

A Generally Favorable Year for the Gay Community

All in all, 2001 was a generally good year in the political realm for the gay community. The score: some significant wins, tempered by a few setbacks.

The National Scene

The year started with the inauguration of President George W. Bush, a controversial event itself, coming on the heels of the recount and the closest presidential race in American history.

President Bush got off to a mixed start with the gay community. He declined to select former Senator Dan Coates for Defense Secretary after Coates publicly said he wanted to reduce the role of women in the military, repeal the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy and return to a total ban on gays serving in the military. Bush, unlike Coates, supports the gender and sexual orientation policies in the military first implemented by President Clinton.

However, Religious Right activists forced President Bush to bypass pro-gay Montana Governor Marc Racicot for the Attorney General slot in the Cabinet. To avoid alienating that powerful electoral constituency, Bush instead selected former Senator John Ashcroft for the post. Ashcroft, a fundamentalist Christian, had a solid anti-gay voting record throughout his career.

Despite initial gay misgivings about him, Ashcroft quickly made a point of meeting with the Log Cabin

Republicans to emphasize that he intended to safeguard the rights of all Americans, regardless of sexual orientation. Likewise, Ashcroft said he would not consider sexual orientation as a factor in hiring employees in the Justice Department.

President Bush also refused the Religious Right's demand that he repeal Clinton's executive orders related to sexual orientation. Those orders, still in place today, continue to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation for all federal employment matters.

A controversy arose early in the year when it was revealed that Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld selected Stephen Herbits of Miami, an openly gay political activist, to serve as a top aide. Herbits, a trusted Rumsfeld friend who served in a similar capacity for him during the Ford Administration, was responsible for approving all applicants for political appointments within the Defense

Department.

The Religious Right, not surprisingly, became upset. "Herbits' appointment sends a message to Congress that the Defense Department openly supports homosexuals in the military, despite the congressional ban. This appointment is a slap in the face to our servicemen and to Congress," said Rev. Lou Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition. Under pressure from various conservatives, Herbits eventually left the post mid-year.

Bush scored points with the gay community when he named openly gay political activist Scott Evertz to serve as director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy. This time

spirit of national unity by giving the eulogy at the funeral of Mark Bingham. Bingham, a gay rugby player, was killed on United Flight 93 when he and other passengers attempted to overpower the terrorist hijackers. The plane crashed in a Pennsylvania field, rather than its intended target of the U.S. Capitol building, because of the heroism of Bingham and the other passengers. McCain said Bingham was "a good American and an extraordinary human being. He supported me, and his support now ranks among the greatest honors of my life."

In November, pro-gay candidates Mark Warner and Jim McGreevey were elected to governorships in Virginia and New Jersey. Both losing GOP candidates were staunchly anti-gay. The GOP also lost key mayoral races in 2001 in Houston, Miami and Los Angeles, although Republicans scored a major upset win in New York City when pro-gay billionaire Mike Bloomberg was elected mayor to succeed retiring incumbent Rudy Giuliani.

In the aftermath of the losses, President Bush forced Republican National Chairman Jim Gilmore to resign, and replaced him with his close friend Racicot. The Human Rights Campaign praised the selection of Racicot as a "signal that the GOP is moving in a more moderate direction that will embrace all Americans."

The Local Political Scene

Religious Right activists in Broward and Miami-Dade organized separate petition drives to repeal anti-discrimination ordinances enacted in both counties.

In Broward, they wrapped their message in the guise of "protecting" the Boy Scouts from a loss of government funding. The South Florida council of the Boy Scouts openly distanced themselves from the Equal Rights Not Special Rights (ERNSR) committee and its DefendOurScouts.com message.

The gay community quickly mobilized with an aggressive Decline to Sign campaign run by the Americans for Equality-Empower Broward group.

Despite spending nearly \$150,000 on the

10-month effort, the ERNSR campaign failed to collect the 62,000 signatures required by the October deadline to force a public vote. After review by the Supervisor of Elections, ERNSR fell nearly 8,000 signatures short.

An exclusive investigation by *The Express* also revealed in October that ERNSR apparently engaged in an elaborate and illegal money laundering scheme related to at least \$100,000 of the ERNSR contributions used to finance their failed effort.

Following a series of *Express* articles, local gay activist Bill Rettinger filed formal complaints in December against three ERNSR leaders with the Florida Elections Commission and the Broward State Attorney's Office. Those civil and criminal complaints remain under active investigation.

Unlike Broward, it appears now that the anti-gay Take Back Miami-Dade (TBMD) campaign collected enough valid petition signatures there to force a repeal vote onto the September 2002 primary ballot.

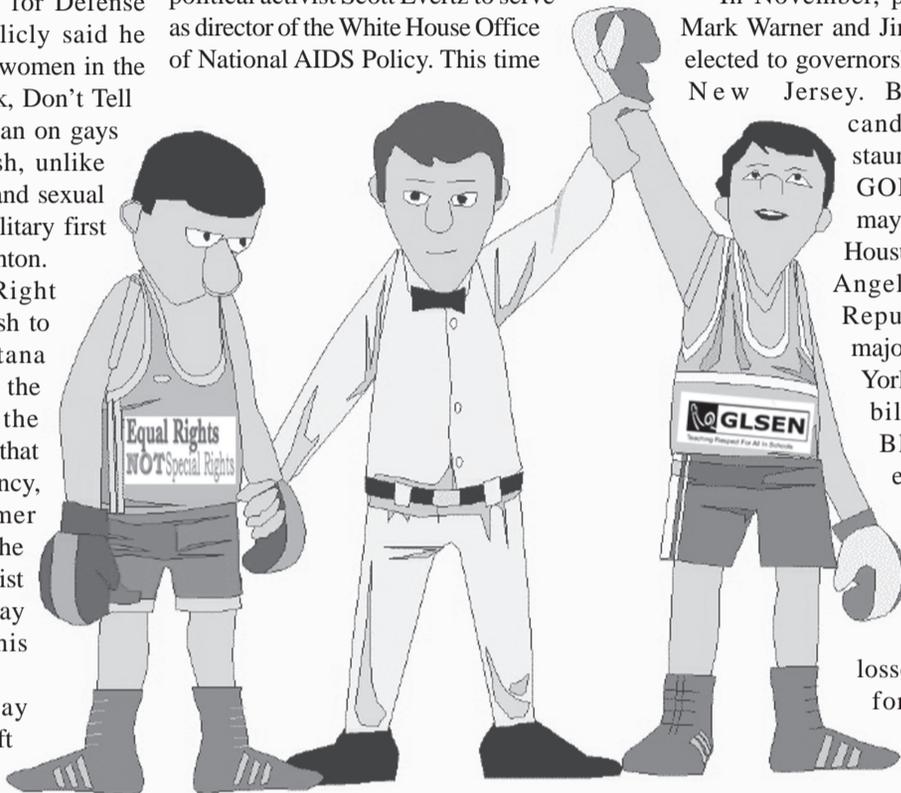
The Miami-Dade drive was marked by controversy. The pro-gay SAVE Dade committee filed criminal complaints that TBMD submitted fraudulent signatures. For a time, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement impounded the TBMD petitions. Then, it appeared for a time that the Miami-Dade Supervisor of Elections would reject enough signatures to invalidate the referendum drive.

A legal challenge by TBMD ultimately established that they submitted enough signatures to force the 2002 repeal vote. SAVE Dade now plans to file a legal challenge contesting the ballot certification. Many political leaders, including Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas, have vowed to campaign in support of retaining the gay anti-discrimination ordinance.

In Broward, conservative Palm Beach radio talk show host Steve Kane successfully riled up a large enough crowd this fall to persuade the Broward County School Board to deny entering into an agreement with the Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) group for an educational campaign.

Kane raised objections to the graphic sexual language contained in GLSEN materials intended for instructing teachers on how to deal with gay students. The GLSEN proposal lost by a 5-3 vote. School Board Members Lois Wexler, Bob Parks and Beverly Gallagher were the three who voted in support of GLSEN.

In local elections, pro-gay candidates David Dermer and Manny Diaz were elected Mayor in Miami Beach and Miami. Voters in Miami Beach also retained the city's domestic partner benefits program for city employees.



Bush ignored the complaints of the Religious Right and rebuffed their call to replace Everts.

Bush also selected openly gay career diplomat Michael E. Guest to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Romania. The U.S. Senate unanimously confirmed Guest, making him the first openly gay person to receive Senate approval for a diplomatic post. At Guest's swearing-in ceremony in September, Secretary of State Colin Powell made a point a publicly recognizing Guest's same-sex spouse.

In the days following the September 11 terrorist attacks, televangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson appeared on TV and appallingly blamed gays, feminists, pagans, the ACLU and others for having angered God to allow the attack on America. They both later apologized. The White House, dissatisfied with Falwell's initial weak apology, forced Falwell to make a second, unconditional apology.

Senator John McCain emphasized the

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