conservative intellectuals carried on lively debates on fundamental principles and offered stimulating social and political analyses, says Lind, many have now become apologists and public relations flaks for fundamentalists.

Like Liebman, Lind criticizes the growing tolerance of anti-Semitism, homophobia, conspiracy theories, and wacko policy ideas. Startlingly, he recounts a meeting where the oncesane Paul Weyrich, who was head of the Free Congress Foundation, proposed that the government lace black market drugs with rat poison so drug addicts could be identified and arrested when they went into sudden convulsions. No one walked out of the meeting or demanded that Weyrich be ostracized.

Now Weyrich may not be a major player, and Lind's portrait may — like Liebman's — be overdrawn, but his wide-ranging critique does offer evidence for conservative intellectual decay: lower standards of evidence, a tolerance for kookiness dependence on foundation money, ideological subservience to the momentary needs of the Republican party, an unwillingness to cope with real social problems, as well as a shameful willingness to shill for the "fever swamp" themes of the culture wars and "the claim that homosexuals are trying to destroy family, religion, and Western civilization."

Lind's article, as an act of seeming apostasy (Lind was once a research assistant for Buckley), was regarded as potentially damaging enough that James Bowman, who writes a media column for the neo-conservative *New Criterion*, tried to do damage control.

Ignoring much of Lind's critique, Bowman implied, not quite accurately, that Lind's major objection was that the culture war "is tantamount to the claim that homosexuals are trying to destroy Western civilization."

Bowman summarily dismisses this as "patent nonsense" and "a wild charge." "Does anyone make this claim beside those who deprecate it?" he asks rhetorically.

Well, yes. We have heard this claim or its equivalent pretty regularly from former Rep.

William Dannemeyer (R-CA), from Republican powerhouse Pat Robertson, from the Traditional Values Coalition's Lou Sheldon, who has met with Newt Gingrich, from columnist Pat Buchanan, and many others.

Usually the claim does not quite take the form that gays *intend* to bring down family, religion, and Western civilization, but that gay demands for equal openness, equal treatment, and the equality of their relationships constitutes an attack on (or weakening of) religion and family and *therefore* civilization will decline and fall.

For example: "The family must be cultivated and protected . . . And today, gay liberation assaults it. . . At stake is our civilization." Clear enough?

Or this: "It is not overstated to say that the Hebrew Bible's prohibition on non-marital sex made the creation of Western civilization possible."

Those are both by Dennis Prager writing in the neo-conservative magazine *Public Interest* (Summer, 1993), edited by Irving Kristol.

And from leading conservative Irving Kristol himself: "No society... is going to accept homosexuality as being as morally or socially acceptable as heterosexuality." (*Policy Review*, Summer, 1984). The obvious, if unstated, part of the argument is: Because if it did . . .

From conservative journalist and publicist M. Stanton Evans: Homosexuality "is a form of life-denying death ethic in our society. If the homosexual ethic prevailed, that would be the end of the human race." (*Policy Review*, same issue)

From prominent conservative rabbi Seymour Siegel: "society cannot tolerate [the legitimization of] homosexuality as an option that is morally no different from the conventional option." (*Policy Review*, same issue) Again, because if it did . . .?

And from an article in *New Criterion* itself (June, 1993), a writer says that revealing the sexual orientation of a White House aide "suggests a blurring of the boundary between the public and the private which if allowed its career unimpeded, must lead to the destruction of civil society." Since the marriages of heterosexuals are regularly spoken of, it must be only when gays are granted equal openness that civil society is destroyed. The author of this arrant nonsense? Why James Bowman himself.

"There's no such thing as an unimpeachable witness. If Jesus Christ with a bloody crown of thorns showed up in Pat Robertson's TV studio and told him to let up on the Jews and gays or march straight to hell, do you think the phony son of a bitch would fall down weeping and beg his saviour's forgiveness? Like hell. He'd call the state police and blame the whole disturbance on ACT-UP."

—Hal Crowther in *The Independent*, 4/26/95

"If I'm making love to a woman that I love, I wouldn't necessarily be a lesbian just because she might call herself that. I feel my sexuality is as individual as my soul, and it keeps getting enriched. . . . If I ever felt that I was a lesbian, I would be thrilled to say it. But I don't feel truthful saying that. It would hurt me to say it. And it would hurt me to say I was heterosexual. And it would hurt me to say I was sleeping with a man at the moment. I'm not."

—Grammy-nominated singer Sophie B. Hawkins explaining her "omnisexual" orientation to *Out* magazine.

"I know from my own experience that in dealing with depression as well as HIV people around me sometimes had to push themselves on me and take the initiative and I'm thankful for that. Also my dogs are very important to me and they kept me going. I had to get up to feed and exercise them and make sure they were well cared

for that helped me personally. And the one thing I learned from my dogs is unconditional love and that's all anyone can ask for. Next."

—Greg Louganis in a live keyboard chat with users of the CompuServe computer on-line service.

"Have I EVER said to you, 'Rex, you can't quote me on this?' You are witnessing the reinvention of this activist into something of a sexual aggressor. It's about time I devoted real time to getting laid. BTW, the Hot Ash [gay-cigar-smokers club] night at the Lone Star [Saloon, San Francisco's main bear bar] last night was OK. Decent crowd and about a dozen stogie smokers. Two of the men got me hard. Guess which bar I'll be at tonight?"

—On-the-record e-mail to this quotes column from notorious free-lance gay activist Michael Petrelis, who is usually in D.C. irritating suit-and-tie gay leaders but now seems to be chasing cigar-smokers at West Coast bear bars.

"If there is a military emergency and we have a draft, would you exempt anyone who says he is gay? The percentage of those claiming to be gay would suddenly escalate! . . . Since the 10 Commandments mention adultery and not

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homosexuality, and adultery is condemned at least 40 times more than homosexuality in the Bible, should we keep anyone out of the service who has

committed adultery? My recollection of my Army days is that [this] would thin our ranks appreciably."

—U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., in his newspaper column.

"Eighteen million people — Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, the handicapped, POWs, Jehovah's Witnesses, leftists, artists — (were) locked up in some 520 concentration camps and subcamps across occupied Europe, according to generally accepted estimates used to teach German school children about Nazi crimes. Eleven million, about half of them Jews gassed in extermination camps, never saw the outside world again."

—From an Associated Press story marking the 50th anniversary of the liberation of World War II concentration camps.

"Nationwide, about 140 major public and private employers extend medical benefits to gay and lesbian domestic partners, including Apple Computer Inc., Eastman Kodak, Levi Strauss &

Terror & Responsibility

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That is the message of the Michigan militia group accused bomber Timothy McVeigh says he belonged to — a group that is a prototype of other hate groups. The leader of that militia, Norm Olson, is a Baptist minister and the owner of a gun shop and on the weekends he plots to overthrow the "big government" he says wants only to take away his guns and the rights of "real" Americans, by which he means straight, white, Christian men.

Off the airwaves, out of the range of radical-right talk radio, the until-now Vociferous voices of the Right were noticeably silent in the aftermath of Oklahoma City. It was six

days after the bombing before either Bob Dole or Newt Gingrich spoke, and their words were perhaps the most telling since the November elections. There were no words of condolence broadcast for the families of the victims, no signs of grief, sorrow, or even compassion. Instead Dole suggested some bipartisan anti terrorist legislation but urged restraint on gun control. Gingrich said gun control wasn't an issue, noting somewhat snidely that the Oklahoma bomb would kill more people this year than assault weapons. Arlen Specter wants to legislate infiltration and surveillance of political groups.

These are the leaders who have brought us to the fringe of terrorism. These men have never driven a truck full of home-grown explosives to sit under the windows of a daycare center. They have never organized a terrorist attack. But their words, their rhetoric, their rage and hate permeate Congress, permeate the airwaves, permeate the consciousness of hundreds of thousands of people like Timothy McVeigh who think the answer to life's inequities is best seen through the sight of a gun or lit at the end of a fuse.

There are acts of terrorism in the U.S. every day, though few have the monumentality of Oklahoma City, and few gain the national and media attention of that gruesome killing field. Clinton called on Americans to take responsibility, to answer back to the rhetoric of hate that spawns these atrocities from Charlie Howard's death to the Oklahoma city bombing. But his voice is startlingly solitary, and those of us who have seen the face of terrorism up close and personal wonder how many deaths it will take till we know that too many people have died.

Paul Varnell's syndicated column is a regular feature of the *Windy City Times of Chicago*.

Co., Microsoft Corp., Sony Corp., Harley Davidson, Marriott Corp., Sheraton Corp., HBO, USAir and Xerox."

—From the *Providence (R.I.) Journal*.

"[Washington state is a] farm team for sodomites [that] treats children like pets for homosexuals to boost their self-esteem by allowing them to act like normal, heterosexual parents. If they want kids, they can do it the old-fashioned way."

—Citizens Alliance of Washington Chair Sam Woodard to *The Spokane Review*.

"I don't know about anywhere else in the world, but in Scotland 'the scene' involves pubbing and clubbing and that's about it. I thought that the difficult bit would be coming out and being accepted by my straight friends and my family, but walking into these supposedly 'safe havens' only to be met by established groups who are not willing to make an effort with a newcomer has been my biggest problem."

—Snagged from the Internet mailing list "Gaynet."

"I don't say that I'm proud to be gay because I don't necessarily think it is something you should either be proud or ashamed of. It just is."

—Chastity Bono, daughter of *Sonny & Cher*, to *The Advocate*.

—Contributed by Rex Wockner