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Harvey Milk and California Proposition 6: how the gay liberation movement won two early victories

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Harvey Milk and California Proposition 6:

How the Gay Liberation Movement Won Two Early Victories

By

Ramy K. Khalil

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Ramy K. Khalil
May 11, 2012

Harvey Milk and California Proposition 6:

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

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May 2012

Abstract

The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) movement scored two historic victories in California in the late 1970s. Despite difficult odds, the movement succeeded in electing Harvey Milk as the first openly gay male candidate to political office in the country. The election of Harvey Milk to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors took place at time when anti-gay ballot initiatives were being approved by large majorities of voters in states across the country. Furthermore, the LGBT liberation movement succeeded in defeating an anti-gay ballot initiative in California in 1978, Proposition 6.

Based on extensive primary source research, this thesis argues that certain historical conditions, which activists had little control over, made these victories possible, namely, the protest movements and radicalization of the 1960s, the massive migration of LGBT people to San Francisco, and the establishment of district-based elections rather than city-wide elections for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. California Senator John Briggs also made the mistake of writing Proposition 6 in a way that most California voters regarded as too extreme. In addition, activists used progressive left-wing strategies that proved to be decisive in electing Milk and defeating Proposition 6. Specifically, LGBT activists formed coalitions with unions, low-income workers, and oppressed groups, they organized visible mass demonstrations, and thousands of LGBT came out of the closet and directly confronted the homophobic arguments of their opponents.

Historians and corporate media outlets give much of the credit for shifting public opinion against Proposition 6 to high profile politicians and media outlets. However, this thesis demonstrates that grassroots activists played the lead role in shifting public opinion against the initiative, not the established politicians or corporate media outlets.

Acknowledgments

“If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet knock down every closet door.”

– *Harvey Milk*

I wish to express my tremendous respect and admiration for all the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, unions, and activists who helped elect Harvey Milk to office in 1977 and defeat California Proposition 6 in 1978. In light of the on-going struggles for LGBT rights today, these historic victories provide many fascinating and useful lessons for how we can make further progress not only for LGBT rights but also for the greater causes of sexual and human liberation. I hope the lessons of these struggles described in this thesis will be used by those today and in the future who are continuing the struggle for equality for LGBT people and all oppressed groups and working people.

There are certain groups in particular who I wish to honor those who inspired me to write thesis or those who contributed to Milk’s election and the victory over California Proposition 6: The Gay Liberation Front, the Bay Area Gay Liberation organization, the Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative and its affiliated organizations, the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Alternative, the Committee for a Workers’ International, Harvey Milk, Cleve Jones, Amber Hollibaugh, Sherry Wolf, the Teamsters Union, the California teachers’ unions, and the thousands of other forgotten LGBT, union, feminist, and socialist activists who made these victories possible. I also wish to acknowledge Gwen Craig and Ruth Mahaney for their activism and for taking the time to contribute thoughtful interviews. Finally, I wish to thank my thesis committee advisors, Professors Kathleen Kennedy, Johann Neem, and Ricardo Lopez, for their helpful assistance and guidance as well as my family members, classmates and friends who provided essential support and feedback throughout the research and writing process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children."

- Anita Bryant

In November 1977, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) movement scored an historic victory by electing Harvey Milk as the first openly gay male candidate to political office in the United States. According to historian Elizabeth Armstrong, "more than any other single event, the election of Harvey Milk to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in November 1977 signaled the ascendance of gay electoral power in San Francisco."¹ Only three years after Elaine Noble was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives as the first openly lesbian or gay candidate to political office in the U.S., Milk's election was a momentous victory that visibly demonstrated the rising political power of the growing LGBT population not only in San Francisco but in the United States as a whole. The victory also reflected the dramatic rise in the 1970s in the number of LGBT people "coming out of the closet" and openly identifying themselves as gays and lesbians.

This electoral victory for the LGBT rights movement is particularly fascinating because it came at a time when there was a growing conservative backlash against the gay liberation movement and other left-wing protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1977 and 1978, ordinances protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination were being repealed in state after state. Conservative forces emerged victorious in ballot initiative elections that

¹ Elizabeth Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 123.

struck down ordinances prohibiting discrimination against gays and lesbians in four cities and counties across the country - Dade County, Florida, Wichita, Kansas, St. Paul, Minnesota, and even the relatively liberal city of Eugene, Oregon. Yet, in the midst of this conservative wave sweeping the country, Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors as the first openly gay politician in the country. After his election, Milk led the effort in San Francisco to pass an ordinance with the strongest protections from discrimination against LGBT people in the country, banning discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations.² As a San Francisco Supervisor, he played a decisive role in building a movement against an anti-gay ballot initiative in California in 1978, Proposition 6. If a majority of voters had voted for Proposition 6, LGBT teachers and LGBT rights supporters would have been banned from employment in California public schools. Milk's election and the defeat of Proposition 6 were not just local victories for the California LGBT rights movement; they were historic victories for the entire national LGBT rights movement that represented a powerful setback to the rising religious right.

These LGBT rights victories took place at a time when LGBT people faced intense discrimination. If gays or lesbians were caught expressing their homosexuality in public in the 1970s, they would often be arrested, have their names listed and exposed in the newspaper, be ostracized by their families and friends, and terminated from employment. In the year 1971 alone, for example, there were 2,800 arrests of LGBT people on sex-related charges even in the relatively tolerant city of San Francisco.³ The social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s were making progress in winning civil rights for African Americans,

² David Aretha, *No Compromise: The Story of Harvey Milk* (Greensboro: Morgan Reynolds Publishing, 2010), 73.

³ Mike Weiss, *Double Play: The Hidden Passions behind the Double Assassination of George Moscone and Harvey Milk* (San Francisco: Vince Emery Productions, 2nd edition, 2010), 38.

women, and LGBT people and pressuring the U.S. government to end the war in Vietnam. However, these left-wing movements provoked a “New Right” backlash among many Americans who felt divided over the merits of the war and who held racist, sexist, and homophobic views to some degree. The right-wing leaders of this New Right movement tapped into growing anxieties about the declining position of the U.S. in the world and its stagnating economy during the 1970s. Inflation was eroding the purchasing power of the wages of tens of millions of workers, most of whom had grown accustomed to rising living standards for three decades since World War II.⁴ The well known singer Anita Bryant founded an organization called Save Our Children and launched a highly publicized “crusade against homosexuality,” as she called it. She mobilized thousands of conservatives with speeches that included statements such as: "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children." "If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes, and to people who sleep with St. Bernards, and to nail biters." “Our laws were never meant to protect the abnormal and were made for the majority.”⁵ The fact that this singer could make such disparaging remarks about LGBT people and convince a majority of people to vote for her ballot initiatives is an indicator of the public’s general lack of understanding, fear, and hostility to homosexuality at the time. The LGBT rights movement clearly faced formidable obstacles.

Many LGBT people were just beginning to come out of the closet, and many of the blue-collar workers who made up a majority of California voters were deeply steeped in homophobic ideas. Despite these difficult conditions, the LGBT minority managed to build effective alliances with others to gain a majority of public support for electing Milk in 1977

⁴ Barry Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 122.

⁵ *Daily Sun Reporter*, 3/5/77, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, San Francisco.

and defeating California Proposition 6 in 1978. After three failed attempts, Milk finally succeeded in winning political office even though he was opposed by much of the political establishment as well as the traditional LGBT movement leaders.

A fascinating feature of the campaign against California Proposition 6 (which would have banned employment of LGBT people and their supporters from public schools) is that opinion polls suggested for an entire year that a majority of voters would support the initiative. Yet in the last three months of the campaign, a section of voters changed their minds, resulting in a significant majority of voters ultimately rejecting the initiative.

What historical conditions made it possible for the LGBT rights movement to elect Milk and defeat Proposition 6? What was different about California compared with the other four states where voters approved anti-LGBT ballot initiatives in the previous year? What strategies did Milk and other LGBT activists use in California that proved to be so successful? How did LGBT people, many of whom were just beginning to come out of the closet, manage to build alliances with blue-collar workers, racial minorities, and senior citizens who held deeply engrained homophobic ideas? Did these California campaigns' relatively militant strategies help or hinder their success? What caused the shift in public opinion against Proposition 6 in the last three months of campaign? Is it true, as many corporate news outlets and historians claim, that high-profile politicians and major media outlets played the main role in defeating Proposition 6? What role did grassroots activists play compared with the major politicians and the major media outlets? These are the main questions this thesis sets out to answer.

To answer these questions, I identify in this thesis the main historical trends that created the conditions for Milk to be elected and for Proposition 6 to be defeated.

Specifically, I argue that the left-wing protest movements of the 1960s-1970s, the massive influx of LGBT people migrating to San Francisco, and the new system for electing the San Francisco Board of Supervisors created the historical conditions that made it possible to elect Milk and defeat Proposition 6.

However, historical conditions by themselves cannot explain these LGBT rights victories. Rather, key political actors in the campaigns made certain decisions and chose certain strategies which had an absolutely decisive impact on their outcome. Specifically, I argue that LGBT rights activists used progressive left-wing strategies in these campaigns that turned out to be very effective. LGBT activists built grassroots social movements and formed coalitions with other oppressed groups that proved essential to the campaigns' success. Harvey Milk's commitment to low-income people and oppressed groups and his incorporation of many gay liberation ideas into his campaigns also proved essential to his election as well as the leading role he played in the campaign against Proposition 6. And finally, the direct challenge that the LGBT rights campaigns waged against their opponents' homophobic arguments turned out to be very effective. All these left-wing strategies help explain how the LGBT rights movement was able to elect Milk and defeat Proposition 6.

LGBT studies are still relatively new academic disciplines, and the historiography on these campaigns lacks a focused analysis of the historical processes and activist strategies that led to Milk's election and especially the defeat of Proposition 6. In fact, no historians have written any major works about Proposition 6. Hundreds of news articles were published about Proposition 6 during the course of the campaign in 1977 and 1978, but very few articles and not a single book have been written about this historic campaign. The campaign against Proposition 6, which was

an important victory in LGBT history, tends to receive only a page or two in LGBT history books. Moreover, the few historians that do mention the campaign against California Proposition 6 in their works, such as Dudley Clendinen, Adam Nagourney, Craig Rimmerman, and Elizabeth Armstrong, often exaggerate the role played by major media outlets and high-profile politicians in defeating Proposition 6. In this thesis, I fully acknowledge that newspaper editorials and major politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter did play a certain role in helping defeat the ballot initiative. However, my thesis emphasizes that the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the grassroots mobilization against Proposition 6 by LGBT rights organizations and allied groups (unions, feminist organizations, etc.) had far more to do with defeating the initiative than these high-profile politicians and the media. I also point out that the California Senator who wrote the ballot initiative, John Briggs, made a major strategic mistake by proposing new policies in his initiative that a majority of California voters believed was too extreme to be acceptable. In these ways, this study makes a unique contribution to the historiographical literature by shedding light on the historical conditions and especially the activist strategies that led to the defeat of Proposition 6 as well as Milk's victory.⁶

⁶ I based this thesis primarily on the research of primary sources that supported, opposed, or took no position on the Milk campaigns and Proposition 6. In particular, I studied fliers, newspaper articles, press statements, speeches, letters, and interviews (video, audio, written) with Harvey Milk, John Briggs, and activists involved in both sides of the campaigns. I conducted two interviews with two lesbian activists, Gwenn Craig and Ruth Mahaney, who were actively involved in the campaign against Proposition 6 and who also worked with Milk. I accessed most of the documents at the San Francisco Public Library where Harvey Milk's papers are stored. Most of the material about the Proposition 6 campaign came from the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society in San Francisco, which houses one of the world's largest collections of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender historical materials.

Chapter 2: Historical Conditions that Made LGBT

Rights Victories Possible

“Gay history does not stand independent of the society of which it is part. At some moments, the experience of gay men and lesbians will be decisively shaped by the larger currents of change swirling around them. At others, events and actions within the gay world will have important ramifications for the whole society.”

- John D’Emilio¹

The election of Harvey Milk in 1977 and the defeat of Proposition 6 in 1978 were undoubtedly achieved by the dedication of LGBT rights activists and the effective strategies they employed. However, it was not “free will” alone that made these victories possible. Specific historical events and developments which activists had no control over coincided in the late 1970s in California to create the conditions, “the fertile soil,” that made it possible for activists to achieve their victories. The activist victories cannot be explained in isolation without understanding the broader historical context and processes in which they took place. This chapter identifies and explains the main historical conditions that made the victories possible.

One main historical process that contributed to the LGBT rights victories in California in the late 1970s was the rise of left-wing protest movements from the 1950s through the 1970s. The civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements collectively provided an essential foundation upon which the LGBT rights movement was built. As these social

¹ John D’Emilio, *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 228.

movements took ideas and inspiration from one another and became increasingly militant, they contributed significantly to the radicalization of the “homophile” movement which led to the massive growth of the “gay liberation” movement. The ideas of gay liberation played a key role in Milk’s campaigns as well as the campaign against Proposition 6 in that both campaigns emphasized the importance of coming out of the closet, celebrating LGBT identities, and confronting homophobic ideas.

Another absolutely essential historical trend that made Milk’s election and the defeat of Proposition 6 possible was the large influx of LGBT people from across the country who migrated to the urban centers of Los Angeles and especially San Francisco, particularly the Castro District from where Milk was eventually elected. This demographic trend provided a major boost to the rise of the gay liberation movement in San Francisco. One specific political reform that the growing LGBT rights movement fought for was the establishment of a new district-based system for electing the San Francisco Board of Supervisors which would make it easier for the LGBT population to elect an openly gay person to office because the LGBT population was very densely concentrated in one specific electoral district. This chapter analyzes how these inter-related historical factors collectively created the conditions that made it possible for the LGBT community to elect Milk and defeat Proposition 6.

1960s Protest Movements

The first key historical development that contributed to the LGBT rights victories in California in the late 1970s was the foundation laid by the social protest movements in the U.S. and around the world in the previous two decades, particularly the African American

civil rights movement. Without the positive example and the significant impact of the 1960s protest movements, the LGBT rights movement would not have developed in the same way nor to the degree that it did.² A basic overview of these protest movements shows how they played a critical role in paving the way for the rise of the gay liberation movement, which elected the first openly gay politician in 1977 and defeated California Proposition 6 in 1978.

The African American civil rights movement from 1954 through the 1970s was one of the largest, most successful social movements in U.S. history. In the year 1963 alone, protests were organized in 115 cities, ten protesters were killed by right-wing groups, thousands were injured often by police, and more than 20,000 were arrested.³ The year 1963 also witnessed the most famous civil rights march on Washington of 250,000 people - the largest demonstration of African Americans in history.⁴ When government officials defended segregation laws or delayed repealing them, the emergence of the Black Power movement in 1965 represented a turning point when the movement became increasingly militant and outspoken. After two decades of persistent marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and strikes, the movement ultimately succeeded in dismantling legal segregation—an historic accomplishment by some of the most oppressed people in U.S. society.

The social movement against racist segregation laws had an electrifying effect on other oppressed social groups, inspiring protests on a wide variety of issues. As the U.S. government increasingly committed troops and resources to its war in Vietnam, some of the first stirrings of protests against the war came from civil rights activists.⁵ As the costs of the

² John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 2nd edition) 224.

³ Adrian Wood and Nutan Rajguru, *Black Rebellion: Black History from Both Sides of the Atlantic* (London: Panther, 1994), 37.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 474-475.

war mounted in both money and people's lives, many African Americans and Latinos, who were disproportionately represented in the military, saw less and less reason to risk their lives for the U.S. government which still discriminated against them. When National Guardsmen killed 4 student anti-war protesters at Kent State University in 1970, a tidal wave of protest shook the country. Students shut down four hundred colleges in the largest general student strike in U.S. history. The FBI counted 1,785 student demonstrations that school year, including the occupations of 313 buildings.⁶ Protests were not limited to civil society; opposition to the war spread deep into the ranks of the armed forces as well. By 1970, soldiers were actually helping publish and circulate 50 underground newspapers on military bases.⁷ Col. Robert D. Heinl Jr. describes the soldiers' rebellion in "The Collapse of the Armed Forces" published in the *Armed Forces Journal* (6/07/71).

The morale, discipline and battle-worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States.

By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous.⁸

As women participated in anti-war protests and civil rights demonstrations for African Americans, they began questioning their own subordinate gender role in society. Women began to ask themselves: "If blacks can successfully challenge racism, why can't women challenge sexism, too?"⁹ A surge in women's rights activism began to take place,

⁶ Zinn, *A People's History*, 481.

⁷ Ibid, 485.

⁸ Col. Robert D. Heinl Jr., "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," North American Newspaper Alliance, *Armed Forces Journal*, 6/07/71, <http://chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/Vietnam/heinl.html>.

⁹ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 59.

reflected in the membership figures for the National Organization for Women which grew exponentially from 300 in 1966 to 40,000 by 1974.¹⁰ Young feminists became politicized and formed women's liberation groups in 1967 which rapidly spread to over 40 cities by 1969.¹¹ The movement succeeded in forcing numerous institutions to change their sexist practices.¹² In 1973, for instance, the Supreme Court legalized women's right to choose an abortion during the first six months of pregnancy in its landmark *Roe v Wade* ruling.

Many of the activists in these civil rights and anti-war movements were also inspired by the protests and revolutions sweeping the world in the 1960s, especially in 1968. The year 1968 witnessed massive student protests all across the world, particularly against the Vietnam War. 1968 was also the year of the largest labor strike in world history in France, the Prague Spring uprising against Czechoslovakia's Stalinist dictatorship, and on-going colonial independence revolutions.

These protest movements helped achieve a number of accomplishments on a variety of issues in the U.S.: the end of legal segregation, the legalization of a woman's right to choose an abortion, the eventual withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and social welfare programs, and other substantial reforms. Militant protest movements also developed among environmentalists, workers, Chicanos, American Indians, the disabled, as well as the LGBT community.

The LGBT rights movement benefited enormously from the radicalization of the 1960s and the achievements of these social protest movements. Historian John D'Emilio argues that these "huge waves of radical protest that washed over the nation" undoubtedly

¹⁰ Sharon Smith, *Abortion: Every Woman's Right* (Chicago: Bookmarks, 1989), 15.

¹¹ Sherry Wolf, Elizabeth Schulte, and Sharon Smith, *Abortion Rights: Lessons for a New Struggle* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2001), 16.

¹² Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 89.

affected the consciousness of gays and lesbians.¹³ D’Emilio correctly points out that “key sources of political power and cultural authority—the military, law enforcement, elected officials, traditional church teaching, mental health professionals—were challenged.” As millions were questioning the legitimacy and authority of these traditional institutions, it became easier to imagine a world in which even LGBT people would finally make progress on achieving equal rights. This was particularly true of the women’s liberation movement and the 1960s counter culture which challenged and transformed commonplace ideas about sexuality and gender roles.

As each of the various protest movements made progress in achieving its own particular demands, it not only set an inspiring example to the LGBT community, it also shifted the public debate in the country and ratcheted up pressure on the political establishment to grant rights to oppressed groups. The civil rights movement of blacks and women not only provided models of protest techniques but also concepts and language about equal rights that the LGBT rights movement embraced. John D’Emilio argues that the LGBT riot at the Stonewall Inn in New York in June 1969 would not have been able to inspire a nationwide grassroots gay liberation movement if other mass radical movements of blacks, students, anti-war protesters and the New Left had not developed before 1969.¹⁴ Above all, D’Emilio argues, the women’s liberation movement provided a political analysis of sex roles and sexism that were essential theoretical contributions that massively strengthened the gay liberation movement, both in its ideas and confidence.

Harvey Milk’s own political evolution was itself the product of this radicalization that was taking place during the 1960s, especially after the inspiring LGBT riots at the Stonewall

¹³ John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (London: Routledge, 1992), 227.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 69-70.

Inn in New York City in 1969.¹⁵ For most of his life, Milk had been conservative politically, and it was not until the mid-1960s when left-wing movements developed a mass following that he became radicalized and began evolving to the left politically. In fact, during the McCarthy period of the 1950s, Milk had strongly supported the U.S. government's war against communism. He enlisted in the navy to fight in the Korean War, even hoping to contribute personally to preventing the spread of "communism."¹⁶ Milk also hoped the right-wing populist Barry Goldwater would receive the 1964 Republican presidential nomination.¹⁷ In fact, Milk spent much of the fall of 1964 waking up early in the morning to pass out leaflets in New York City subways to build support for Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign.¹⁸ Milk's fiercest argument with his boyfriend in 1964 was not about LGBT rights but rather President Kennedy's use of the federal government against the steel companies. The use of "big government" to interfere in the economy infuriated Milk.¹⁹ For eight years, Milk was also a well paid Wall Street research analyst for several financial firms that were members of the New York Stock Exchange.²⁰

However, Milk was not immune to the affects of the civil rights movements, the Vietnam War protests, and the 1960s counter-culture. Always a lover of theater, Milk jumped at an opportunity in 1964 to help a friend produce plays in a small theatre in New York City. Through the theater community, Milk developed a new group of friends who were bohemian hippies and flower children, and their counter-cultural ideas began to have an

¹⁵ Walter Williams and Yolanda Retter, eds. *Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 359-360.

¹⁶ Randy Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk: The Mayor of Castro Street* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), 16.

¹⁷ Simon Hall, "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (Austin: September 2010. Vol. 19, Iss. 3), 559.

¹⁸ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 36.

¹⁹ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 29.

²⁰ "S.F. Gay Campaigning for the Straight Vote, too," newspaper in Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library, 10/18/73.

affect on him. He started growing his hair long and rejecting social conformity. At the same time, however, he remained a Wall Street financial analyst. He increasingly lived a dual life – his work life on Wall Street and his private life surrounded by hippies, flower children, and LGBT people. His new peer group challenged his conservative political views, which forced him to reevaluate his politics, and over time he began increasingly adopting liberal political views. By the 1970s he was participating in protests against the Vietnam War.²¹ A pivotal moment came when the U.S. announced the invasion of Cambodia on April 29, 1970. Milk shared the anger of the hundreds of thousands of people who took to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to the U.S. escalation of the war, and he resolved to himself to do more to resist the war. Shortly afterwards, Milk was fired from his Wall Street job for refusing to cut his long hair.²² He decided to move to San Francisco with his lover and eventually opened up a small camera shop in the Castro District. Milk was further outraged by the lies he felt the politicians were telling on television during the Watergate scandal. The final break came when a tax collector knocked on the door of his new business to demand that his small shop pay more taxes than he could afford. After this experience, Milk concluded that the government was too corrupt and exploitative, and he decided to throw himself into politics to do something about it.²³

Milk's political evolution was not unique. Millions of Americans and LGBT people were politicized and influenced by the events and protest movements of the 1960s. Milk was just one individual who played a leadership role in this general process that millions of people were experiencing at a similar time. By the early 1970s a majority of ordinary people

²¹ Rob Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, documentary film (Beverly Hills: Pacific Arts Video), 1984.

²² Mike Weiss, *Double Play: The Hidden Passions behind the Double Assassination of George Moscone and Harvey Milk* (San Francisco: Vince Emery Productions, 2nd edition, 2010), 39.

²³ *Ibid*, 42-44.

increasingly agreed with the goals of most these protest movements. In 1969 a poll found that 64% of Americans considered the decision on abortion a private matter.²⁴ In 1976 a poll found that 63% of women supported efforts “to strengthen and change the status of women in society.”²⁵ In August 1965, 61% of the population thought U.S. involvement in Vietnam was not wrong, but by May 1971, it had reversed; 61% thought U.S. involvement *was* wrong.²⁶ In 1970, shortly after National Guardsmen killed four anti-war protesters at Kent State University, polls found that more than one million students considered themselves revolutionaries.²⁷ The next year, a *New York Times* investigation found that 40% of college students, more than three million people, thought a revolution was needed in the U.S.²⁸ This shift to the left in the political consensus in the 1960s and 1970s impacted the thinking of millions of people like Milk, and it had an historic impact on the LGBT rights movement as well.

The Emergence of Gay Liberation

The general political shift to the left in the 1960s directly contributed to the emergence of the militant gay liberation movement in 1969—a second key factor that made it possible for the LGBT rights movement to elect Milk and defeat California Proposition 6. The earlier years of the LGBT rights movement in the mid-1950s were generally marked by the founding of the first enduring gay and lesbian rights organizations in the U.S. which

²⁴ Zinn, *A People's History*, 500.

²⁵ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), 221.

²⁶ Zinn, *A People's History*, 483.

²⁷ Joseph A. Califano, Jr., *The Student Revolution: A Global Confrontation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 64.

²⁸ *New York Times*, 1/02/71.

focused on educating LGBT people and professionals about homosexuality. Later on during the 1960s, many LGBT people became inspired and politicized by the protest movements of blacks, women, and anti-war activists, and the level of LGBT activism began to rise. A major turning point came in 1969 when the LGBT community decided to fight back against a typical discriminatory police raid of a gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, in Greenwich Village in New York City. The Stonewall riot crystallized a process that was already underway of a new generation of LGBT people rejecting the social stigma against homosexuality, inspiring thousands more to begin actively fighting for their rights.²⁹ But before the radicalization and massive growth of the gay liberation movement could take place after the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, the LGBT rights movement in the 1950s first focused on laying down the initial foundations of the movement.

During the Cold War, the intensified persecution of LGBT people placed enormous social pressures on them to hide their sexual identity. When Dr. Alfred Kinsey released his report on sexual behavior in the U.S. in 1948, Americans were shocked and horrified at the prevalence of homosexuality in society. During the Red Scare, Republican and Democratic politicians both consistently scapegoated LGBT people employed by the federal government, arguing that LGBT federal employees were weak-willed and therefore susceptible to the temptation of Soviet espionage.³⁰ Historian David Johnson argues that LGBT people were actually persecuted more than communists in his book *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. Historian Martin Duberman described the 1950s as a time when “the vast majority of gay people were locked away in

²⁹ D’Emilio, *The World Turned*, 50.

³⁰ David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

painful isolation and fear, doing everything possible *not* to declare themselves.”³¹ A writer, Quincy Troupe, described LGBT life in the 1950s in similar terms: “You weren’t just in the closet, you were in the basement. Under the basement.”³² Under these repressive conditions, it is difficult to overstate the intense discrimination and stigmatization LGBT people faced if or when they revealed their sexual identity.

On the other hand, the social climate was so suffocating and oppressive that it could not be tolerated by LGBT people forever. As corporations and urban development grew, so did the LGBT population, as well as LGBT bars and subcultures. World War II drew millions of LGBT people out of small conservative towns into sex-segregated army barracks and eventually into urban cities where homosexuals could meet each other much more easily, and homosexuality became increasingly common. As LGBT people increasingly came out and publicly revealed their sexual identity, they became increasingly conscious of themselves as an oppressed minority and gradually began to join together to fight for equal rights in society. In 1951 Communist Party and labor activists founded the first enduring national gay rights organization which eventually adopted the name the Mattachine Society. In 1955, lesbians founded the first lesbian rights organization, the Daughters of Bilitis. These organizations, which became known as “homophile” organizations, gradually increased the size of their membership, and they published literature educating gays and lesbians and professionals about the rights of gays and lesbians. Given the harsh persecution and witch hunts LGBT people faced in the 1950s, the mere establishment of these homophile organizations was quite a bold act at the time.

³¹ Martin Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey* (New York: Plume, 1991), 3.

³² Quoted in Stuart Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement* (Boston: Alyson, 1990), xiv.

Despite these important steps in getting the LGBT rights movement initially established, as late as the mid-1960s many homophile activists still psychologically internalized the societal discrimination against LGBT people into their own outlook. For instance, the leader of the Washington, D.C. chapter of the Mattachine Society, Frank Kameny, startled the movement in the mid-1960s when he asserted that homosexuality was not a sickness. Many LGBT spokespeople disputed Kameny's claim.³³ Although LGBT activists believed they were entitled to be left alone, to live in peace, and to have more rights than society afforded them at the time, few believed that homosexuality was equally valid and legitimate compared with heterosexuality.³⁴ The fact that the LGBT rights leader's claim was disputed by other LGBT spokespeople reveals how the persecution of LGBT people was so harsh that even many homophile activists themselves bought into heterosexist ideas to some degree. The homophile movement and other activist movements of the 1960s, however, gradually helped many LGBT people overcome this internalized oppression. This process accelerated exponentially in 1969 after the LGBT community decided to fight back against the police raid of the Stonewall Inn gay bar in New York City.

This transformation of ideas and attitudes within the LGBT rights movement could not take place without growing pains and tensions in the movement. Disagreements over strategies and ideologies between different LGBT rights activists came to a head around the 1969 Stonewall rebellion when a new generation of younger gay liberation radicals began employing militant tactics that older traditional homophile leaders felt was too extreme.³⁵ A clash between the "old guard" organizers and newly rising militants became apparent during

³³ Sam Deaderick and Tamara Turner, *Gay Resistance: The Hidden History* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 1997), 38.

³⁴ Luke Gilleran, "Who was Harvey Milk and Why Is He Important?" Triangle Community Center website, Norwalk, CT, 2008, <http://www.ctgay.org/who-was-harvey-milk-and-why-is-he-important-part-2.htm>.

³⁵ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 57.

the riot when Mattachine activists who had met with the Mayor's office and the police posted the following notice on the front of the Stonewall Inn: "We homosexuals plead with our people to please help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of the Village—Mattachine."³⁶ However, this plea by established Mattachine leaders to stop defying the police and city authorities was ignored by the rising tide of young radicals. For the next few nights, more and more LGBT people and their allies showed up in Greenwich Village with precisely one purpose—to show the police and the government that they could no longer push LGBT people around.

Six nights of street fights ensued, but the police repeatedly failed to gain control of the streets, much to the surprise even of the LGBT activists themselves. Many LGBT people felt extremely proud that they finally succeeded in standing up to the police for once. A new sense of confidence and enormous pride swept over LGBT communities throughout the country. After an initial outburst of celebrations over their achievement, LGBT activists decided to build on this positive momentum by calling a meeting to organize a march in commemoration of the victory. They gave the leaflet the title, "Do You Think Homosexuals Are Revolting? You Bet Your Sweet Ass We Are!"³⁷ This leaflet's campy title alone speaks volumes about the dynamism and new confident mood of the movement that was emerging. The activist meeting called in the aftermath of the Stonewall rebellion decided to launch a new organization, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), with more far-reaching, revolutionary goals than the established homophile organizations. One leading New York City GLF

³⁶ Sherry Wolf, *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics and Theory of LGBT Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 126.

³⁷ Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants: How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969-1971* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 19.

activist, Jim Fouratt, captured well the tensions that were growing between two different wings of the LGBT rights movement:

We wanted to *end* the homophile movement. We wanted *them* to join *us* in making the gay revolution. We were a nightmare to them. They were committed to being nice, acceptable status quo Americans, and we were not; we had no interest at all in being acceptable.³⁸

This quote provides a glimpse of how the new group of radicals rejected traditional sexual identity categories as well as homophile groups' "assimilationist" strategies.

In the next year, the Gay Liberation Front and the gay liberation movement grew dramatically. At least 20 GLF chapters rapidly sprouted up across the country in only one year. John D'Emilio provides figures to demonstrate the growth of the movement:

A mass movement was born almost overnight. On the eve of Stonewall, after almost twenty years of homophile politics, fewer than fifty organizations existed. By 1973, more than eight hundred lesbian and gay male groups were scattered across the country. The largest pre-Stonewall homophile demonstrations attracted only a few dozen people. In June 1970, five thousand women and men marched in New York City to commemorate the Stonewall Rebellion. By the mid-1970s, the yearly marches in several cities were larger than any other political demonstrations since the decline of the civil rights and antiwar movements.³⁹

"Coming out of the closet" and revealing one's homosexual identity was celebrated as a central part of this new movement for gay liberation. The idea of coming out captured the imagination of tens of thousands of LGBT people.⁴⁰ The gay liberationists' rallying cry became "gay power," whereas the homophile movement had traditionally used the less

³⁸ Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 229.

³⁹ D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 86.

assertive slogan “gay is good.” The Gay Liberation Front’s statement of purpose advocated revolutionizing societal definitions of sexual identities:

We are a revolutionary homosexual group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished. We reject society’s attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature. We are stepping outside these roles and simplistic myths. We are going to be who we are. At the same time, we are creating new social forms and relations, that is, relations based up brotherhood, cooperation, human love, and uninhibited sexuality. Babylon has forced us to commit ourselves to one thing—revolution!⁴¹

The Gay Liberation Front’s statement of purpose not only called for completely abolishing existing social institutions but also unapologetically affirmed the validity of LGBT identities, similar to the black power movement’s celebration of black identity.

The burst of revolutionary fervor and the massive growth of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s inspired by the Stonewall rebellion was undoubtedly one of the main historical processes that paved the way for Harvey Milk’s election in 1977 and the defeat of California Proposition 6 in 1978. Milk and other activists in California would draw directly from many of the new ideas promoted by the gay liberation movement. The emphasis that the gay liberation movement placed on coming out of the closet and demanding full equality immediately would be essential themes for both Milk and the campaign against California Proposition 6.

LGBT Migration to San Francisco

⁴¹ GLF Statement of Purpose, 7/31/69, reprinted in *RAT*, 8/12/69.

The emergence of the gay liberation movement contributed to another historical process that would contribute to Milk's election and the defeat of Proposition 6—the growth of the LGBT population in San Francisco after World War II and especially in the 1970s. Historians trace the initial growth of a large LGBT population in San Francisco back to the discovery of gold in California which transformed San Francisco from a small frontier town in the 1840s into the eighth largest city in the U.S. by the turn of the century.⁴² The Gold Rush attracted a huge influx of immigrants to San Francisco from around the world, especially from Latin America and Asia. The resulting diversity of overlapping communities and cultural values in this frontier town gave rise to a live-and-let-live sense of morality in the city.⁴³ The largely immigrant workforce developed an expansive network of bars as cultural and leisure institutions, and San Francisco became known as the "wettest city in the West," to the extent that the city resisted federal and state enforcement of Prohibition.⁴⁴ A culture of gambling, prostitution, and corrupt politics developed that made the city well known for vice, lawlessness, and sex.⁴⁵ The prevalence of bars and liberal attitudes about sexuality contributed to the growth of an LGBT community, especially after Prohibition was repealed in 1933 when the city's tourist district began developing night clubs, bars, and taverns with LGBT entertainers.⁴⁶

World War II was another key event that caused a dramatic rise in the LGBT population in San Francisco. The social dislocation caused by World War II was unprecedented in U.S. history. Almost 15 million men were drafted into the military during

⁴² Nan Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

⁴³ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 4.

⁴⁴ Timothy Stewart-Winter, "The Castro: Origins to the Age of Milk," *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* (Boston: Jan/Feb 2009. Vol. 16, Issue 1), 3.

⁴⁵ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

the war.⁴⁷ The impact of the war on social relations was enormous. Millions of women and men left their families behind, passed through major port towns such as San Francisco on their way to and from the Pacific battlefronts, and ended up living in military settings that were segregated by sex. Millions of women also left small towns to move to larger cities to enter the workforce, filling jobs formerly held by men who were now abroad fighting in the war. Millions of men in the war and women in the workforce suddenly found themselves living and working in largely sex-segregated environments, living neither with parents nor a spouse. In military settings and large cities, religious values and pressures to conform to traditional sexual norms were much weaker compared to their small rural hometowns, allowing millions to explore homosexuality like never before. Many heard the word “homosexual” for the first time in their lives, giving a name to the feelings that many had secretly hidden inside from others. Hearing this word for the first time also suggested to closeted LGBT people that others like them existed and that they were not the only ones feeling homosexual desires.

World War II also became the first war in which the U.S. military tried to systematically identify and ban LGBT people from the military. Draft boards examined millions of people who were eligible for military service and classified thousands of them as homosexual.⁴⁸ Thousands were purged from the military, often branded with a dishonorable discharge for homosexuality.⁴⁹ After the war, the vicious repression of LGBT people in the era of McCarthy witch hunts contributed to the growth of a consciousness among LGBT people of belonging to a distinct collective group – a group the government was ironically

⁴⁷ Allan Berube, “Marching to a Different Drummer: Lesbians and Gay GIs in World War II,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1990), 364.

⁴⁸ Berube, “Marching to a Different Drummer,” 387-389.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 392.

trying to repress and isolate.⁵⁰ Congress launched investigations into government employment of “perverts,” LGBT people were purged from the federal workforce, states passed laws to deal with “sexual psychopaths,” the media published articles about “sexual deviants,” and police intensified their harassment of LGBT people.⁵¹ This systematic persecution of LGBT people had the unintended consequence of heightening LGBT people’s self-awareness of being part of a distinct group and creating an entire population of social outcasts who would be shunned and discriminated against if they attempted to return to their hometowns. Knowing that San Francisco had a reputation for tolerance, thousands of LGBT people decided to stay in San Francisco, and other port cities such as Los Angeles, rather than return to their hometowns and face ostracism.⁵² The population of San Francisco had declined during the Great Depression of the 1930s, but between 1940 and 1950, it grew by over 125,000.⁵³ Ironically, the government’s participation in World War II and their persecution of LGBT people had the unintended consequence of transforming San Francisco into a city with a enormous LGBT population.

Word spread to small towns across the country that the LGBT population was booming in San Francisco. Faced with homophobic persecution in rural America, many LGBT people decided to pack their bags and head to San Francisco where they could be open about their true identity with less fear of persecution.⁵⁴ This contributed further to San Francisco becoming known as the gay Mecca of the universe.

⁵⁰ D’Emilio, "Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco since World War II," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1989), 459.

⁵¹ Berube, “Marching to a Different Drummer,” 391-393.

⁵² D’Emilio, "Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco since World War II," 459.

⁵³ D’Emilio, "Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco since World War II," 459.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 459-460.

Major shifts in San Francisco's economic landscape drew even more LGBT people to San Francisco. For decades, San Francisco had been an industrial port town full of blue-collar workers and ethnic neighborhood enclaves. However, Federal Housing Authority-backed mortgages, the construction of the interstate freeway system, and the increased use of automobiles in the 1950s and 1960s led to a mass exodus to the suburbs and the decline of inner-city neighborhoods.⁵⁵ In the 1960s and 1970s, a rising number of industries fled the city, opting to build new plants in the suburbs in Oakland rather than upgrade their aging antiquated inner-city facilities.⁵⁶ Better paid, often white workers who could afford to relocate their houses followed their union jobs to the suburbs.⁵⁷ Lower-income white, black, and Latino workers, however, could not afford to move to the suburbs, and they watched their inner-city neighborhoods become even more economically depressed.⁵⁸ The city politicians, whose campaigns were heavily backed by real estate developers and construction unions, did little to restrict the flight of heavy industry.⁵⁹ Instead they launched an "urban renewal" campaign promoting tourism, service industries, and the establishment of corporate headquarters downtown.⁶⁰ Large sections of San Francisco's poorer ethnic neighborhoods were razed to make space for office buildings and the Bay Area Rapid Transit subway system designed to lure tourists and corporate headquarters to the city. In 1964, manufacturing had been the industry with the second most employment in the city, but by 1974, manufacturing was surpassed by tourism, finance, insurance, real estate, transportation,

⁵⁵ www.kqed.org/w/hood/castro/resourceguide/programhighlights.html.

⁵⁶ Gregory Rosmaita, "Harvey Milk, The Forgotten Populist," 1993, www.hicom.net/~oedipus/milk.html.

⁵⁷ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 124.

⁵⁸ Stewart-Winter, "The Castro," 3.

⁵⁹ Rosmaita, "Harvey Milk, The Forgotten Populist."

⁶⁰ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 124.

and utilities.⁶¹ As a result, San Francisco experienced an explosion of white-collar jobs in the 1970s, many of which were filled by the thousands of white “middle-class” LGBT people migrating to San Francisco in search of a home that accepted LGBT people. These economic changes not only attracted thousands of LGBT people to San Francisco but also angered thousands of poor workers and people of color who would later be receptive to Harvey Milk’s economic populist appeals and his efforts to form coalitions uniting ordinary people and all oppressed groups – gays, workers, blacks, Latinos, etc. Milk’s populist economic demands also appealed to the many working-class LGBT people (not just middle-class LGBT people) who migrated to San Francisco seeking a home that was more welcoming of LGBT people.

Most of the LGBT people arriving in San Francisco in the late 1960s and 1970s moved into the Eureka Valley neighborhood and rapidly transformed it into the gay hub of San Francisco. Previously, Eureka Valley had been a conservative Irish Catholic working-class neighborhood. Eureka Valley had been populated by factory workers, stevedores, longshoremen, and policemen whose community activities, traditions, and values were centered around the Most Holy Redeemer Church. As these better paid, typically white workers began following their factories to the suburbs, and as LGBT people started moving in, the remaining conservative Irish Catholic homeowners sold their houses at rock-bottom prices to flee the “homosexual invasion.” Many straight residents in Eureka Valley were hostile to the “gay invaders” at first. They resisted what they perceived as a gay onslaught in every way they could—vandalism, violence, and pressuring the municipal government to restrict or criminalize “inappropriate” behavior such as “cruising.” The Gay Activist Alliance recorded 60 beatings of LGBT people city-wide in a three-month period in 1974,

⁶¹ Weiss, *Double Play*, 37.

with Eureka Valley having the worst record of all. The neighborhood association of business owners, the Eureka Valley Merchants Association, also exposed gay business owners' sexual identities against the owners' wishes.⁶²

An estimated 80 LGBT people per week were arriving in the Eureka Valley. It was impossible to count the exact number of LGBT people living in San Francisco since many were living "in the closet." However, the Chamber of Commerce estimated the number to be 100,000 by the late 1970s, the *San Francisco Chronicle* estimated 150,000, and LGBT activists estimated 200,000 in a city of approximately 700,000.⁶³ A huge number, perhaps 100,000, LGBT people had moved to San Francisco in only five years between 1972 and 1977. These figures would be even larger if suburbs were included.⁶⁴

More and more LGBT people were arriving every day in Eureka Valley to take up the gay life. Gay-owned businesses began sprouting up, particularly along Castro Street, a major street in Eureka Valley. "The Castro," as the new neighborhood came to be known, was booming. LGBT couples upgraded the houses they bought, causing property values to rise. The remaining straight homeowners living in the Castro couldn't help but sell their houses at the prices now being offered which had begun skyrocketing, opening up housing in the Castro to even more LGBT newcomers⁶⁵ As gay bars and bathhouses began overflowing with young men, the possibilities for gays seeking to explore their sexuality seemed infinite.

⁶² Stewart-Winter, "The Castro," 5.

⁶³ Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), 64-65. Also, Weiss, *Double Play*, 38.

⁶⁴ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Right Movement in America* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 332.

⁶⁵ Stewart-Winter, "The Castro," 7.

Harvey Milk was one of these new gay arrivals to the Castro. The following description of Castro Street by Milk captures eloquently the intimate bond that thousands of LGBT immigrants formed with the Castro District.

I came out at 14. Even though I lived at home for several more years, it was never “home” again for me. For in that home I was “closeted.” In fact, I never had a home again. A home is a place to be one’s self, to be free to express the greatest gift that any person has - the gift of loving another human.

I lived like all gays - inside our place to live, I was gay. Once outside, I suppressed myself. I had no home and especially no home town.

Then came Castro Street. Castro Street became my home town. Castro Street became my home. And for the first time in my life there was a place to live, to shop, to play, to be, that I felt was home.

To many, Castro Street became their hometown, even if for only a short time. It has become a symbol to many gay people – a symbol of being. You can go home again!⁶⁶

As the LGBT population grew in numbers and developed a more flourishing culture, the community increasingly questioned their second-class status in society. After having experienced so much repression as isolated individuals in their former hometowns, it was only a matter of time before the rapidly increasing number of LGBT people now living together in one city began to make use of their growing political clout to exercise their collective power.⁶⁷ Historian Elizabeth Armstrong documents the growth of gay identity, non-profit, and sexual commercial organizations in San Francisco in the 1970s. The first “gay identity organization” in San Francisco was founded in 1970, and the number of gay identity organizations grew exponentially to approximately 85 by 1978. Forty gay non-profit organizations in 1970 more than doubled to approximately 90 organizations by 1978. Sixty-five lesbian and gay sexual commercial organizations in 1970 practically tripled to

⁶⁶ Harvey Milk, interview with gay activist and journalist Jack Davis, 1978.

⁶⁷ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 126-127.

approximately 170 by 1978.⁶⁸ As gays registered to vote, they were increasingly noticed as a powerful voting bloc. Harvey Milk happened to be one ordinary gay person who decided to step up at the right historical moment to lead the growing political assertiveness of the booming LGBT community. After moving to San Francisco, Milk opened up the Castro Camera shop at 575 Castro Street and moved into the apartment directly upstairs. Shortly after he threw himself into LGBT political activism, his camera store became a hub for progressive activists, public meetings, and voter registration drives.

One of Milk's early goals was to organize the LGBT community to shop at businesses owned only by LGBT people to strengthen their community's economic and political clout. A neighborhood merchants association was the organization through which other ethnic neighborhoods had flexed their neighborhood's muscles, so Milk helped form the Castro Village Association to demonstrate the LGBT community's power, and its membership grew rapidly.⁶⁹

Since other neighborhoods celebrated their culture through an annual street fair, Milk believed it would demonstrate the power of the growing LGBT community if the Castro organized its own neighborhood street fair, too. Through the Castro Village Association, Milk organized the first Castro Street Fair in 1974, attended by an estimated 5,000 people.⁷⁰ The next year over 20,000 people attended the fair.⁷¹ The Castro Street Fair grew exponentially each year, and it became one of the main events where the neighborhood's celebrated its existence.

⁶⁸ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 116 and 121.

⁶⁹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 339.

⁷⁰ Barry Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 339.

⁷¹ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 49.

Milk also founded the custom in San Francisco of organizing an annual Gay Freedom Parade in 1974 as part of the annual tradition in cities across the world of commemorating the 1969 Stonewall rebellion with an annual Gay Pride Parade on the last weekend in June. The fact that an estimated 350,000 people attended the 1978 Gay Freedom Parade—only five years after the first Gay Freedom Parade—is a strong indicator of the massive growth of the LGBT population and the gay liberation movement.⁷²

Through these sorts of initiatives, Milk earned the nickname “The Mayor of Castro Street.” However, Joseph Alioto, the actual mayor of San Francisco from 1968 - 1976 ignored the LGBT population’s needs, like most politicians did in the country at the time. Another mayoral candidate, though, George Moscone, took note of the growing political power of the LGBT electorate and aggressively courted the LGBT vote in order to win election as the new mayor in 1976. In fact, a growing number of politicians had begun courting the growing LGBT vote in the 1960s and especially the 1970s.⁷³ In 1974, 12,000 LGBT voters turned out for the fall elections, representing 12% of all votes cast, an important section of the electorate that could no longer be ignored.⁷⁴ When San Francisco gay rights leader Jim Foster served as the political chairman for the Society for Individual Rights, the organization hosted public forums every election season, and a growing number of politicians began attending to compete for the organization’s endorsement and the LGBT community’s support.⁷⁵ After hearing from the various candidates, Foster’s organization would endorse and campaign for whichever straight politician appeared to support LGBT

⁷² Stryker and Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, 70.

⁷³ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 152.

⁷⁴ Stryker and Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, 65.

⁷⁵ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 152.

rights the most.⁷⁶ Foster also founded the first Democratic Party LGBT club in the country, the Alice B. Toklas club (named after Gertrude Stein’s lesbian lover), in order to involve the growing LGBT constituency in Democratic Party politics.⁷⁷ Dianne Feinstein credited her election as the President of the Board of Supervisors to the Society for Individual Rights and the LGBT community’s support for her campaign. Similarly, Richard Hongisto ran for Sheriff on a platform that included reforming California’s laws on sexual conduct, an issue near and dear to the hearts of gay men.⁷⁸ The association of gay bars, The Tavern Guild, financially supported the sheriff candidate’s campaign, and the LGBT movement campaigned for him. According to historians Clendinen and Nagourney, “the sheriff-elect made no bones about who had put him into office. His ‘biggest single source of support was gay and lesbian,’ he told people. ‘Hands down.’”⁷⁹

If mainstream politicians were increasingly willing to risk alienating conservative voters by openly courting the LGBT vote, then Milk figured that LGBT people no longer needed to rely on straight politicians to represent them. LGBT people could rely on themselves, he believed. Milk made this a central theme of his speeches, starting with his first run for office in 1973, like in the following speech.

You see there is a major difference—and it remains a vital difference—between a friend and a gay person, a friend in office and a gay person in office. Gay people have been slandered nationwide. We’ve been tarred, and we’ve been brushed with the picture of pornography. In Dade County, we were accused of child molestation. It’s not enough anymore just to have friends represent us, no matter how good that friend may be... For invisible, we remain in limbo—a myth, a person with no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no friends who are straight, no important positions of employment.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Ibid, 155.

⁷⁷ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 161.

⁷⁸ Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities*, 125.

⁷⁹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 159.

⁸⁰ Harvey Milk, "The Hope Speech" reprinted in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 430.

Milk was ahead of his peers not only in realizing that the Castro was ready to elect its own representative but also in undertaking continual efforts to register LGBT people to vote—day after day, year after year—and earning the support and confidence of the LGBT community. Each time Milk ran for office, he poured most of his meager earnings from his small camera shop into his political campaigns, spending often ten hours a day shaking hands at bus stops and passing out fliers at train stations. Despite enormous efforts, he was defeated by a narrow margin in all three of his first electoral campaigns in 1973, 1975, and 1976. Nonetheless, Milk made an increasingly impressive showing with each campaign, gaining more votes, support, and media attention each time.

District-Based Elections for San Francisco Supervisors

The fourth main condition that contributed to Milk's election was the introduction of district-based elections in 1977 as opposed to the previous city-wide electoral system. This change meant that each member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors would be elected by the voters in only one district rather than the entire county of San Francisco. This worked to Milk's advantage because he could now be elected from a district whose population he estimated was 15-20% LGBT people rather than having to campaign across the entire county of San Francisco, which was overwhelmingly straight (i.e. heterosexual).⁸¹

Milk and other left-wing activists had campaigned for years for the implementation of district-based elections in order to weaken the tight grip that downtown corporations held

⁸¹ Joe Martin, "Harvey Milk Talks about Politicians and Lying," *Gay Community News*, 2/25/78, 6-7, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

over city politics. The campaigns to establish district elections in 1972 and 1973 failed due to a lack of sufficient funds. However, in 1976 labor unions got on board the campaign because they grew tired of being hammered with anti-union ballot initiatives that the Board of Supervisors kept placing on the ballot and were then approved by voters.⁸² Milk played an important role in uniting blue-collar unions and LGBT rights groups behind the district-based elections initiative—two groups that were not accustomed to working together. Finally in 1976, with the added funding and volunteers that the trade unions mobilized behind the campaign, the coalition succeeded in placing the question of district elections on the ballot, and a majority of voters approved the initiative in November 1976. Given the other factors previously discussed that resulted in Milk losing by a small, declining margin in his first three electoral campaigns in 1973, 1975, and 1976, the introduction of district-based elections made it easier for him to be finally elected in the fall of 1977. Once Milk was elected, he used his position on the Board of Supervisors to play a prominent role in the successful campaign against Proposition 6.

Conclusion

We see, then, how a number of historical trends created the conditions that made it possible for the gay liberation movement to elect Milk and defeat California Proposition 6. The civil rights and anti-war protest movements from the 1950s-1970s provided an essential foundation upon which the LGBT rights movement was built. As these movements drew on each other's momentum and became increasingly militant, the "homophile" movement

⁸² Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 178-179.

exploded into the much larger, more assertive “gay liberation” movement after the 1969 Stonewall riot. As more and more LGBT people came out of the closet, huge numbers of them moved to San Francisco in search of a more tolerant home. Many moved to the Castro District providing a major boost to San Francisco’s gay liberation movement. By 1976, Milk and the increasingly politically assertive LGBT community succeeded in working with allies to establish a district-based system for electing San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors, making it easier to elect an LGBT person from the electoral district that had a densely concentrated LGBT population. Of course, these four factors were not the only historical processes that laid the basis for Milk’s election and the defeat of California Proposition 6, but they were the most influential factors.

Chapter 3: Milk's Progressive Strategies

“If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet knock down every closet door.”

– *Harvey Milk*

However, historical conditions and trends alone cannot explain Milk's 1977 election victory and the victory over Proposition 6 in 1978. The progressive strategies that the Milk campaign used were also crucial to ensuring his electoral success. While the next chapter analyzes the strategies activists used against Proposition 6, this chapter analyzes the key political strategies that the Milk campaign used to win office. Specifically, there were three important inter-related strategies that helped Milk win—his coalitions between LGBT people and other oppressed groups, his commitment to low-income people and oppressed groups, and his message that LGBT people needed to come out of the closet and demand full equality immediately.

Coalitions between LGBT People, Unions, and Oppressed Groups

Harvey Milk estimated that the LGBT population was “no more than 15-20%, at the very most” of the overall population in his electoral district. Although his district included the predominantly LGBT Castro neighborhood, the electoral district covered a geographic area that was much larger than just the Castro. “To get elected,” he explained, “you have to

have a lot of other votes.”¹ The Milk campaign’s success at building coalitions with unions, people of color, feminists, and senior citizens proved to be an absolutely decisive factor in helping him get elected.

Many white middle-class males held conservative views during the post-war economic upswing when living standards for workers reached historic highs. However, the white-collar workers who moved to San Francisco to fill the jobs opening up in the tourism and service industries and corporate headquarters were often oppressed on the basis of their sexual preference, and many of them may have had liberal sympathies with other oppressed groups. This probably made it easier for the LGBT community to build a progressive majority coalition in San Francisco than in other cities.

Still, it is quite impressive that the LGBT community was able to build alliances with blue-collar workers, racial minorities, and senior citizens who were generally steeped in homophobic ideas. How was this possible?

Milk’s coalition with blue-collar workers began when six San Francisco beer distributors, including Coors and Budweiser, refused to sign the Teamster union’s proposed contract. The corporations’ resistance pressured the truck drivers union to go out on strike. The Teamsters union succeeded in convincing federations of Arab and Chinese grocers to boycott non-union drivers that replaced the drivers on strike.² Despite this initial success, the boycott did not cost the large corporations enough money to pressure them to agree to the union contract proposal. Teamsters leader Allan Baird figured that if the Teamsters could somehow get the large group of thriving gay bars in San Francisco to join the boycott, then

¹ Joe Martin, “Harvey Milk Talks about Politicians and Lying,” *Gay Community News*, 2/25/78, 6, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

² David Aretha, *No Compromise: The Story of Harvey Milk* (Greensboro: Morgan Reynolds Publishing, 2010), 45.

the union could win the strike. The problem, though, was that the traditionally homophobic Teamsters did not have the first clue about how in the world to get the gay bars to support the boycott.³ Since Milk was known as a leader of the LGBT community, Baird decided to see if Milk could help. Milk agreed to launch a campaign to convince the gay bars to boycott the six beer distributors, but only on one condition—that the Teamsters would guarantee gays jobs in their union.⁴

Before the Teamster boycott had even begun, Milk had already developed a close relationship with the gay bar owners association, The Tavern Guild.⁵ As president of the Castro Valley Association of neighborhood merchants, Milk as well as his fellow activists and the Bay Area Gay Liberation organization launched a campaign to convince the gay bars to join the boycott.⁶ They explained to bar owners and customers that Coors was discriminating against gays and exploiting truck drivers and that the Teamsters union had promised gays jobs if they joined the boycott.⁷ The boycott campaign ended up developing rock solid support among gay bars, costing the six beer distributors more income. This tipped the balance of power in favor of the union, and five of the beer distributors ended up caving and signing the union’s contract proposal.⁸ As the Milk campaign activist Gwenn Craig explained:

The labor folks, the Teamsters, were just *floored* by how successful the boycott was. They hadn’t been able to get a leg up, and, it was just like clockwork getting Coors out of the gay bars. And that had a lot to do with Harvey having made *solid* connections with the Tavern Guild, the

³ Gwenn Craig, Co-coordinator of San Franciscans Against Proposition 6, interview with Ramy Khalil, 2/22/11.

⁴ Newmarket Press publisher, *Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2009), 44.

⁵ Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

⁶ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Right Movement in America* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 360.

⁷ *Ibid*, 340.

⁸ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 46.

organization of all the gay bar owners... Nobody would touch Coors beer, and the Teamsters loved it.⁹

According to Milk biographer Randy Shilts, Teamsters representative Allan Baird found out later that Milk had been running for the Board of Supervisors when Baird had asked Milk to support the boycott. Baird was impressed that Milk had not requested an endorsement from the Teamsters union for his political campaign. All Milk had asked was that gays have equal access to jobs in the Teamsters union.¹⁰ This is one example of Milk's commitment to coalitions between gays and other exploited groups and his support for their struggles which gained him and the LGBT community valuable support and lasting allies over the years.¹¹

Milk's electoral campaign printed fliers designed for union audiences explaining his support for union demands in order to strengthen his support among workers and to build links between unions and the LGBT community.¹² Much to the surprise of the city's established politicians, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Teamsters, firefighters, and construction workers' unions became some of Milk's greatest supporters, starting with his first run for office in 1973.¹³ The unions' support for Milk baffled the city's established politicians who had historically relied upon these unions to get out the blue-collar vote for them.¹⁴

⁹ Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹⁰ Randy Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk: The Mayor of Castro Street* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), 97.

¹¹ Gregory Rosmaita, "Harvey Milk, The Forgotten Populist," 1993, www.hicom.net/~oedipus/milk.html.

¹² Harvey Milk for Assembly Committee flier, "Harvey Milk or the Unknown? Take Your Choice" 1976, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

¹³ Strange de Jim, "A Photo History of Charismatic Gay Pioneer Harvey Milk," www.strangebillions.com/harvey/

¹⁴ Rosmaita, "Harvey Milk, the Forgotten Populist."

When Jim Elliot, a union delegate, found out that his union council had endorsed Milk for Supervisor, he thought to himself: “How are we gonna go back to our union and tell the guys we supported a fruit?” But then Elliot found out that Milk led the gay bars boycott of Coors, and he became more open to the idea of supporting a gay candidate.¹⁵ Later Elliot reluctantly attended a meeting at Milk’s camera store and felt very uncomfortable working so closely with so many LGBT people. He couldn’t help but wonder out loud: “What the hell am I doin’ here with all these fruits and kooks?”¹⁶ Yet the solid support LGBT activists gave to the Teamsters boycott, the ballot initiative to establish district-based elections for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and other labor struggles ended up trumping the homophobic views many workers had held. Some straight workers were even transformed into active supporters of LGBT rights. Milk campaign activist Gwenn Craig describes the union workers’ change of attitude:

[Union workers] got a little skeptical, but success really showed them, “Gee, this is really beneficial to us...” They first looked to Harvey and then to other organizations in the lesbian and gay community and built a relationship.¹⁷

Despite Elliot’s initial discomfort with working with LGBT people, even he would eventually become an ardent defender of Milk and LGBT rights.¹⁸ Many LGBT activists were shocked at first that it was possible to have large burly union truck drivers, longshoremen, and firefighters on their side. Milk campaign activist Gwenn Craig describes the common attitude among LGBT rights activists:

You know everybody thought of the firefighters as these *totally* homophobic straight guys that were, you know, formally the bullies that beat you up. Now

¹⁵ Rob Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, documentary film (Beverly Hills: Pacific Arts Video), 1984..

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹⁸ Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk*.

all of a sudden there were there as the union support for Harvey's campaign... Milk was able to build bridges with the firefighters.¹⁹

Once LGBT community and blue-collar union activists tested out in practice that it was possible to build a strategic alliance with each other and also necessary in order to build a majority coalition, their conservative stereotypes about each other began to change.²⁰

After the victory of getting the gay bars to boycott certain beer distributor companies, Milk promoted a more highly publicized boycott in the gay bars against not only Coors' exploitation of truck drivers but their racist discrimination against Latino truck drivers as well.²¹ In the following article, Milk laid out the left-wing argument that it was in the interest of all oppressed groups to unite against the various types of oppression they faced from large companies.

It could be a major step in the gay movement if we started to join tighter forces with other groups to fight any and all discrimination by any and all companies. In this case, [Coors] has a rotten record in regards to women and minorities—especially the Chicano population. The company has been brought before the Federal Equal Employment Commission and the Colorado Human Rights Commission more than once. A second reason for the boycott comes out of the paternalistic attitude Coors has toward its workers and a very poor labor relations history... If the gay community continues, even leads, the boycott, then the Spanish and labor groups fighting Coors will understand who their friends are and what it means to join together in fighting for a common goal—ending discrimination. The point: we will also be building bridges with others who in turn will aid us in our fight for equal rights. The combined effort could then trigger other groups and communities to joining in the struggle. The time is here when all who are discriminated against in any way should join forces—it's a common battle.²²

¹⁹ Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bob Heacock, "Coors Boycott: Gays, Unions Find Common Ground," *Gay Vote – News from the San Francisco Gay Democratic Club*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1978, 3, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library. Also, Harvey Milk, "Milk Forum: Reactionary Beer," *Bay Area Review*, 3/18/76, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

²² Harvey Milk, "Milk Forum: Reactionary Beer."

In the quote above, Milk appears to be motivated by a moral opposition to discrimination but also the pragmatic understanding that it was in the self-interest of LGBT people and other oppressed groups to join forces to fight a common enemy—companies that discriminate against various groups of workers and consumers.

The Milk campaign also translated leaflets into Spanish in order to reach out to the Latino community and involve immigrants in their campaigns. This type of outreach and work against the racism that the Latino community faced undoubtedly helped Milk win the endorsement of the Mexican American Political Association for his 1977 electoral campaign.²³ It is worth quoting at length from the African American Milk campaign activist Gwenn Craig to get a sense of the real living coalitions that Milk and other left-wing activists built.

I think Harvey won his campaign because he had made those kind of strategic alliances... Milk really believed in it. That was really the mantra of the time, “coalition politics, coalition politics.” You talked about it, heard about it, tried to find ways to engage in that all the time. It was about, “We got to make sure the whole rainbow was here, part of the coalition, part of this table, this campaign committee. Oh, we don’t have this group represented? We got to do something about that.” Much more so, it seems, than today.

Harvey was *very strict* about that. We had to make sure that all the groups were represented in some way. He specifically went out and tried to build some sort of relationship with the organizations... Harvey got to be very well known among the Democratic clubs, the Filipino Democratic Club, the African American Democratic Club, the Chinese American Democratic Club...

Once he went onto the Board, he made alliances with... Gordon Lau, who was seen as very representative of the Chinese American community... There was Carol Ruth Silver, and she was seen as sort of the feminist representative. Her platform was all around women’s rights. She was the inroad to the San Francisco Women’s Political Caucus, the Democratic Women’s Forum, and all the local groups that represented the women’s vote in San Francisco... Harvey made those kinds of alliances with those sorts of organizations and the key players...

²³ Mexican American Political Association, San Francisco chapter, election recommendations, 1977, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

That also played greatly to our favor when we formed the campaign committee for No on 6. Harvey really spearheaded what that was going to be, and he made sure that we had the ethnic communities represented, some folks from labor... For No on 6, that made a big difference, too.²⁴

Milk's historic election in November 1977 attracted national media coverage. In his victory speech, he presented his election as a victory for all oppressed minorities: "This is not my victory -- it's yours. If a gay man can win, it proves that there is hope for all minorities who are willing to fight."²⁵ After he was elected, Milk introduced a resolution to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, which won a slim majority of votes on the Board, requesting that the State Department close the South African consulate in San Francisco as part of the international campaign to depose the racist Apartheid regime in South Africa.²⁶ He and three other Supervisors also introduced a similar resolution supporting the black South Africans' call for other countries to withdrawal all investments from South Africa.²⁷ Milk also campaigned for Washington, D.C. to have its own representative in Congress.²⁸ Washington, D.C. has no Congressional representation since it was designated as its own district that is not part of any of the 50 states that make up the United States. Since the city's population is predominantly black, a D.C. Congressional representative would have helped provide blacks slightly more representation in government. After being elected in 1977, these campaigns that Milk waged against racism could only have helped Milk and the LGBT community

²⁴ Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

²⁵ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Harvey Milk: Hero and Martyr," in *The Castro Resource*, PBS, 1978 www.kqed.org/w/hood/castro/resourceguide/harveymilk.html.

²⁶ Harvey Milk, letter about Board of Supervisor resolution to close South African consulate, 2/09/78, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

²⁷ Harvey Milk, 3/22/78 letter about two Board of Supervisor resolutions against South African Apartheid regime, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

²⁸ Harvey Milk, "Rose Bird and the Republicans" *Coast to Coast Times*, 9/19/78, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

strengthen their bridges with people of color and obtain their support in the fight against Proposition 6.

Randy Shilts, who wrote the only substantial biography about Milk, argues that “Harvey drew little support from lesbians, who distrusted his alliances with drag queens and noted that he had few, if any, close lesbian friends.”²⁹ Shilts appears to be correct that Milk drew more support from gay men than lesbians. However, the evidence suggests, contrary to Shilts’ unsubstantiated claims, that Milk did succeed in building a relatively successful alliance with lesbians. Milk regularly included feminists and women in his list of groups that he thought gays should form alliances with in a common struggle against all forms of oppression. In a typical article, for instance, Milk speaks about the importance of passing the Equal Rights Amendment, saying “it is a disgrace not to want to give to women the same rights that men have.”³⁰ The fact that Milk hired a lesbian feminist to be his campaign manager demonstrated a certain commitment to building alliances with feminists and women. Gay male sexism and the rise of separatist identity politics in the 1970s were certainly major challenges that weakened and divided the gay and lesbian movements from one another. However, these obstacles did not prove to be large enough to prevent Milk from being elected in 1977 nor Proposition 6 from being defeated in 1978. Historian John D’Emilio and lesbian activists such as Gwenn Craig and Ruth Mahaney believe that Milk did succeed in building an alliance with feminists.³¹ Mahaney, a lesbian activist in San Francisco in the

²⁹ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 122.

³⁰ Harvey Milk, “Rose Bird and the Republicans.”

³¹ John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (London: Routledge, 1992), 91.

1970s, told the following story to demonstrate her belief that, as she put it, “Milk was a great ally for women.”³²

There was a women’s café in the Castro that was getting flack from neighbors for noise. They would have concerts there, never late at night, but they would have music there, live music. It was one of the first kinds of spaces like that for women. A lot of early musicians and poets read and sang there, and then later became very famous and sang in huge halls, but this was a very small space. They were getting flack, and the neighbors were complaining about noise, so they said [to themselves], “Well, you know, there’s this gay guy who is now Supervisor, so let’s call him and see if he can do anything.”

So they picked up the phone and called him, and he *answered*, which is bizarre! You know, it’s like, he picked up! He answered the phone!

And so she told him the story, and he said “Well, a cabaret license is expensive and really hard to get, but you need an... entertainment license which costs \$25.” He said “I’ll get an application and bring it over.”

And he did! In like an hour! He personally brought it over. They gave him \$25 and signed it, and he took it back, and that was the end of it. The City, the Fire Department and all these people were getting ready to prosecute because they didn’t have a license, and so now they had a license.³³

It was rare for politicians to personally answer their phone and provide such prompt personal service. In my interview with Mahaney, I asked her if she believed Milk helped the café specifically because it was a women’s café in order to build bridges between gays, women, and feminists, and she replied, “yes.” Milk’s eventual success in winning a seat in office demonstrates that his efforts to build bridges with various constituents beyond his gay male minority were on some level ultimately successful.

Milk’s Commitment to Low-Income People and the Oppressed

³² Ruth Mahaney, No on 6 campaign activist, interview with Ramy Khalil, 2/20/11.

³³ Ibid.

A second related factor that contributed to Milk's electoral success was his commitment to low-income people and oppressed groups, such as people of color, women, and the elderly. Lesbian activist Ruth Mahaney said she believed Milk personally answering his phone and immediately helping the women's café epitomized his commitment to marginalized groups. Acts like that earned Milk a lot of support from groups whose needs were typically neglected by politicians. A typical campaign statement from Milk exemplifies his attempts to build connections with poor marginalized people.

I know the people of this district; I know their problems. I live in the 16th Assembly District. I'm a store owner in this district. Our rate of unemployment is obviously higher here than in any other district of our city... You can see the results of that unemployment in the beaten faces on Third Street, on the streets of Chinatown, and among the senior citizens of the Tenderloin...

We need people who understand,... who realize that bread costs over fifty cents a loaf and milk forty cents a quart, and if you don't have that forty or fifty cents, your kids don't eat...

This district doesn't need politicians who are skilled in the practice of pay-offs, log-rolling, and political trade-offs. We need people with a concern and awareness of the problems of the people of this district: the poor people, the little people, the people who pay the taxes and who contribute to the quality of life that is so prized in this district. In every race that I've run, every board that I've ever worked on, my aim has been to help *these* people.³⁴

In this statement Milk goes to great lengths to demonstrate his familiarity and empathy with the daily challenges poor people in his district face.

Lesbian rights activist Gwenn Craig attributes Milk's success to his consistent work campaigning and skill in building connections with ordinary people.

I think Harvey won his campaign because he had made those kinds of strategic alliances, and he had done *solid* grassroots campaigning. He was always at the bus stops first thing in the morning. He was always at the Muni

³⁴ "Statement of Harvey Milk: Candidate for the 16th Assembly District," 3/9/76, 1-2, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

[transit] stations to greet people coming in and out. He went to senior centers for lunch, went around to all the tables, laid down his literature, and talked to the ladies. He just was everywhere... He knew how to talk to people and make that sort of connection, and he broke down some real personal barriers.³⁵

Another Milk flier shows how his campaigns attempted to appeal to workers, particularly blue-collar and low-income workers, who made up a large section of the electorate.

Light industry must be brought back into the city. Our elected officials watched silently as major industries in San Francisco packed up and left—taking thousands of jobs with them...

Without these jobs the people in the district have no money to spend. The Result: White Front closed, Sears in the Mission closed—and still more jobs were lost...

I will lobby to bring new industry—and blue collar jobs—into the city. For too long our attention has focused on downtown high-rises and office jobs—jobs for people who don't live in the city. We must open job opportunities to workers on the first step of the economic ladder. Blue collar jobs are the economic backbone of San Francisco.³⁶

This excerpt above from a flier displays Milk's belief in a more humane form of capitalism. By the 1970s, Milk believed society should be organized to benefit low-income workers more rather than enriching only the wealthy business elite. Milk had evolved to the left in the 1960s, and he became a liberal Democrat, though he never evolved into a socialist. His flier advocates “lobbying to bring new industry—and blue collar jobs—into the city,” not nationalizing industry, as a socialist would advocate, so that the government could guarantee the creation of living wage jobs for workers. Milk believed in working within the limits of capitalist property relations, but he believed politicians needed to pressure industry harder to

³⁵ Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

³⁶ Harvey Milk for Assembly Committee, “Harvey Milk on the Issues” campaign flier, 1976, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

contribute to the common good of society as a whole. Milk also had a streak of libertarianism and even some conservatism on certain political or economic issues. For example, he continuously railed against government bureaucracy as a key problem in society. Despite his eclectic mix of political ideas, once he became politically active, Milk fought consistently for reforms that would benefit the working poor, which gained him a significant amount of support among the large population of working-class voters.

Milk spoke up for the needs of workers, the poor, and the oppressed even if that meant having to clash at times with the powerful business elite and the established politicians who controlled San Francisco politics. One example of this took place in January 1976 when Mayor George Moscone appointed Milk to the Board of Permit Appeals as San Francisco's first openly gay commissioner in order to curry favor with the growing LGBT electorate. Shortly afterwards, Milk indicated his interest in running for the state assembly, for which Mayor Moscone threatened to fire him from his commissioner position essentially if he ran against the mayor's preferred candidate who was supported by the political establishment.³⁷ This threat symbolized to Milk exactly what was wrong with politics. Milk saw this as the established bureaucrats in power violating citizens' basic right to an equal opportunity to run for political office. Milk refused to back down and ultimately sacrificed his rare appointment as the city's first gay commissioner so that he could run for office. This would allow him to make a third attempt at getting elected to office, rather than being appointed, and also provide a political voice to working-class people whom he felt were excluded from political power. He described this in one of his 1976 campaign fliers.

³⁷ Bruce B. Brugmann and Jerry Roberts, "The New Liberalism of Moscone, McCarthy and the Burtons: Ganging Up on Harvey Milk," *Bay Guardian*, 3/13/76, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

The people of our district have been frozen out of jobs. They've been frozen out of decent schools, out of decent housing, out of decent medical care, out of decent care for the elderly, out of decent care for children.

Harvey Milk understands that! After all, they tried to freeze him out of running against their hand-picked candidate. They tried to deny him the right—everyone's right—to run for public office.

Harvey Milk is not running as somebody else's errand-boy, or riding on anybody's coat tails. As a legislator, he'll owe nothing to the power brokers and the big money that keeps them in power. Harvey Milk has already established that he is not afraid to stand up for what is right. Harvey Milk will be able to raise the questions on the floor of the Assembly that our "experienced" politicians overlook—or are afraid to ask.

Because he's **independent**, Harvey Milk will be able to fight for the people who need jobs. He won't have to knuckle under to the corporations who lobby for their own special interests and tax loopholes.³⁸

This flier's criticism of "the power brokers and the big money that keeps them in power" provides a sense of Milk's willingness to challenge at times not only the established politicians but also the corporations who used their huge amounts of money and control of the media to dominate politics. Many politicians at the time shied away from sharp clashes with the established politicians and corporations, fearing that these powerful groups could destroy their political careers.³⁹ Although Milk lost the state assembly race in 1976 to the candidate picked by "the political machine," as Milk called it, he finally won the election to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors the following year, in spite of the fact that he clashed at times with the corporate political establishment.

This is not to suggest that Milk was consistently opposed to the political establishment, the corporate elite, or the capitalist system. Milk did eventually develop some support among sections of the corporate political establishment and the Democratic Party leadership. As he gained an increasing number of votes with each of his four attempts at

³⁸ "Why Elect Harvey Milk" campaign flier, 1976, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

³⁹ Barry Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 113-114.

running for office, a growing number of Democratic politicians and media outlets could see the writing on the wall that the growing LGBT electorate would eventually elect an openly gay candidate, most likely Harvey Milk. These Democratic politicians and newspapers eventually supported Milk's later electoral campaigns, particularly his fourth and final campaign, perhaps attempting to curry favor and influence with him in case he were elected. Milk was not just an idealist populist; he was a pragmatist as well, and he did his best to develop friendly relations with Democratic Party leaders and the corporate media. At the same time, he would often call them out and challenge them when he felt a principled issue was at stake.

Milk eventually succeeded in out-competing his political opponents who were far more connected with wealthy corporate interests largely by building a coalition of oppressed groups, neighborhood activists, and appealing to the working-class majority of the population even though their financial means were much more limited.⁴⁰ The support he received from trade unions was particularly helpful because the unions had the resources, activist networks, and authority to mobilize thousands of voters behind his campaign. Rather than focusing on securing donations from the wealthy, Milk focused instead on mobilizing activists, building a movement around the needs of working-class communities, and appealing to ordinary people to contribute financially whatever small amounts they could afford. The following excerpt from a letter from Milk to his supporters is just one example.

Without the knowledge that there is a broad-based support behind me,
I could not continue...

But I'll need your continuing support. I'll need you to tell your
friends, your neighbors, your relatives, the check-out person at the
supermarket, the bus driver, your fellow workers. Since I don't have large

⁴⁰ Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 112.

financial interests behind me, I need *you* to say where *you* stand on the issues...

We need people to walk door to door. We need people to hold coffees. We need people to do phoning...

And, of course, we can always use money. **Even a one-dollar contribution helps. The five and ten-dollar contributors are our “fat-cats.”** We need funds—and people to help raise funds.⁴¹ [My emphasis added – RK]

It was undoubtedly rare, even in the 1970s, for a political candidate to ask for donations as small as one dollar and to say that their five and ten dollar contributors were their “fat-cats.”

⁴² One way the Milk campaign overcame its shortage of funds was by using creative tactics such as the low-cost “human billboard” where a large group of campaign volunteers would all line a street together holding signs supporting the Milk campaign. These “human billboards” attracted the attention of drivers and pedestrians, stimulated conversation, and provided great photo opportunities for local newspapers.⁴³

Milk did not just rhetorically criticize corporate politics during campaign season and then compromise with corporate interests once voters were paying less attention, like most politicians.⁴⁴ He fought for marginalized groups in between elections and even after he was elected to office—at least as much as felt he could within the constraints of the existing political economic system.⁴⁵ As a San Francisco Supervisor, Milk supported a community grassroots movement led by the San Francisco Housing Coalition to pass legislation to control skyrocketing rents which were driving low-income people and people of color out of the city.⁴⁶ He also promoted a tax on wealthy businesses and individuals, limits to high rise

⁴¹ Harvey Milk, letter to campaign supporters, 9/20/77, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

⁴² Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 113-114.

⁴³ Newmarket Press publisher, *Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk*, 78-79.

⁴⁴ Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 113-114.

⁴⁵ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 72.

⁴⁶ *San Francisco Examiner*, 3/31/78, 32, San Francisco Public Library.

development projects, and protection of senior citizen housing.⁴⁷ He attempted to prohibit discrimination by landlords who refused to rent to families with children. He also sponsored a tax to make rapid-turnover real estate speculation more costly.⁴⁸ The following article by Supervisor Milk provides a sense of how Milk argued that the wealthy and corporations should pay more in taxes to ease the burdens on low-income people.

The people who care the most for San Francisco are those who live here and who want to live here, not those commuters and business leaders who have abandoned the city they say they love. Yet these are the people who have had the most influence on our government, and especially our tax laws.

The people who use the city should be paying for it. The residents of San Francisco can no longer afford to subsidize the streets and parking lots for the commuters, nor the high rise office buildings which probably cost us more than they help us.

I've asked for a full-scale review of our tax laws and would like to see an end to our present taxes—especially property taxes—and replace them with a tax on those businesses and individuals who earn a living in the city. In short, an income tax. Under the present system, those who are retired and those who have low or fixed incomes pay too great a share of the total taxes. It makes it impossible for many people to continue to live here.⁴⁹

This article shows Milk using his position on the Board of Supervisors to promote the left-wing idea that there should be progressively higher taxes on those individuals and businesses who earn more. In this case Milk is targeting those corporations and wealthier employees who benefited from the city's publicly financed infrastructure and services but lived in the suburbs and therefore paid less in taxes.

Milk also used his seat on the Board of Supervisors to lead the effort to pass a strong ordinance against discrimination of LGBT people and provide a strong public voice for the grassroots movement against California Proposition 6. Most politicians, in contrast, did not

⁴⁷ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 72.

⁴⁸ Mike Weiss, *Double Play: The Hidden Passions behind the Double Assassination of George Moscone and Harvey Milk* (San Francisco: Vince Emery Productions, 2nd edition, 2010), 192.

⁴⁹ Harvey Milk, "Noe Valley Voice," 4/21/78, 1, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

prioritize LGBT rights legislation, and, as the next chapter demonstrates, most politicians dragged their feet in fighting Proposition 6. Milk, however, sent two letters to the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce chastising the powerful business association for failing to take a stance, one way or the other, in favor or against Proposition 6. He compared their silence to those who looked the other way when Hitler “first took on the gypsies, then the gays, then the Jews, then the Socialists, then the Trade Unionists, and finally everyone else he could find any fault with.”⁵⁰ When the Chamber of Commerce sent a reply refusing to alter their position, Milk wrote them a second letter, informing them that he would publicly criticize this most influential business association in the city—something most politicians did not do.⁵¹

Though Milk was often outnumbered on many votes on the Board of Supervisors that challenged wealthy corporate interests, he spoke up for and voted for what he believed in anyway. For instance, Milk locked horns with the well established San Francisco Supervisor Diane Feinstein, insisting that voting machines be made accessible to senior citizens with poor eyesight and immigrants who could not read English well. Milk was also the first city official to use a municipal public transit pass, a “Muni Fast Pass,” every day.⁵² In his classic campy style, Milk wrote the following letter to the editor of a newspaper, poking fun at the other city officials who lived a more luxurious lifestyle than the most the voters they represented.

I was glad to read Pat Swendson’s letter in your column suggesting that supervisors and PUC commissioners ride Muni at least once a month.

⁵⁰ Harvey Milk, letter to Bill Dauer, Executive Vice President of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, 10/16/78, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

⁵¹ Harvey Milk, letter to Bill Dauer, Executive Vice President of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, 10/19/78, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

⁵² <http://www.strangebillions.com/castroharveyjose>

I don't ride Muni about once a month; I ride it almost every day. In fact, I post my used fast passes on my office wall to encourage others to do the same.

If more of my colleagues and commissioners did ride the Muni, we'd have a much greater system.

The rides are often quite interesting, too.

- Harvey Milk
Supervisor, San Francisco

Another aspect of Milk's commitment to oppressed groups that gained him enormous support and respect was his level of dedication and self-sacrifice. Milk often spent ten hours a day working for various causes. He drove himself into poverty pouring every dollar he had into the LGBT rights movement. Milk was defeated the first three times he ran for office, practically exhausting himself each time, but he was determined to continue trying.⁵³ By running for office four times, he gained invaluable political experience and developed more supporters and allies each time, which made it easier finally to win on his fourth try.⁵⁴ Even after he was elected, Milk poured so much time and energy into fighting Proposition 6 that he barely gave himself time to grieve for his alcoholic boyfriend Jack Lira who felt Milk was not paying enough attention to him and committed suicide during the campaign. Milk rarely turned down a single invitation to speak against Proposition 6 in the state, yet he still managed to make it into City Hall almost every day to get work done.⁵⁵ Milk's election campaign manager, Anne Kronenberg, described the valuable role Milk played in fighting Proposition 6 (which became known as "the Briggs Initiative" since it was sponsored by California Senator John Briggs).

I think he really believed that he was the one who could be the most effective in fighting the Briggs Initiative. And he was right. To do something on a

⁵³ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 65-66.

⁵⁴ Craig, Interview with Ramy Khalil.

⁵⁵ Weiss, *Double Play*, 210. Also, Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 381.

statewide level... it just needed to have somebody like Harvey doing the campaigning. He recognized that, and he put himself out there as the spokesperson, self-appointed spokesperson. And thank God he did.⁵⁶

Milk also faced repeated gruesome death threats for running for office as a visible openly gay activist. The threats became even more ferocious after he was elected. One of his campaign staff members described the hate mail as “awful, nasty, disgusting things.”⁵⁷ Numerous times, his campaign staff urged him not to deliver high profile speeches in public out of fear that he would be shot and killed. Multiple letters threatened to assassinate him specifically at the 1978 Gay Freedom Parade which was expected to attract an enormous crowd particularly because it would take place in the midst of the intensely controversial struggle around Proposition 6. Supervisor Milk had debated Senator Briggs about the initiative up and down the state on television, and national news outlets covered the televised debates extensively.⁵⁸ One postcard simply read: “You get the bullet the first minute you stand at the microphone.”⁵⁹ Milk had come to accept the grim reality that there was a significant possibility that he could be assassinated for becoming the first elected openly gay male politician in the country. Despite repeated death threats, he chose to continue campaigning very visibly and publicly for LGBT rights. He rejected his campaign staff’s pleas not to speak at the 1978 Gay Freedom Parade. He felt he needed to be at this historic, massive event to speak out against the anti-gay ballot initiatives sweeping the nation because he knew the national spotlight would be on San Francisco and California Proposition 6. When the day of the Gay Freedom Parade arrived, a massive throng of an estimated 350,000

⁵⁶ Newmarket Press publisher, *Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk*, 92.

⁵⁷ Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk*.

⁵⁸ Barry Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 113.

⁵⁹ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 262-263.

people marched to City Hall where Milk delivered the keynote speech.⁶⁰ Milk delivered a fiery, strident speech to the enormous crowd, denouncing the LGBT scapegoating crusade led by Anita Bryant and John Briggs as well as the silence of liberal leaders such as Democratic President Jimmy Carter who failed to speak out against discrimination against LGBT people.⁶¹

With chilling foresight Milk recorded three copies of a will shortly after he was elected where he makes the following statement in an extremely serious, pensive tone.⁶²

This is Harvey Milk speaking on Friday, November 18. This is tape two. This is to be played only in the event of my assassination. I've given long and considerable thought to this, not just since the election. I've been thinking about this for some time prior to the election and certainly over the years. I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for—a gay activist—becomes the target or potential target for a person who is insecure, terrified, afraid or very disturbed themselves. Knowing that I could be assassinated at any moment or time, I feel it's important that some people should understand my thoughts.⁶³

Milk's most famous quote appears in his will: "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet knock down every closet door."⁶⁴ This one sentence from his will alone speaks volumes about Milk's dedication to the cause of LGBT liberation. Although Milk clearly enjoyed all the media coverage and public attention he received from running for office, this quote clearly suggests that he was primarily motivated by a dedication to the LGBT liberation movement rather than personal ambition. This appears quite clear given how many assassination threats he received and his decision to continue campaigning publicly for

⁶⁰ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 381.

⁶¹ Harvey Milk's speech to San Francisco Gay Freedom Parade, 6/25/78, transcribed in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 433-443.

⁶² Audio recording of Harvey Milk's will, 1978, <http://www.archive.org/details/ssfHarveyml>.

⁶³ Harvey Milk's will, transcribed in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 444-445.

⁶⁴ Windy City Media Group, www.windycitymediagroup.com/ARTICLE.php?AID=12956

LGBT rights even though he was fully aware that he may be assassinated at any moment.

Almost a year after he was elected, Milk wrote a poem where he expresses again a strong connection and commitment to the LGBT liberation struggle, even if it were to result in his assassination.

I can be killed with ease.
I can be cut right down.
But I cannot fall back into my closet.
I have grown.
I am not myself.
I am too many.
I am all of us.⁶⁵

Only one year after Milk was elected, he and the liberal San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were shot and killed by Dan White, the most conservative member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. White had grown angry at the influence that Milk and other liberals exerted on the city government. White was disgusted with the way LGBT people had changed the city's traditional culture. Eventually, White resigned from the Board, frustrated by the political situation and also his family's declining financial position with the intention of putting more time into building his family's small business. A few days later, the police and a realtors' association convinced him to attempt to reclaim his seat. However, when he tried to reclaim his seat, he discovered that Milk had successfully pressured Mayor Moscone to fill his seat with a liberal, tipping the balance of power to the liberals who now acquired a majority control over the city government. Feeling powerless to stop his hometown from sliding down what he saw as a downward spiral, White decided to murder Milk and Mayor Moscone.

⁶⁵ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 96.

In his will, Milk had explained whom he wanted to replace him on the Board of Supervisors if he were assassinated:

I think there was a strong 372 differential between [moderate gay leader] Rick Stokes and myself. I have never considered myself a candidate. I have always considered myself part of a movement, part of a candidacy. I've considered the movement the candidate. I think there's a delineation between those who use the movement and those who are part of the movement. I think I was always part of the movement. I wish I had time to explain almost everything I did. Almost everything that was done was done with an eye on the gay movement.

I would suggest and urge and hope that the mayor would understand that distinction and that he would appoint somebody to my position who also came from the movement rather than used the movement or never understood the movement. I think those people who actively opposed me—the Jim Fosters, Rick Stokes, Jo Dalys, Doug De Youngs—those people never understood the movement.⁶⁶

Here Milk draws a distinction between LGBT leaders who, in his opinion, were part of the movement and those who used the movement or did not fully understand it. Milk viewed other LGBT leaders' belief that the time was not right for openly gay candidates as a symptom of the underlying oppression they experienced. "Gays are so oppressed, they don't even know they are oppressed," he would say.⁶⁷ He believed that oppression resulted in part from gays buying in, on some level, to the idea they were undeserving of equality. Milk felt that these types of leaders, or those who built a political career for themselves without challenging LGBT people to come out of the closet and overcome that deep internalized oppression, were perpetuating the problem.

Milk's willingness to put his own life on the line to set an example to others that it was indeed possible to win a political election as an openly gay person and obtain equal

⁶⁶ Harvey Milk's will, transcribed in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 445.

⁶⁷ Luke Gilleran, "Who was Harvey Milk and Why Is He Important?" Triangle Community Center website, Norwalk, CT, 2008, <http://www.ctgay.org/who-was-harvey-milk-and-why-is-he-important-part-2.htm>.

status in society gained him enormous respect and support. Milk often said that he ran for office in order to provide hope to LGBT youth who felt so hated and marginalized to the point where they would contemplate suicide. He regularly told a story of a young gay person from Altoona, Pennsylvania who phoned him the day after he was elected. The gay boy told Milk that he was planning on committing suicide until he heard the news that Milk had been elected and now felt more hopeful about his future. Milk stressed again and again:

You've got to keep electing gay people...to know there is better hope for tomorrow. Not only for gays, but for blacks, Asians, the disabled, our senior citizens and us. Without hope, we give up. I know you cannot live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living. You and you and you have got to see that the promise does not fade.⁶⁸

Most reports from people who knew Milk have reported that his message of providing hope to young LGBT people and other oppressed groups, who often felt hopeless in a society that marginalized them, inspired them to support his electoral campaigns which, later, helped them win the campaign against Proposition 6 as well.

Drawing on the Ideas of Gay Liberation

One fascinating aspect of Milk's history is that he eventually succeeded in getting elected even though he was actively opposed by not only much of the political establishment but also by the people whom one would imagine he would receive his strongest support—the traditional LGBT rights organizations. The Alice Toklas Democratic Party club, the Society for Individual Rights, and *The Advocate* magazine contributed considerably to Milk's defeats

⁶⁸ www.kqed.org/w/hood/castro/harveymilk.html.

the first three times he ran by organizing sections of the LGBT community and other liberal constituents to oppose him. David Goodstein, the politically connected, affluent publisher of *The Advocate*, opposed the establishment of district-based elections in San Francisco as opposed to city-wide elections, knowing that it would increase Milk's chance of being elected. He also opposed the boycott campaign against Coors' homophobic policies which Milk played a leading role in.⁶⁹ According to historians Clendinen and Nagourney, "Rick Stokes, a gay lawyer and businessman, . . . Jim Foster, and David Goodstein—the rich conservative, autocratic publisher of *The Advocate*, the only national LGBT magazine—were determined to keep the gay street populist Harvey Milk from becoming the first public homosexual elected to office in the city."⁷⁰ For example, Rick Stokes, Jo Daly (a leading lesbian activist with the Toklas Democratic LGBT club), and Jim Foster convinced Michael Wong, who wanted to be San Francisco's first elected Chinese Supervisor, to campaign against Milk. "It would be disastrous for the gay community if Harvey Milk ever received credibility," Jim Foster told Wong. "Maybe if we just ignore him, he'll go away," hoped Jo Daly. Rick Stokes insisted that Milk "had no support in the gay community . . . he's running on his own."⁷¹ In order to gain these LGBT leaders' support, Wong helped convince San Francisco Tomorrow, an environmentalist organization, and the San Francisco Young Democrats not to endorse Milk, citing the established LGBT leaders' objections.

Why would these LGBT rights leaders and liberal activists actively oppose a dedicated activist attempting to become the first openly gay man elected to political office in the country? When Milk approached Jim Foster, the founder of the Alice Democratic club,

⁶⁹ Randy Alfred, "Milk Sworn In: SF Gay Goes to City Hall," *Gay Vote – News from the San Francisco Gay Democratic Club*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1978, 4, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

⁷⁰ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 8th page of photos.

⁷¹ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 89.

to ask for the LGBT rights organization's endorsement, or at least Foster's agreement not to support someone against him, Foster's reaction was very revealing. He told Milk that he had not put in the time to prove himself or build up his credibility with the other established LGBT leaders.⁷² The Democratic Party was "like the Catholic Church," he said. "We take converts, but we don't make them Pope the same day."⁷³ Foster, Goodstein, and Stokes had spent ten years working to build a political power base for LGBT people among San Francisco's straight liberals. They resented Milk who they viewed as a "long-haired, flamboyant hippie" who had only recently moved to town attempting to appoint himself the leader of the LGBT rights movement. However, these conflicts were not simply personal power struggles. The conflicts were rooted in real differences over political strategy. Goodstein, Foster, Daly, and Stokes believed Milk's strategy of being so public and outspoken about his homosexuality would backfire and ultimately prove to be counter-productive.⁷⁴ They thought a more realistic, effective strategy was not to be so conspicuous or inflammatory about LGBT rights with their straight liberal allies who were probably homophobic to some degree and would be made uncomfortable by uncompromising demands for immediate equality.⁷⁵ Foster, who founded the Alice Democratic LGBT club, also feared that an attempt to run a brazenly LGBT candidate for a seat on the Board of Supervisors might provoke a backlash from Mayor Alioto in the form of another police crackdown on the gay bars since the mayor had built his political base among the police association and conservative Catholics.⁷⁶

⁷² Aretha, *No Compromise*, 41.

⁷³ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 339.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 163.

⁷⁵ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 35. Also, Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 322.

⁷⁶ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, p 85.

Goodstein expressed the established leaders' relatively conservative outlook in a report he wrote for gay newspapers about their partially failed attempt to lobby California state legislators. Half of the forty senators they contacted refused to meet with gay rights lobbyists. In the report, Goodstein blamed the senators' rejection of their offer to meet not on the senators but on radical gay liberation activists.

[The senators] regard us as freaks... Most of the behavior of gay liberationists they have seen in the media confirms the stereotypes they have been taught to perceive... Our spokesmen must be willing and able to argue intelligently, rationally and quietly. They must wear Establishment clothes. They must not confirm stereotypes.⁷⁷

Goodstein's report also singled out for criticism the "radicals who affect bizarre costumes."

They insist that they represent all gay people. Their behavior, their zaps, and their picket lines reinforce bigotry where it exists and frighten already timid legislators away from our cause. I do not naively believe that these people will desist in their behavior, but the rest of us must make sure that they are not the only or even the most frequent spokespersons.⁷⁸

It is clear from this quote that Goodstein believed it was more effective to try to convince legislators to support LGBT rights, and adamantly opposed using "picket lines," street rallies, or "zaps," as the LGBT liberation movement called them, to bring public pressure to bear on politicians. One of Goodstein's columns in *The Advocate* "complained about the bad image LGBT revolutionaries were giving the movement... and attacked the 'flamboyant exhibitionists' and 'media freaks' who, he said, cared only about getting their names in the newspapers and faces on television."⁷⁹ In another column in *The Advocate*, Goodstein

⁷⁷ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 249.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 249.

⁷⁹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 251.

criticizes other LGBT leaders again, and this time, his elitist class perspective comes out even more strongly.

One must be deaf and blind not to notice that most gay people actively dislike most of the people speaking publicly on their behalf. They are fearful of the image being portrayed... [The majority of gay organizations are] dominated by people who took them over from more responsible persons through hysterical attacks on their integrity. These are the spokespeople whom our majority shuns. The straight media pay attention to them because they confirm the stereotypes they're looking for. Our people resent them for the same reason. They appear unemployable, unkempt, and neurotic to the point of megalomania... Our people are hiding in anger and distress from their alleged leaders. It is up to anyone purporting to lead to pay attention to his or her followers. As it is, it's damned lonely on the front lines!⁸⁰

When Goodstein relocated the office of his *Advocate* magazine from Los Angeles to San Mateo, 25 miles south of San Francisco, he made clear that the move was primarily motivated to insulate his office from the criticisms and protests of radicals in L.A. and San Francisco. "We were under a virtual state of siege by gay leaders" in southern California, he complained to the *Wall Street Journal* in 1975. Discussing the move with his staff, Goodstein said, "If the liberation fairies want to protest something we write, they'd never come down to San Mateo."⁸¹ Goodstein's determination to "make sure that [radical gay liberationists] are not the only or even the most frequent spokespersons" for the LGBT community helps explain why he worked to mobilize people against Harvey Milk's electoral campaigns. The whole thrust of Milk's campaigns promoted the opposite idea that LGBT people should come out of the closet, publicly assert themselves, and demand visible representation at all levels of society.

⁸⁰ David Goodstein, "Opening Space" column, *The Advocate*, 1/14/76, transcribed in Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 255.

⁸¹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 252.

The Alice Democratic Party LGBT club ended up rejecting Milk's request to endorse his electoral campaign. Instead they endorsed and campaigned for a straight liberal politician who had been friendly with the LGBT community. No, "it's not time yet for a gay supervisor," the Alice club founder, Jim Foster, told Milk.⁸² "When is it ever going to be time?" Milk fumed. The liberals would never give up power to LGBT people, Milk argued. "You have to TAKE IT!"⁸³ Milk pointed out that the traditional LGBT leaders' strategy had failed to get a single LGBT person appointed to a city commissioner position or get a comprehensive civil rights law banning discrimination other than at a small group of city contractors.⁸⁴ Later, however, once Milk was elected as a city supervisor, he led the effort to pass an ordinance with the strongest protections from discrimination against LGBT people in the country, banning discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations.⁸⁵ In an interview, Milk explained his strategy for winning LGBT rights:

Rights are not won on paper; they are won only by those who make their voices heard. They are won by activists and militants. Silence never won rights. They are not handed down from above. Rather, they are forced by pressures from below.⁸⁶

The idea that rights are won by subordinate groups through popular pressure from below—rather than handed down by enlightened elites from above—is a classical radical idea. Radicals have always maintained that substantial legal changes that benefit marginalized groups stem from determined protest movements in the streets that force the legal system to adapt to the new political reality created by popular protest movements. While Milk would

⁸² Ibid, 339

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 122.

⁸⁵ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 73.

⁸⁶ Lenny Giteck, "Gays and the City: An Interview with Harvey Milk," *San Francisco Examiner*, 11/29/78, 21, San Francisco Public Library.

best be characterized as politically liberal on most economic issues, he did adopt a lot of the radical ideas from the gay liberation movement on the specific issue of LGBT rights. In his speech at the 1978 Gay Freedom Parade, for example, Milk expressed his belief that outspoken militancy was the most effective way to win LGBT rights.

THE BLACKS DID NOT WIN THEIR RIGHTS BY SITTING
QUIETLY IN THE BACK OF THE BUS. THEY GOT OFF!
GAY PEOPLE, WE WILL NOT WIN OUR RIGHTS BY STAYING
QUIETLY IN OUR CLOSETS... WE ARE COMING OUT! WE ARE
COMING OUT TO FIGHT THE LIES, THE MYTHS, THE DISTORTIONS!
WE ARE COMING OUT TO TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT GAYS!⁸⁷

In another interview, Milk elaborated the idea that LGBT people needed to assert themselves to win their rights, echoing one of the radical themes of the gay liberation movement:

Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed because he realized the only way the blacks were to win their rights as citizens was not to seek mere survival but full success, full citizenship... With the incorporation of the blacks into national life, not only were blacks free to offer their full creative contribution to society, but the whites were challenged to reconsider the roles by which they lived. The longest and most deeply suppressed of all groups refuses to learn from history. In order to win our right to self-respect and equality, we must first assert our full existence and then its strength.⁸⁸

Milk's insistence that the LGBT community should stop relying on half-hearted straight allies and elect their own outspoken LGBT spokespeople to office resonated with many LGBT people in California, as demonstrated by the following column of a journalist for a San Francisco LGBT newspaper.

Milk's opponents also use the argument that now is not the time. Then when in hell is the time? On a recent trip to Los Angeles, I was amazed to learn how many gay people in that city are watching this political race. As one put

⁸⁷ Harvey Milk, "That's What America Is!" transcribed in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 435.

⁸⁸ Harvey Milk statement, 1978, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

it, “hell, if the gays in San Francisco can’t get their act together and elect a gay person to the legislature, there ain’t no place in the State that is going to do it . . . certainly not in Orange County.” Given the chance, Milk could be a political symbol of good will for the Homosexual Community of this country, much less the State of California.⁸⁹

In the tradition of the gay liberation movement, Milk presented himself as a grassroots protester and argued that street protests were an effective tactic, such as in the following flier.

Harvey Milk called the mass demonstration protesting the Labor Day bust by the police. It was that demonstration, and its follow-up, that accounted for the change in attitude toward gays by police patrolling the Castro area.

Harvey Milk joined the demonstration at the Board of Education protesting discrimination against gay teachers. Where were our “friends” at the rally?⁹⁰

Milk, in fact, led many of the LGBT rights marches through the city that often began in the Castro.⁹¹ When Democratic Vice President Walter Mondale came to Golden Gate Park to speak to a rally about human rights, Supervisor Milk and a number of gay liberation activists picketed the rally and heckled Mondale for not speaking about LGBT rights.⁹² Historians Clendinen and Nagourney describe how Harvey Milk embraced the radical tactic of protest marches whereas traditional LGBT rights leader, Rick Stokes, shunned them.

When the crowd that poured out of the Castro reached Union Square, the main speaker they heard, as the red flag flapped [emblazoned with the words “Gay Revolution”] above them, was Harvey Milk. Dark-eyed, passionate and voluble, he was a theatrical, even outrageous personality. He

⁸⁹ Wayne Friday, “World of Wayne,” spring 1976, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

⁹⁰ Howie Klein, “One of Our Own,” *Vector*, 1977, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

⁹¹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 347.

⁹² Frances FitzGerald, *Cities on a Hill: A Journey through Contemporary American Cultures*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 51.

had become the voice of the Castro in the years since 1972, and the midnight march and rally—with thousands of people swarming up a hill, cheering as a determined lesbian climbed up a pole to untangle the red flag of revolution—was his kind of event.

Rick Stokes, the quiet candidate of the old gay establishment, was nowhere to be seen. It was not his thing. Stokes was not a street person. He was a lawyer and a businessman, a man who spoke softly and seriously, as careful and thorough in his politics and investments as he was in his personal life.⁹³

In their description above, Clendinen and Nagourney touch on the class dynamics that contributed to the differences in political strategies between the traditional LGBT leadership and the maverick Harvey Milk. Stokes and Goodstein had made handsome fortunes for themselves, by capitalizing economically, in some ways, on the growth of the LGBT community. Stokes and a few business partners opened up a gay bathhouse called Ritch Street Baths that became enormously popular as the gay population in San Francisco multiplied. Stokes profited immensely as long lines of young men paid admission fees to enter the ragingly popular bathhouse and bought drinks inside.⁹⁴ David Goodstein, began as a Wall Street investment banker in New York, but after he moved to California, he purchased *The Advocate* magazine, from which he profited as the LGBT community grew nationally and a growing number of LGBT people purchased and subscribed to the magazine. In contrast, in the late 1960s Harvey Milk consciously rejected his middle-class background and ended up a poor camera shop owner. These class differences contributed substantially to the conflicts and debates over strategy between the assimilationist LGBT establishment and the more radical LGBT activists around Milk.

When Rick Stokes and lesbian activist Sally Gearhart were appointed to the board of directors of the Family Services Agency, the first two acknowledged LGBT people appointed

⁹³ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 337.

⁹⁴ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 160.

to public positions in the city, Stokes emphasized in an interview that gay men shared similar identities as straight men and played traditional family roles like straight men.

When the two were interviewed by the *Chronicle*... [Gearhart] took a radically feminist line, saying she viewed her lesbianism as “a rejection of the oppressive role of women as barefoot pregnant helpmates chained to a kitchen stove.” But Rick Stokes took a completely different approach to the interview: what he stressed was how much he was like a married man. “I know that in the beginning, my fellow members of this board are going to regard me as just a homosexual spokesperson, but I hope that early along, they’ll realize that like any other family man, I have a lover, and we write letters to each other and cook dinner and worry about money and have squabbles—the whole bit.”⁹⁵

In the following passage, Clendinen and Nagourney argue that Milk’s eventual electoral victory marked a decisive turning point in the strategic debates between Milk’s politics which drew on the ideas of gay liberation and the wealthy LGBT establishment’s assimilationist politics. The passage makes reference to the decision by the established LGBT leaders to run Rick Stokes as the moderate gay candidate to attempt to prevent Milk from winning office, which ultimately failed.

Milk’s victory was not just historic; it signaled a change in the rules. He had beaten Rick Stokes, the lawyer and former bathhouse owner running as “The Respectable Candidate,” endorsed by *The Advocate* and backed by the gay political establishment. The vote was a repudiation of the strategy the organized gay political community had followed for a decade in San Francisco, a strategy of supporting gay-friendly mainstream candidates or establishment gays like Rick Stokes who had mainstream ties. Milk’s election—and the previous election of Mayor George Moscone, who had openly sought gay votes—represented a quantum leap in the political pride and clout of the city’s gay community.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid, 162.

⁹⁶ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 322.

Milk's victory over Stokes was indeed historic for another reason. According to the *Gay Community News*, the Stokes campaign was not only backed by *The Advocate* and "professional gays," but it was also "one of the most highly financed campaigns ever in San Francisco politics—spending some \$35 per vote cast for the candidate."⁹⁷

In another interview, Milk discussed his views on the different leadership strategies within the LGBT rights movement.

The Advocate, Jim Foster, Jo Daly have always opposed me. They have always opposed any gay person trying to get up ahead, if they can't control that person. All movements go through this—the internal bickering and fighting. They opposed me with smears, lies...

They felt there could only be one person on top of the mountain... I recognize that there's plenty of room for a lot of gay people at the top of the mountain... that we're going to need them... we desperately need them. That's why I keep encouraging more people to get involved... more and more people to run for different offices. I'm encouraging it because we need a multitude.

We don't need "friends" to help the gay movement. We can do it ourselves. You don't find blacks any longer electing "friends" of the black community. You find blacks electing blacks. You find Latinos electing Latinos. You find Asians electing Asians.⁹⁸

Here Milk identifies the sources of conflict between the two leaderships as rooted in a power struggle over who would be in the leadership of the local LGBT movement but also a difference over the strategy of whether to rely on liberal straight allies to represent LGBT people or have the LGBT community represent themselves. The following opinion piece by one LGBT activist demonstrates the appeal that Milk's radicalism on this issue had for many LGBT rights activists.

Milk, who in his last nearly-successful bid for elective office rolled up more votes than any openly gay person in the history of the United States, is

⁹⁷ Joe Martin, "Harvey Milk Talks about Politicians and Lying," 6.

⁹⁸ Joe Martin, "Harvey Milk Talks about Politicians and Lying," 7.

gathering more impressive strength from outside the gay movement than from within it. While self-appointed “gay leaders,” who have never dared to stand for any election themselves, attack their gay brother all over the city, traditionally anti-gay groups have been impressed by Milk’s qualifications, abilities, and earnest, fresh approach to government. San Francisco’s most conservative newspaper, *The Progress*, has broken national publishing ground by endorsing an openly gay candidate, while millionaire David B. Goodstein’s *Advocate*, fearful of losing control over even a part of the gay movement, has taken an active role in supporting Milk’s non-gay opponent. All the so-called gay leaders dependent on Goodstein’s pocketbook are playing the roles of Uncle Toms, Judases, and hatchet persons, attacking Milk’s outstanding record with vicious lies and slanderous innuendoes.⁹⁹

This quote also provides a sense of how, after running multiple times and winning an increasing number of votes each time, Milk did eventually begin to gain some support from sections of the political establishment and the corporate media. Milk was eventually supported, for example, by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as well as *The Progress*, two of the city’s most conservative newspapers, as well as some politicians such as San Francisco Supervisor Quentin Kopp. These newspapers and politicians probably recognized that the growing LGBT electorate was increasingly likely to elect Harvey Milk eventually, and they may have been positioning themselves to curry favor with the growing LGBT voting bloc in case he were elected.

This points to another side of Milk that was, in reality, not that radical. Though Milk is often remembered for his clashes with the traditional LGBT rights leaders on the right wing of the political spectrum of LGBT activism, it is less well known that he also clashed with the left wing of LGBT activists as well, such as the Bay Area Gay Liberation organization, an LGBT rights organization with socialist ideas. Although Milk was quite radical for his time on the issue of LGBT rights, he was less radical in other ways. For

⁹⁹ Gay Friends of Harvey Milk, “Is it Important to elect an Up-front ‘Gay’ to the State Assembly?” 1977, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

example, when one interviewer asked him whether he supported revolutionary change, Milk rejected revolution as unrealistic in the U.S. since many people enjoyed relatively decent living standards in the 1970s compared to other countries. Milk responded by expressing his goal of fighting for “rapid evolution, not revolution.”¹⁰⁰

Milk’s political philosophy could be best described as a modern day urban form of Jeffersonian Democracy. He cherished residential neighborhoods over the downtown district which was controlled by large commercial interests. He advocated for the interests of small businesses like his own small camera shop over big corporations like the real estate developers and tourist industry who were taking over San Francisco. He based his political philosophy on small business and the average citizen, not the working class specifically nor labor organizations, as a socialist would, though he did certainly build important alliances with unions and workers. Milk wanted to clean out what he saw as the corrupt, bureaucratic elements of capitalist democracy, but he was not fighting to overthrow the entire capitalist system or attempting to establish a socialist democracy.

Milk was on the left wing of the Democratic Party. For example, he repeatedly publicly challenged Democratic President Jimmy Carter and Democratic Vice President Walter Mondale to speak out for LGBT rights. On the other hand, he never broke from the Democratic Party or ran as an independent candidate.

Milk even took a number of conservative or libertarian positions at times, particularly on economic issues. His candidate statements in the 1973 and 1975 voters’ pamphlets, for example, made no mention about LGBT rights other than mentioning his membership in the Society for Individual Rights. Only the most politically active people would be aware that

¹⁰⁰ “A Conversation with Harvey Milk,” Interview recorded by Greg Gordon, *This Way Out: The International Lesbian and Gay Radio Magazine*, March 1978.

the Society for Individual Rights was an LGBT rights organization since the organization's name makes no explicit mention of LGBT rights. Milk's candidate statements simply emphasized his experience as a small business owner and a financial analyst for corporations and merely called for the efficient use of tax-payers' money.¹⁰¹ Although Milk published these technical, somewhat conservative candidate statements in the voters' pamphlets for his first two bids for office, he was still evolving to the left politically as he became more politically active. Gwenn Craig described Milk's personal and political growth over the years, saying, "Harvey came a long way, believe me. He was a gay Republican when he first came to San Francisco, and he grew politically in being comfortable in his skin as a gay person over time."¹⁰² After getting more established and comfortable with running for office as a liberal Democrat and being elected as a candidate who drew on some of the ideas of the gay liberation movement, he became increasingly confident about his liberal and gay liberation views and expressed them more forcefully over the years, even after he was elected. Overall, Milk's political philosophy could best be characterized as left-wing populism—a mixture of various political philosophies but leaning decidedly to the left. Milk was liberal on economic issues (though he had a dose of conservative libertarian hostility to government bureaucracy) and fairly radical for his time on the specific issue of LGBT rights.

Conclusion

Though Milk lacked support from the traditional LGBT rights organizations as well as most established politicians and corporate donors, he was still able to eventually win an

¹⁰¹ California voters' pamphlets, 1973 and 1975, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

¹⁰² Craig, Interview with Ramy Khalil.

election by building coalitions between the LGBT people, unions, and other oppressed groups, by demonstrating a commitment to low-income workers and oppressed groups, and by using a radical, fighting approach on the specific issue of LGBT rights. These strategies must have resonated with the growing LGBT electorate and a majority of straight voters because they finally elected him in November 1977. These political strategies alone do not completely explain how Milk was able to get elected. It also certainly helped that Milk was an engaging speaker and an outgoing person with a fun sense of humor, skilled at pulling creative stunts that attracted media attention. And, of course, there were the underlying historical trends described earlier that made Milk's victory possible—the protest movements of the 1960s, the emergence of the gay liberation movement, the migration of LGBT people to San Francisco, and the introduction of district-based elections in San Francisco. But if Milk had not developed coalitions between LGBT people and other oppressed groups, fought for working-class people, and used some of the ideas of gay liberation, it is extremely doubtful Milk would have ever won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Chapter 4: How California Proposition 6 was Defeated

“We can defeat the Briggs Initiative if all the gay people come out to your family, your friends – if indeed they are your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors. You will hurt them if you come out, but think of how they will hurt you if they vote for Briggs. If they don’t come out, then it will be a very tight race.”

- Harvey Milk¹

After Milk was elected, the LGBT community had to face another historic battle—California Proposition 6. If approved, the ballot initiative would have required public schools to fire all employees found engaging in homosexual activity, as well as employees who said or did anything that could be considered sympathetic to homosexuality. The ballot referendum was initiated by California Senator John Briggs, a far-right wing Republican attempting to advance his political career by exploiting the growing wave of anti-gay ballot initiatives sweeping the country in 1977 and 1978. If he could lead the Proposition 6 campaign to victory, California Senator Briggs hoped the victory would pave the way for him to be elected the governor of California and/or a U.S. Senator.²

By January 1977, nearly 40 cities and counties had enacted a law or policy barring discrimination against gays and lesbians.³ These legislative protections were some of the many accomplishments of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. The progress of the LGBT, feminist, African American, and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s

¹ Rob Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, documentary film (Beverly Hills: Pacific Arts Video), 1984..

² Dennis J. Opatmy, “GOP Candidate John Briggs: Serious or Showing Off?” *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, 6/20/77, p6, section A, San Francisco Public Library.

³John Tanasychuk, "Exhibit Marks 30th Anniversary of How Anita Bryant Fought—and Helped—Gay Rights," *The South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, 6/04/07, 1, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

disturbed conservatives and wealthy elites who held traditional views about race, gender, and the United States' role in the world.⁴ The U.S. defeat in Vietnam combined with stagnation of the U.S. economy in the 1970s fueled a growing conservative backlash of people who feared that U.S. society was in decline.⁵

Anita Bryant, a former Miss Oklahoma and celebrity singer, tapped into people's anxieties and channeled them behind her nationwide "crusade against homosexuality," as she called it. She played the leading role in an organization called Save Our Children in 1977 that collected thousands of signatures to place an initiative on the ballot to repeal the LGBT rights ordinance in Miami's Dade County that county officials had recently enacted. Bryant campaigned against LGBT rights by stoking parents' fears about their children's well-being and the decline of religion, as she did in the following speech.

No one has a human right to corrupt our children. Prostitutes, pimps, and drug pushers, like homosexuals, have civil rights, too, but they do not have the right to influence our children to choose their way of life. Before I yield to this insidious attack on God and his laws, and on parents and their rights to protect their children, I will lead such a crusade to stop it as this country has not seen before.⁶

Bryant's campaign attracted national media attention and plenty of controversy. A special election for the initiative was held on June 7, 1977, and it attracted the largest voter turnout of any special election in the history of Dade County. The election resulted in people voting overwhelmingly to repeal the LGBT rights ordinance by a stunning margin of more than two to one.⁷ In LGBT communities June 7th became notoriously known as "Orange Tuesday"

⁴ Barry Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 109-110.

⁵ *Ibid*, 122.

⁶ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Right Movement in America* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 292.

⁷ Leigh Rutledge, *The Gay Decades* (New York, Penguin, 1992), 108.

because Bryant was well known as a celebrity singer in Florida orange juice commercials.

Bryant, in contrast, basked in her victory, pledging similar ballot initiatives in other states.

All America and the world have heard the people of Miami. We will now carry our fight against similar laws throughout the nation that attempt to legitimize a lifestyle that is both perverse and dangerous to the sanctity of the family, dangerous to our children, dangerous to our freedom of religion and freedom of choice, dangerous to our survival as a nation.⁸

Bryant's appeals to preserve the sanctity of the family and to protect children from perverse lifestyles that endangered America were clearly resonating with a large portion of the population.

Over the next year, Bryant led very similar campaigns in St. Paul, Minnesota, Wichita, Kansas, and Eugene, Oregon. Within the span of one month in 1978 between April 25 and May 23, voters repealed similar LGBT rights ordinances in three cities, often by huge margins—by a roughly two to one margin in St. Paul, Minnesota and Eugene, Oregon and an overwhelming five to one margin in Wichita, Kansas!⁹ Throughout all four of these campaigns across the country, social conservatives singled out San Francisco's left-wing LGBT culture for special criticism as a symbol of America's decline as a civilization.¹⁰

The tremendous support the religious right received from voters across the country made it appear as if right-wing politics were taking over the country. After the ballot initiatives' repeated success, national politicians who had previously been supportive of LGBT rights quickly distanced themselves from the LGBT rights movement. States from Alabama to New Jersey began discussing measures to recriminalize homosexuality.¹¹ The

⁸ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 309.

⁹ Rutledge, *The Gay Decades*, 122-123. Also, Barry Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* 111.

¹⁰ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 334.

¹¹ Fred Feies, "The Briggs Initiative Goes National," *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, July-August 2008, 22.

media expressed increasing skepticism of the LGBT community's claim to be a minority group deserving of legal protection from discrimination.¹² The rate of violent hate crimes against LGBT people was even rising.¹³ Was the progress of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s being completely rolled back? It certainly appeared that way.

Witnessing the popular sentiment that could be galvanized to oppose LGBT rights, California state senator John Briggs decided to launch a ballot initiative of his own against LGBT rights with the hope of attracting attention to himself and boosting his political career. His initiative, Proposition 6, would ban LGBT people and their supporters from employment in California public schools. He used arguments similar to Bryant's arguments to promote his ballot initiative:

What Proposition 6 is really all about is the right of parents to determine who will be teaching their children. We don't allow people who believe in practicing bestiality to teach our children. We don't let prostitutes teach our children. And the reason we don't is because it is illegal to be a prostitute. But it is not illegal to be a homosexual in California.¹⁴

One of the main arguments Briggs used to promote Proposition 6 was that gay school teachers often molested young children. "Everybody knows that homosexuals are child molesters. Not all of them, but most of them. I mean, that's why they are in the teaching profession."¹⁵ As No on 6 campaign organizer Amber Hollibaugh pointed out, most Americans at the time were uneducated about homosexuality and rarely ever discussed

¹² Feies, "The Briggs Initiative Goes National," 22.

¹³ Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 109.

¹⁴ David Aretha, *No Compromise: The Story of Harvey Milk* (Greensboro: Morgan Reynolds Publishing, 2010), 76.

¹⁵ Ronald Reagan quoting Briggs in his opinion piece against the Briggs Initiative, "Two Ill-Advised California Trends" *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 11/01/78.

sexuality openly.¹⁶ So even though LGBT activists pointed out that 95% of reported incidents of child molestation were carried out by heterosexual men, Briggs was nonetheless able to strike fear into the hearts of parents that gay school teachers threatened their children's safety.

Hurting from the painful beatings of the ballot initiatives, the LGBT community in California began to organize a challenge against Proposition 6. At first, most LGBT rights activists viewed the battle as a steep uphill challenge.¹⁷ “We stand a very good chance of winning San Francisco, but California is more remote,” predicted Howard Wallace, a long-time gay political activist. David Goodstein was even more pessimistic: “I believe we are underdogs by a large margin. I think there's a chance we won't even carry San Francisco County.”¹⁸ Harry Britt, a founding member of San Franciscans United against Prop. 6, stated flatly, “I know of no informed person who holds any real hope for defeating the Briggs Initiative.”¹⁹ Amber Hollibaugh, a full-time organizer for the California Outreach Group “NO on 6” campaign, explained that even the more optimistic left wing of the LGBT rights movement had little hope of victory.

When the campaign started, we – the gay and lesbian left – assumed that almost all of the right and much of the center would be for Proposition 6 and against homosexuals... In California we felt that we were facing an overwhelming majority of unsympathetic people, especially because Proposition 6 was drafted in a way that made it possible to mobilize support in sensitive areas: sexuality, homosexuality, and children, particularly in the schools. I don't think there's been much of a tradition of dealing with sexual issues in the schools in this country...

¹⁶ Diane Ehrensaft and Ruth Milkman, “Interview with Amber Hollibaugh: Sexuality and the State – The Defeat of the Briggs Initiative and Beyond,” *Socialist Review*, May-June 1979, 5.

¹⁷ Craig Rimmerman, *From Identity to Politics: The Lesbian and Gay Movements in the United States* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2002), 130.

¹⁸ Cory Michaels, “Anti-Briggs Forces Expect Tough Fight,” *Noe Valley Voice*, Vol. II, No. 6, August 1978, 1, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁹ Harry Britt, “New Group to Fight Briggs,” *Gay Vote: News from the San Francisco Democratic Club*, June-July 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society.

The forces that we figured would be against Proposition 6 were the gay movement and sections of the women's movement, period. We did not assume support from anywhere else because no other groups had shown support. Neither the left in general, nor the labor movement, churches...

Most of us assumed the best that could be done was an enormously intricate educational campaign against the assault we expected. There were members of the left gay community who did think that we had a chance to defeat the proposition, but they were a tiny voice in the wind and most of us thought they were off the wall.²⁰

Early opinion polls and one poll as late as August 1978, three months before the election, confirmed LGBT activists' fears. They suggested that Proposition 6 would pass by a two to one margin, specifically 61% to 31%.²¹ LGBT activists were right that Senator Briggs was striking a chord with voters who wanted some control over what kind of teachers taught their children and who wanted to protect their children from sexual molestation. The movement against Proposition 6 failed at first to shift public opinion. However, after a year of grassroots organizing and campaigning, the movement did eventually succeed in convincing major labor, community, and religious groups to pass resolutions and take public stances against the initiative. By the end of September 1978, a month after the previous poll results had been publicized, a new poll showed support for the initiative slipping with only 45% in favor of the initiative, 43% opposed, and 12% undecided.²² Millions of Californians began to change their minds in the last three months of the campaign. Ultimately, the election witnessed a high turnout of 70.4% of the electorate, and the voters sent the initiative down to a resounding defeat, rejecting it by 58% to 42%.²³ Rather than the expected landslide in

²⁰ Ehrensaft and Milkman, "Interview with Amber Hollibaugh," 5.

²¹ "The Latest Poll," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11/3/78, 22, San Francisco Library.

²² Ibid.

²³ California Secretary of State, "Statement of Vote," 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

favor of the initiative, the voters handed Briggs a stunning defeat. Briggs even failed to win a majority of votes in his own Orange County, a stronghold of conservatism at the time.

How can historians explain the defeat of the Proposition 6 in California when similar initiatives won in other states? What caused the shift in public opinion against the initiative in the final three months of the campaign? In chapter two, I outlined the main historical trends that contributed to this victory for the LGBT rights movement—the protest movements and radicalization of the 1960s, the migration of tens of thousands of LGBT people to San Francisco in the 1970s, and the establishment of district elections in San Francisco - which contributed to the election of Milk who went on as a San Francisco Supervisor to play a leading role against Proposition 6. In addition to these crucial underlying historical processes, key political players in California made important strategic decisions in 1977 and 1978 that resulted in the initiative’s defeat. The few historical narratives that exist about Proposition 6, such as those by Dudley Clendinen, Adam Nagourney, Craig Rimmerman, and Elizabeth Armstrong, often give much, if not most, of the credit for the initiative’s defeat to high profile politicians and newspaper editorials who spoke out against the initiative. While established politicians and the media certainly played a role in helping defeat the initiative, this chapter argues that other factors played much more important roles. One decisive factor was the mistake by Briggs himself of over-reaching—of promoting an initiative that was more extreme than the anti-gay ballot initiatives in other states. Proposition 6 required school districts to terminate employment of LGBT or straight people who expressed any sympathy toward homosexuality, on or off the job, whereas the ballot initiatives in other states merely repealed special protections against discrimination for gays or lesbians. Most importantly, though, Proposition 6 was defeated by LGBT people,

labor unions, feminists, and other allies who organized a powerful grassroots movement involving highly visible protests and actions that successfully confronted the homophobic arguments behind Proposition 6. These factors—Briggs’ over-reach and the massive grassroots movement that LGBT people, unions, and feminists built to confront Briggs’ homophobic arguments—primarily explain the initiative’s defeat, not the role of established politicians and major media outlets.

Briggs Over-reached

A major reason why Proposition 6 was defeated was that its sponsor California State Senator John Briggs over-reached, mainly by attempting to gain support for an initiative that was too far to the right of the political consensus at the time. Proposition 6 attempted to go further in restricting people’s rights than the other four anti-gay ballot initiatives in Miami’s Dade County, St. Paul, Wichita, and Eugene. If passed, California Proposition 6 would have required school districts to fire not only LGBT teachers but any school employee, gay or straight, who said or did anything sympathetic to homosexuality—on the job or even off the job. Proposition 6 was directed primarily against LGBT people, but a major difference from the ballot initiatives in other states was that it threatened straight workers as well. The ballot initiatives in other states, in contrast, merely repealed protections for LGBT people from discrimination. The specific language of California Proposition 6 required the dismissal of any school employee who engaged in “advocating, soliciting, imposing, or encouraging or promoting of private or public homosexual acts.”²⁴ By this definition, attending a Gay Pride

²⁴ California Voters’ Pamphlet, 1978, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

parade or having a drink at a gay bar could be interpreted as encouraging homosexuality and could become grounds for dismissal. By requiring school districts to fire any school employee who said or did anything that “promoted” homosexuality, on the job or off the job, Proposition 6 made it possible to mobilize not just LGBT workers against the initiative but many straight workers as well.

Proposition 6 also had a provision within it that directly threatened the validity of union contracts, provoking the active opposition of the labor movement. Proposition 6 was written in a way where the dismissal of public school employees who “encouraged” homosexuality would have been upheld “notwithstanding any other provision of the law.”²⁵ This provision in Proposition 6 was a direct threat to union contracts that protected workers’ jobs and rights which unions had fought very hard over the years to attain and strengthen. The California AFL-CIO umbrella federation of trade unions was already quite familiar with Republican Senator Briggs’ anti-labor record in the state legislature. For all these reasons, they came out against Proposition 6, and many city and county central labor councils as well as union locals followed their lead. Fliers against the Briggs Initiative list hundreds of union locals that came out against the initiative. Without the provision in Proposition 6 that directly challenged unions’ authority, it is much less likely that the powerful trade unions would have mobilized so many workers against an anti-gay campaign.

Proposition 6’s proposal to restrict school employees’ personal activities and freedom of speech off the job also made it possible to mobilize not only left-wing supporters of democratic rights against the initiative but also the majority of Californians who cherish their right to privacy and their Constitutional right to free speech, including people with right-wing

²⁵ East Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative/NO on 6 brochure, “What Does Prop. 6 Really Mean?” Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

libertarian and conservative leanings. The initiative would have required the state to intervene in individuals' private lives and censor their private activities off the job. If a school employee were to say something sympathetic about LGBT rights, on the job or off the job, it could have been interpreted as "advocating or encouraging" homosexuality and would be grounds for dismissal. For this reason the California Department of Education came out very early on August 31, 1977 against the initiative, an entire year before the vote would take place, issuing the following public statement.

It is the position of the Department of Education that the current law is sufficient to protect pupils from sexual advances by teachers, whether homosexual or heterosexual, and to prevent teachers from promoting their sexual life style or preference in the classroom...

The teacher also has a right to privacy; the right to engage in any legal activity with a consenting adult should not be limited so long as such activity does not pose a threat to students or otherwise adversely affect the classroom performance of the teacher.²⁶

Most notably, two LGBT rights activists convinced former California Republican Governor Ronald Reagan to speak out against Proposition 6.²⁷ In an editorial printed in the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* on November 1, 1978, former Governor Reagan used primarily libertarian arguments against government intrusion into individuals' private lives to explain his opposition to the initiative:

Since the measure does not restrict itself to the classroom, every aspect of a teacher's personal life could presumably come under suspicion. What constitutes "advocacy" of homosexuality? Would public opposition to Prop. 6 by a teacher—should it pass—be considered advocacy?²⁸

²⁶ Thomas M. Griffin, Chief Counsel for the California Department of Education, letter to Hank Wilson, 8/31/77, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco. Also, "NO on Proposition 6" report from the San Francisco Council of Churches Board of Directors, Oct. 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

²⁷ Rimmerman, *From Identity to Politics*, 130.

²⁸ Ronald Reagan, "Two Ill-Advised California Trends" *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 11/01/78.

Another way Briggs over-reached was by writing the ballot initiative in such a way that its legality was questionable. Proposition 6 opponents made a strong argument that denying a U.S. citizen the right to “solicit, promote, or encourage” private homosexual conduct would have violated citizens’ right to free speech guaranteed by the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The California Legislature’s attorney Bion Gregory issued a statement on September 7, 1978 arguing that the wording of the “impermissibly vague” initiative violated both the California and U.S. constitutions.²⁹ He stated that the initiative not only violated the right to free speech but also constitutional guarantees to due process of law. He cited previous U.S. Supreme Court precedents that “a statute which either forbids or requires the doing of an act in terms so vague that men of common intelligence must necessarily guess at its meaning and differ as to its application violates the first essential of due process of law.”³⁰ In June 1978, the Board of Directors of the Barristers Club of San Francisco, an organization of 2,000 San Francisco attorneys, voted unanimously to oppose Proposition 6 because it would deny teachers “their rights to association and speech.”³¹ This organization of attorneys in San Francisco then succeeded in convincing the state-wide State Bar House of Delegates to oppose the initiative as well.³² Attorneys from the Pride Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union, and Gay Lawyers’ Committee of the San Francisco Bar Association continuously challenged the legality of the initiative through

²⁹ John Balzar, “Legal Opinion Calls Prop. 6 Too Vague,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9/8/78, 7, San Francisco Public Library.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Barristers Club of San Francisco press statement, 6/27/78, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

³² Laguna Beach Coalition for Human Rights flier “California Voters Say NO on 6,” Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

lawsuits throughout 1977 and 1978.³³ In addition, the American Civil Liberties Union vowed to challenge Proposition 6 in court if the voters approved it in November 1978.³⁴ Briggs clearly overreached in wording the initiative in a manner that many lawyers and legal organizations believed was in violation of existing law. This apparent violation of existing law added pressure on politicians—even right-wing politicians and homophobic conservatives—to oppose the initiative.

Proposition 6 was more extreme than the anti-gay ballot initiatives in other states in another important, though subtle, way. In the other states, the ballot initiatives removed protections from discrimination for LGBT people. In California, Proposition 6 would have imposed a requirement on public schools to discriminate actively against LGBT school employees. It is one thing to remove a protection against discrimination; it is another to enact a requirement to discriminate.³⁵ Anita Bryant’s ballot initiatives in Florida, Minnesota, Kansas, and Oregon argued that LGBT people were not a social group deserving of “special” protections from discrimination. However, John Briggs’ initiative in California required school districts to fire LGBT school employees—a more far-reaching, sharper attack on LGBT rights. While voters in Florida, Minnesota, Kansas, and Oregon were able to be convinced that LGBT people did not deserve any “special” protections from discrimination, voters in California turned out to be uncomfortable with instituting a state requirement to discriminate against LGBT people.³⁶

³³ Pride Legal Defense Fund letter, November 1977 letter, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

³⁴ Balzar, “Legal Opinion Calls Prop. 6 Too Vague,” 7.

³⁵ John D’Emilio, interviewed by Alisa Solomon, 12/07/08.
<http://www.beyondthepale.org/segment/2008/12/07/milk>.

³⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10/10/78, San Francisco Public Library.

Another important way Senator Briggs over-reached was placing Proposition 6 on the ballot primarily to increase his chances of being elected in 1978 when he ran for California Governor and in 1980 when he hoped to run for U.S. Senate. Briggs was not a sophisticated, diplomatic politician. He openly admitted, for example, that he placed two initiatives on the ballot—Proposition 6 and Proposition 7 (to increase use of the death penalty)—to improve his chances of winning an election to higher office.³⁷ He blatantly admitted this in multiple interviews, such as the following interview.

“What we’re going to try to do is convert the support for those issues into support for me.”

...Using direct mail, as well as television, he hopes to turn support of those issues into supporters of John Briggs.³⁸

In another interview, Briggs drew a link between the success of Proposition 6 and the success of the candidacy he planned to mount for U.S. Senate in 1980.

I’ve been told by many of my friends that come November [when Proposition 6 would be voted on] I could well end up being America’s newest and biggest folk hero – someone who will make a good candidate against (Senator) Alan Cranston in 1980 – or I could very well end up being the world’s biggest chump.³⁹

A *San Francisco Chronicle* article describes candidly how Briggs jumped on Anita Bryant’s bandwagon simply to bring attention to his gubernatorial campaign.

³⁷ Tony Ledwell, “Prop. 6 Vote to Mark Milestone in Homosexual Controversy” *Santa Ana Register*, 10/27/98, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

Also, Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 379.

³⁸ Jerry Burns, “Briggs Reveals He Has Secret Weapon,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4/20/78, 6, San Francisco Public Library.

³⁹ “Briggs Sees Himself as Hero or Chump,” *United Press*, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

Senator John Briggs ran his fingers lovingly through a stack of requests for radio and television interviews.

“They’re coming so fast I’ve had to have them take a number and wait,” he said, beaming. “Just because I went to help Anita.”

Briggs had been lusting for publicity to launch him from near obscurity in his campaign for next year’s Republican nomination for governor.

He got it when he went to Miami this month to join singer Anita Bryant’s successful campaign to repeal a gay rights ordinance there.⁴⁰

Briggs’ self-promoting motivation behind his anti-gay ballot initiative disgusted many people, especially LGBT people.⁴¹ Many LGBT people expressed their desire to fight the initiative to stop politicians such as Briggs from whipping up fear and bigotry toward LGBT people to advance their own personal careers.⁴² LGBT activists began referring to Proposition 6 as the “Briggs Initiative” to expose Briggs for exploiting the initiative to advance his own political career.

His self-serving careerism was so blatant that many media outlets and even leaders of his own Republican Party publicly criticized him for it. The following *San Francisco Chronicle/Examiner* article is full of blistering criticisms of Briggs not only from the newspaper but also directly from Republican leaders themselves.

Briggs’ candidacy is considered less a serious threat to other GOP aspirants than an opportunistic plunge into gubernatorial politics...

[He] has become a media creation, forcing even legislative colleagues to swallow hard to keep from smiling.

“He’s like a loose cannon rolling around on the deck,” said one Republican Senator...

In just a few weeks, Briggs has exploited two emotional but critical issues which have ignited spirited public discussion...

⁴⁰ Larry Liebert, “The Long Shot Who Would Be Governor,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6/18/77, 32, San Francisco Public Library.

⁴¹ Craig, Interview with Ramy Khalil.

⁴² Ibid.

“He is willing to say anything, do anything to force people to focus on an issue, whether or not what he says fits his political principles,” said Assemblyman Jerry Lewis, Republican-Highland...

When the gay rights episode erupted in Miami, he took time off from the Legislature to join Anita Bryant’s efforts to repeal the Dade County ordinance...

[Senator] Richardson termed Briggs’ foray into Florida a self-serving escapade designed to gain him front-page mention in newspapers and extended coverage on television.

“I hardly think he went to Florida to promote the issue,” Richardson said. “He went down to promote John Briggs.”

Assemblyman Dixon Arnett, Republican-Redwood City, has a more succinct description.

“His reputation around here is one of a gadfly”...

Assemblyman Gordon Duffy, a Republican from Hanford, has an even more concise contempt for Briggs’ candidacy. “I don’t think he should even be considered as a gubernatorial candidate.”

Lt. Gov. Mervyn Dymally, the Democratic president of the state Senate, was a little kinder. “John Briggs is like the mischievous kid on the block.”⁴³

It is rare for politicians to criticize another fellow Senator so viciously in front of the media, especially a Senator from their own political party. Such harsh political attacks in the full view of the media would normally run the risk of damaging the reputation of their party or undermining confidence in the political system. The Republican politicians must have believed that being associated with Senator Briggs would be more damaging to their political work than heaping so much criticism on him.

Another *San Francisco Chronicle* article, “The Long Shot Who Would Be Governor,” includes direct quotes from senior politicians expressing contempt for what they saw as Briggs’ self-serving opportunism and ignorance.

Few Capitol observers take the Republican from Fullerton seriously as a candidate for governor. One speculated that Briggs is building a reputation to challenge U.S. Senator (Alan) Cranston (Dem.-California) in 1980...

⁴³ Opatmy, “GOP Candidate John Briggs: Serious or Showing Off?” p. 6, section A.

There is no denying that Briggs is one of the legislators least liked by his colleagues.

“He can go to the jugular on any item that will bring him maximum media exposure...” said Senator Peter Behr (Rep.-Tiburon), a liberal.

“Anybody can get attention by dropping his pants. That’s how Briggs operates,” said Senator H. L. Richardson (Rep.-Arcadia), a conservative. “I don’t say things about legislation I’m abysmally ignorant of.”⁴⁴

It is abundantly evident from the multitude of these political attacks against Senator Briggs from his colleagues, including many politicians from his own party, that a wide political chasm existed between Briggs and the rest of his colleagues.

This hostility Briggs faced from the Republican Party leadership, however, did not stem solely from their belief that he was self-serving or ignorant (though these quotes clearly demonstrate that they did believe this to be the case). Their antagonism also stemmed from their political concerns that his views on homosexuality and other issues were too extreme and out of touch with the mainstream views of the electorate, thereby undermining the Republican Party’s base of support among the majority of voters. A *San Francisco Examiner* article, “John Briggs: The Loner on the Far Right,” has a direct quote from a Republican strategist who explains that Republican leaders felt that Briggs’ views were out of step with the voters, especially as California’s LGBT electorate was growing.

Besides generating outrage among homosexuals and liberals, each such utterance also causes all but the most conservative Republican Party leaders to wince. Even Davis, whose antipathy toward homosexuals is a matter of record, has attempted to put distance between himself and Briggs, refusing to endorse his initiative and taking a considerably softer line on gay rights than in years past.

Explains one state GOP strategist: “There is a feeling of pragmatism seeping through the Republican Party, a sense that if we don’t begin

⁴⁴ Liebert, “The Long Shot Who Would Be Governor,” 32.

expanding our constituency now, we're never going to do it. We will go the way of the pterodactyl. Briggs runs completely counter to that spirit."⁴⁵

The quote and article above help explain why a majority of the Senate voted against the bill Briggs introduced in the Senate on June 14, 1977 to ban LGBT teachers from public schools.⁴⁶ The Senators' majority vote against Briggs' bill suggests that a majority of the Republican politicians were probably worried that such a harsh attack on LGBT rights would narrow their electoral base, especially as the LGBT electorate was rapidly growing. In fact, Proposition 6 was so extreme that very few well known political organizations ended up endorsing it, two of which were the state Nazi party and the Ku Klux Klan.⁴⁷

John Briggs also infuriated party leaders by refusing to work with them in a collaborative fashion around the strategies that they believed to be more politically strategic.

Says one seasoned Republican observer: "Davis has carefully cultivated an image of responsibility and willingness to work with the party. Briggs is off the wall."

...Briggs' Republican colleagues in the Legislature describe him as a loner who keeps his own counsel and is rarely inclined to follow the party line.

The image is clearly one he enjoys, judging from the following paragraph from his own campaign brochure: "John is known as a tough fighter... One who refuses to go along with the club when it conflicts with his convictions. His colleagues often describe him as abrasive... a call-them-as-he-sees-'em, even if it hurts kind of guy."⁴⁸

After the Senate rejected his bill, Briggs irritated the Republican Party leadership once again by ignoring the will of his Senator colleagues and collecting signatures to put the initiative

⁴⁵ "John Briggs: The Loner on the Far Right," *San Francisco Examiner*, 2/27/78, 6, San Francisco Public Library.

⁴⁶ Senate Bill No. 1253, introduced by Senator John Briggs, 6/14/77, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁴⁷ *San Francisco Examiner*, 10/3/78, 7, San Francisco Public Library. Also, Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 292.

⁴⁸ "John Briggs: The Loner on the Far Right," *San Francisco Examiner*, 2/27/78, 6, San Francisco Public Library.

directly before the voters as a popular referendum.

Ironically, there are interesting parallels between John Briggs and Harvey Milk. Both were populists who appealed to ordinary people to challenge the political establishment—Briggs from the right and Milk from the left. Both figures played the lead role on their side in the drama that unfolded over the next year around Proposition 6. The major difference between the two, besides one being right-wing and the other being left-wing, is that Briggs admitted openly that he placed his initiatives on the ballot to boost his political career, whereas Milk’s political actions appear to have been primarily motivated by a genuine dedication to a greater cause.⁴⁹

The first factor, then, that contributed to the defeat of Proposition 6 was Briggs’ overreach—his off-putting self-serving motives but especially promoting an initiative that was too extreme for a majority of voters and probably beyond the bounds of the law. Briggs’ ballot initiative not only disturbed many people’s sense of fairness and their rights to privacy and freedom of speech, but his far-right politics and unilateral methods antagonized the political establishment as well, even those in his conservative Republican Party. Despite these political mistakes, there was still no guarantee whatsoever that Proposition 6 would be rejected by a majority of voters. Briggs collected 500,000 signatures—far more signatures than 312,404 signatures required—to qualify the initiative for the 1978 ballot. Supporters enthusiastically donated thousands of dollars to his campaign, and Briggs organized weekly media interviews and speeches to promote his initiative.⁵⁰ Moreover, opinion polls indicated for months that a majority of voters supported Proposition 6. The initiative certainly could

⁴⁹ Burns, “Briggs Reveals He Has Secret Weapon,” 6.

⁵⁰ Jerry Burns, “S.F. Protest Against Senator: Briggs Files Anti-gay Initiative,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, early May 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

have passed if the LGBT community, unions, and thousands of left-wing activists had not organized a massive grassroots campaign against it.

LGBT People Begin to Organize

The fact that Briggs announced his initiative on June 9, 1977 meant that LGBT and lesbians had almost a year and a half to overcome their initial fears of the rising New Right and come to grips with the reality that defeating Proposition 6 would require thousands of LGBT people to come out of the closet and organize a mass campaign against the initiative. As early as September 24, 1977, three organizations in Los Angeles—the Lesbian Feminists, Latinos Unidos, and Coalition for Human Rights—organized a conference where 148 activists established a statewide network between local groups to coordinate fundraising, outreach, education, and speak-outs.⁵¹ The minutes from this conference show how LGBT rights activists launched a mass campaign to educate all LGBT people about Proposition 6, even those who were not politically active, and to mobilize them to fight the initiative:

It was agreed that a major effort should be made to involve gay people who are not active in politics or organizations. Non-political people will attend benefits and a full scale P.R. effort must be made to make the Briggs issue important to all gay people.⁵²

⁵¹ Lesbian Feminists, Latinos Unidos, Coalition for Human Rights, “Call For Action,” 9/24/77, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵² Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Council, “Minutes and Reports of Statewide Conference on the Briggs Initiative,” 9/24/77, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

Three months later, LGBT rights activists organized another statewide conference that lasted for three days in Los Angeles from December 9-11, 1977 where activists debated and decided the next steps for their movement.⁵³

Briggs originally attempted to qualify his initiative for the June 1978 ballot, but as soon as he announced his intentions a year before in June 1977, LGBT rights groups began organizing a movement against it, including challenging it in court.⁵⁴ Briggs was eventually prevented from qualifying his initiative for the June 1978 ballot because he failed to include in the wording of the initiative the substantial financial and administrative costs and judicial hearings that would be required to enforce the initiative, information to which California voters were legally entitled.⁵⁵ This disqualified the 100,000 signatures that Briggs' organization, California Defend Our Children, had collected. Now they had to start all over again to raise money and collect another 100,000 valid signatures and ultimately 312,000 valid signatures to qualify the initiative for the November 1978 ballot instead of the June 1978 ballot.⁵⁶ This delay in qualifying the initiative for the ballot gave the left another five months to organize a movement against the initiative. As one flier from the Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative put it, "What we won is time. Time to organize. LET US BEGIN NOW!"⁵⁷

⁵³ BACABI invitation to "California Conference to Defeat the Briggs Initiative," Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵⁴ Rivaldo Pabich Associates, Pride Legal Defense Fund letter, 1977, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵⁵ "Anti-Gay Teacher Initiative Foiled by Typos," *Associated Press / San Francisco Chronicle*, 11/02/77, 11, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵⁶ Jerry Burns, "Political Showdown in the State: The Move to Ban Gay Teachers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 01/22/78, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁵⁷ "The Briggs Initiative IS ALIVE," flier by the Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

The Role of Politicians and the Media

The few historical narratives about Proposition 6 that exist acknowledge the role of the grassroots movement that activists built against the initiative, but many narratives often give established politicians or newspaper editorials most of the credit for defeating the initiative. For example, historian Craig Rimmerman argues the following.

David Mixner and Peter Scott, veteran gay political activists,... made perhaps one of the most important strategic decisions of the entire campaign when they visited Governor Ronald Reagan and asked him to oppose the Briggs amendment... When Reagan subsequently announced his opposition to the Briggs initiative, the campaign turned around almost overnight. California pollster Mervyn Field... was convinced that the changes in public opinion were due to the “increasing number of influential voices now being raised against the measure.” His statement is a clear reference to the impact of Reagan’s public opposition to the initiative.⁵⁸

Although Rimmerman acknowledges that “the lesbian and gay movements won endorsements from an array of unions... and the support of African American and Chicano leaders including Angela Davis and United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez,” he portrays Reagan and other established politicians as playing a central role in defeating the initiative.

Historians Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney argue that Reagan’s opposition to Proposition 6 “is what won the election.” He cites John Briggs and Ivy Bottini, the deputy campaign director against Proposition 6 for southern California, as agreeing that Reagan’s opposition was what turned public opinion against the initiative.⁵⁹

In one part of their book, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*, historians Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk credit LGBT people for organizing an effective opposition and defeating the initiative. However, another section of

⁵⁸ Rimmerman, *From Identity to Politics*, 130.

⁵⁹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 387-388.

their book claims that Proposition 6 “was defeated on November 7, 1978, after an arduous media campaign” as if the media was the central forum where the initiative was debated and defeated.⁶⁰ Similarly, historian Simon Hall tends to give equal credit to two factors—conservative politicians and gay rights activism:

A combination of robust gay rights activism and the opposition of prominent conservative politicians, most notably the former governor, Ronald Reagan, saw Briggs's ballot initiative, Proposition 6, go down to defeat by more than a million votes in the November 1978 election.⁶¹

There is no question that newspaper editorials and politicians, such as Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, played a certain role in helping defeat the initiative. As Gwenn Craig, a leading activist against Proposition 6, put it, “we knew it was a turning point when Reagan came out against Prop 6.”⁶² But the question is—which came first, the chicken or the egg? Did the work of grassroots activists shift public opinion against the initiative, making it politically safe for politicians to oppose it? Or did the politicians coming out against the initiative lead to the shift in public opinion? Clearly, the efforts of grassroots activists and politicians both contributed to defeating the initiative, but which group played the main role and led the effort that shifted public opinion?

Historical primary sources overwhelmingly suggest that the high profile politicians and major newspaper editorialists remained largely silent throughout the duration of the campaign and finally took a public stand only after grassroots activists had spent over a year systematically working to convince the public to oppose the Briggs initiative. Only after

⁶⁰ Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), 76.

⁶¹ Simon Hall, “The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (Austin: September 2010. Vol. 19, Iss. 3), 558.

⁶² Craig, Interview with Ramy Khalil.

politicians and newspaper editors noticed that public opinion was shifting against the Briggs Initiative—to the extent that it would no longer be a major political risk to come out against it—only then did most politicians and editorialists raise their voices against it. All the newspaper editorials opposing Proposition 6 that I could find were not published until September and October 1978, with the exception of one in May 1978 in the *Modesto Bee* and one in the *Los Angeles Times* on August 21, 1978. The Log Cabin Republicans, a gay Republican group that formed in the wake of Proposition 6 confirm this analysis, saying, “Many prominent politicians in the Republican and Democratic parties were hesitant about standing up to the bigotry of Briggs and his allies.”⁶³ Ronald Reagan made his objections public at first only in an informal statement to reporters late in September and again in a newspaper editorial in the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* on November 1, less than a week before the vote on November 7.⁶⁴ Similarly, Jimmy Carter came to California on November 3, only four days before Election Day, very late in the campaign season. However, he did not come to California to campaign against Proposition 6 but rather to provide a boost to Democratic Governor Jerry Brown’s reelection campaign. When Carter finished a speech stumping for Brown, a television microphone accidentally recorded Brown urging Carter to speak out against the initiative. “Proposition 6—you’ll get your loudest applause,” he said. “Ford and Reagan have both come out against it. So I think it’s completely safe now.” Carter returned to the microphone and added, “I also ask everybody to vote no on Proposition 6!”⁶⁵ Carter’s speaking out against Proposition 6 was merely an afterthought, intended primarily to boost the political position of Democrats like Jerry Brown and for Carter to “get

⁶³ Log Cabin Republicans website history link: www.logcabin.org/site/c.nsKSL7PMLpF/b.6417383/k.B012/Our_History.htm.

⁶⁴ Aaron Goldstein, “Reagan and Milk,” *American Spectator*, 2/26/09, <http://spectator.org/archives/2009/02/26/reagan-and-milk/print>.

⁶⁵ Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk*.

[his] loudest applause” once it was “completely safe” according to Brown. Carter also felt pressure from local LGBT rights activists like Harvey Milk who repeatedly urged him in public and in private to extend his “commitment to human rights” to LGBT people and speak out against Proposition 6. Historians have failed to acknowledge that LGBT activists formed a Carter NO on 6 Committee which chartered a bus and organized car pools to drive to the state capitol, Sacramento, that November 3 to meet Carter and urge him to take a stand against Proposition 6.⁶⁶ With the exception of Harvey Milk, Democratic Party politicians did not lead the struggle against Proposition 6. On the contrary, the people led, and the leaders followed.

Historians and news reporters may have mistakenly given most of the credit for the initiative’s defeat to these high profile politicians for a few reasons. It must be partly because the initiative began to slump in opinion polls around the same time that many newspaper editorials and politicians came out against the initiative. However, simply because two phenomena take place at the same time does not automatically mean that one phenomenon caused the other. Another reason may be that most people are taught their whole lives, often by the media and institutions funded or influenced by wealthy individuals and corporations, to see elites as the primary agents of historical change rather than working-class people and subordinate groups. Indeed, the corporate-owned media themselves contributed to this narrative by consistently crediting high profile politicians and their own media outlets for the initiative’s defeat. Here is one typical article from the *San Francisco Chronicle* from October, 5 1978.

⁶⁶ Carter NO on 6 Committee flier, 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

The public's change of direction on Proposition 6 appears to be due to the increasing number of influential voices now being raised against the measure. Many prominent state office holders, candidates, and editorialists on the state's major newspapers, TV and radio stations have come out with strong cautionary voices or outright opposition on Proposition 6.⁶⁷

However, many LGBT rights activists disagreed with the media's narrative, as this account explains:

The only explanation the media could find for the upset vote was the opposition by conservative leaders like Ronald Reagan, Hayakawa and Jarvis, as well as President Carter. But such endorsements came only at the eleventh hour and were pragmatic... Reagan's cautiously worded proposition was that there were already sufficient laws on the books to handle the problem. By election time a stand against Briggs was almost mandatory for politicians looking toward 1980, [the next major election].

Here was the explanation for the defeat of the Briggs Initiative that the media could not see—a massive mobilization by those who felt directly threatened. The results of this activism were concrete: in the end virtually every public figure, every newspaper, most trade unions, community groups, political and educational bodies had been lobbied to take a stand. Most passed a No on 6 endorsement on to their constituencies.⁶⁸

A final reason why historians may have credited established politicians for defeating the initiative is that many people and news reporters may have respected politicians for speaking out against the initiative, particularly because it may have appeared on the surface that these politicians were putting their political careers at risk. In 1978, for example, Reagan was preparing to run for President in the 1980 election, a campaign where he would need the backing of conservatives and moderates who felt uncomfortable with LGBT teachers. As the Log Cabin Republicans put it, Reagan's "advisors all thought he was committing political

⁶⁷ Mervin D. Field, "A Major Shift to 'No' on Prop. 6," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10/5/78, 8, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁶⁸ Michael Ward and Mark Freeman, "Defending Gay Rights: The Campaign against the Briggs Initiative in California," *Radical America*, Vol. 13, no. 4 July-August 1979, 30.

suicide when he decided to be an outspoken foe of the Briggs Initiative.”⁶⁹ Reagan biographer Lou Cannon agrees, writing that Reagan was “well aware that there were those who wanted him to duck the issue [but nevertheless] chose to state his convictions.”⁷⁰ While Reagan clearly helped defeat the initiative by opposing it in late September, many news reporters and historians such as Cannon fail to give full credit to the activists from the LGBT, labor, and feminist movements who spent over a year before September working to systematically convince voters to oppose the initiative. It was these activists’ efforts that created the environment where there was very little cost, if any, to Reagan and other politicians for coming out against the initiative, a key point which Cannon and others fail to recognize.

Mass Protests

The grassroots activist movement that developed against Proposition 6 did not begin when Senator Briggs filed the petitions to place his initiative on the ballot. In reality, the movement began a year earlier in reaction to the growing right-wing movement which scored a major victory on June 7, 1977 when Dade County voters repealed their gay rights ordinance. This growing right-wing movement had developed as a backlash in response to the accomplishments of the left-wing movements of the 1960s and the gay liberation movement. However, this New Right conservative movement provoked its own left-wing backlash. When the outcome of the Dade County election was reported on the news,

⁶⁹ Log Cabin Republicans website history link: www.logcabin.org/site/c.nsKSL7PMLpF/b.6417383/k.B012/Our_History.htm.

⁷⁰ Dale Carpenter, “Reagan and Gays: A Reassessment” *Bay Area Reporter*, 6/10/04, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

spontaneous street protests immediately erupted with a fury in New York City, Los Angeles, Houston, Boston, Indianapolis, Denver, and New Orleans.⁷¹ But nowhere were the protests as large as in San Francisco. A protest that began with 200 people in San Francisco swelled to approximately 5,000 as the protesters repeatedly shouted “Two! Four! Six! Eight! Gay is just as good as straight!”⁷² Shocked by this unexpected outburst of anger which they could not control, the San Francisco police called on the one person they hoped could prevent a riot—Harvey Milk. Milk led a five-mile march through San Francisco, attempting to keep the angry crowd continuously moving to prevent them from throwing rocks at any buildings. The protest finally ended when 1,000 people simply sat down in the middle of a major street intersection to demonstrate their rage. Similar spontaneous marches of a few thousand people took place the next five days consecutively in San Francisco, including another street blockade sit-in—a testament to the growing LGBT community’s anger and determination to win equal rights.⁷³

As Anita Bryant pledged to place initiatives on the ballot in more states, hundreds of LGBT people who had never been involved in politics now felt compelled to get politically active to resist the right wing’s growing efforts to roll back their rights.⁷⁴ Three weeks after the Dade County election, an unprecedented 200,000 people poured onto the streets of the Castro District to attend the June 26, 1977 Gay Freedom Day Parade, the largest mass assembly in San Francisco in nearly a decade.⁷⁵ The size and political intensity of the Gay Freedom Parade were heightened by not only the Dade County vote but also by two other recent events. A gay deputy sheriff had recently committed suicide when his sexual identity

⁷¹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 310. Also, Aretha, *No Compromise*, 61.

⁷² Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 336.

⁷³ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 189-190.

⁷⁴ Craig, Interview with Ramy Khalil. Also Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 346-347.

⁷⁵ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 319, 346. Also, Aretha, *No Compromise*, 63.

had been discovered. Four days before the Gay Freedom Parade, a gay man had been stabbed to death 15 times by a group of four men shouting “Faggot! Faggot! Faggot!” and “This one’s for Anita!”⁷⁶ The turnout at the 1977 Gay Freedom Parade was massive, almost as large as the historic 1963 March on Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I have a dream” speech to an estimated 250,000 people.

There was a sustained series of LGBT rights marches in San Francisco and enormous Gay Pride Parades between 1977 and 1979. These street protests and parades were essential to building a movement that ultimately defeated Proposition 6 in 1978. As the date when St. Paul citizens would vote on whether to repeal the city gay rights ordinance approached on April 25, 1978, Cleve Jones, a Milk campaign intern, decided “Now is the time for us to get our army together.”⁷⁷ Jones and his friends spent the days running up to April 25th organizing a march to protest the outcome of the election. When the news spread that voters in St. Paul repealed the gay rights ordinance by a margin of two to one, anger in the San Francisco LGBT community reached a boiling point.⁷⁸ Cleve Jones and his friends’ call to protest struck a chord. Hundreds of angry people joined the march as it passed by gay bars, swelling the size of the march to at least 2,000 people, more than Jones or the police had expected. Jones was impressed by the size and militancy of the protest, leading him to conclude that the LGBT community needed to get better organized politically.⁷⁹

Left-wing anger at the St. Paul vote intensified when Senator Briggs stood on the steps of San Francisco’s City Hall a week later to announce his ballot initiative. This brought the threat of the growing New Right directly to the populous state of California—a major

⁷⁶ Stryker and Van Buskirk. *Gay by the Bay*, 76. Also, Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 319. Also, Aretha, *No Compromise*, 62-63.

⁷⁷ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 252.

⁷⁸ Rutledge, *The Gay Decades*, 122.

⁷⁹ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 257.

threat to LGBT people in California and the entire country. When Briggs filed the paper work, he was immediately confronted with at least 40 protesters chanting, “John Briggs, you can’t hide. We charge you with genocide!”⁸⁰

Only a week later, on May 9, 1978, Wichita, Kansas voters repealed their gay rights ordinance by a stunning five to one margin!⁸¹ In response, another mass protest of 1,000 people erupted in San Francisco. However, given that five out of six of people in Wichita, Kansas had voted against the gay rights ordinance, the fury was far more intense this time. The crowd did not chant polite slogans like “Gay is just as good as straight” as they had before. They shouted “Civil Rights or Civil War!” over and over again as Cleve Jones lost control of the unruly rally.⁸² Only two weeks later, on May 23, 1978, Eugene, Oregon voters repealed their gay rights ordinance by a almost a two to one margin.⁸³ Once again, thousands took to the streets of San Francisco to demonstrate their fury.⁸⁴

These protests against the results of each referendum across the country were not the only protests organized during the campaign against Proposition 6. The Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative began organizing a series of protests, beginning with a speak-out in San Francisco on March 17 followed by a rally on May 12, 1978 with approximately over 500 people participating in each of them.⁸⁵ Protests also took place in Berkeley on June 17 and in Los Angeles on July 2, 1978.⁸⁶ But the size of these rallies paled in comparison to the Gay Freedom Parade in San Francisco on June 25, 1978. It is estimated

⁸⁰ Burns, “S.F. Protest Against Senator: Briggs Files Anti-gay Initiative.”

⁸¹ Rutledge, *The Gay Decades*, 122-123.

⁸² Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 258.

⁸³ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 436.

⁸⁴ Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 260.

⁸⁵ Paula Lichtenberg and Michael Mank, co-chairs of BACABI, letters from 3/08/78 and late May 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁸⁶ Berkeley Militant Forum flier “Calif. Briggs Initiative: Challenge to Gay Rights,” June 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

that a staggering 350,000 people attended the parade, the largest assembly of people during the entire 1970s in San Francisco and possibly the nation, almost twice as many as the 200,000 people who attended the Gay Freedom Parade the year before.⁸⁷ The 1978 Gay Freedom Parade was a massive show of force by the LGBT community against Proposition 6. The keynote speaker at City Hall, Harvey Milk, delivered one of his most militant speeches to the huge crowd. He not only responded to Bryant and Briggs' attacks on LGBT people but also sharply criticized President Jimmy Carter's hypocritical rhetoric about "human rights" which never included "gay rights." Here is a transcript of an excerpt from Milk's speech notes.

JIMMY CARTER: YOU TALKED ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS A LOT... IN FACT, YOU WANT TO BE THE WORLD'S LEADER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS. WELL, DAMN IT, LEAD!!! THERE ARE SOME 15 TO 20 MILLION LESBIANS AND GAY MEN IN THIS NATION LISTENING AND LISTENING VERY CAREFULLY.

JIMMY CARTER: WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO TALK ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS?

JIMMY CARTER: YOU HAVE THE CHOICE:
HOW MANY MORE YEARS?
HOW MUCH MORE DAMAGE?
HOW MUCH MORE VIOLENCE?
HOW MANY MORE LIVES?⁸⁸

Milk used the momentous occasion to add his voice to the growing call for a national march on Washington of LGBT people on the 4th of July the following year, which ended up taking place and becoming the first national LGBT rights march in U.S. history. It is estimated to have attracted somewhere between 75,000 and 125,000 LGBT people and supporters.

However, the Gay Freedom Parade in San Francisco the year before attracted approximately

⁸⁷ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 381.

⁸⁸ Harvey Milk speech at Gay Freedom Parade, 6/25/78 transcribed in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 437-438.

three times as many people as the national march in Washington, DC.⁸⁹ Indeed, the 1978 Gay Freedom Parade was the pinnacle event in LGBT emergence in San Francisco. The San Francisco LGBT movement correctly saw itself as the vanguard of a burgeoning national movement, and Milk was its symbol. A central theme in Milk's speech, echoed by picket signs carried in the march, was a call to come out of the closet and fight Proposition 6.

All these protests united and mobilized thousands of ordinary people, demonstrated popular opposition to Proposition 6, attracted media coverage for the LGBT rights point of view, and provided a forum where activists and volunteers could network with each other.⁹⁰ Yet the size and significance of these demonstrations are often underemphasized by certain historians even though many of the demonstrations, especially the enormous Gay Freedom Parades in 1977 and 1978, are clear evidence of an early sustained campaign that mobilized tens of thousands of people against Proposition 6.

BACABI sponsored one final rally on November 4 at the San Francisco Civic Center that was endorsed by at least 30 LGBT, labor, civil rights, and political organizations. At least 6 politicians (including Harvey Milk) spoke at the rally, urging people to vote against Proposition 6.⁹¹ However, with the exception of Harvey Milk and two San Francisco politicians, most politicians' public speeches against Proposition 6 came very late in the campaign, only three days before Election Day, after public opinion had shifted against the initiative and it was politically safe to speak out against the initiative. None of the fliers publicizing rallies earlier in the campaign list any politicians speaking at them.⁹² As LGBT

⁸⁹ Amin Ghaziani, *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁹⁰ Lichtenberg and Mank, letters from 3/08/78 and late May 1978.

⁹¹ BACABI, Human Justice Rally NO on 6 flier, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁹² Rally fliers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco. Also, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

rights journalists Diane Ehrensaft and Ruth Milkman explained, “neither [the Republican nor Democratic] Party made any real effort to mobilize people against Proposition 6.”⁹³ A resolution to vote on whether to oppose Proposition 6 was not even presented to the California Democratic Party Executive Board until August 4, 1978, quite late in the campaign.⁹⁴ The only exception of Democratic Party organizations campaigning against the initiative early on were the Gay Caucus of the Democratic Party Council and the LGBT clubs of the Democratic Party.⁹⁵ Of course, these rank-and-file LGBT Democratic organizations campaigned against the initiative early on; the entire purpose of these groups within the party was to push for LGBT rights. The leadership of the party as a whole, however, refrained from publicly speaking out early against the initiative or mobilizing their party membership or supporters until late in the campaign once it was politically safe.

Only “No on 6” brochures published late in 1978 have quotes or endorsements from politicians or media outlets. The fliers from most the duration of the campaign have endorsements only from LGBT, labor, feminist, and civil libertarian organizations, not politicians or media outlets. Almost all the quotes and endorsements from politicians are from articles published in September only two months before Election Day, after activists had spent a year working to convince almost half the public to oppose the initiative.

After scouring hundreds of primary source documents, the only evidence I could find of the few politicians who opposed the initiative earlier than September 1978 mostly represented the San Francisco district where the LGBT electorate was growing extremely

⁹³ Ehrensaft and Milkman, “Interview with Amber Hollibaugh,” 3.

⁹⁴ Resolution presented to the California Democratic Party Executive Board by the Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Party, 8/04/78, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

⁹⁵ Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Council, “A Call to Conference: The Briggs Initiative Upon Us!” 9/1/77, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

rapidly. The politicians representing San Francisco who opposed Proposition 6 before September 1978 were U.S. House Representative Burton, Speaker of the Assembly McCarthy, Assemblyman Agnos, Assemblyman Brown, Jr., State Senators Marks and Foran, San Francisco Mayor Moscone, San Francisco Supervisors Silver and Milk, and San Francisco Commissioner Phyllis Lyon. These San Francisco politicians had already established a practice of supporting some of the demands of the growing LGBT community well before 1978 because they often relied on the growing LGBT vote to get elected and re-elected.

One of the three politicians who opposed Proposition 6 well before September 1978 who represented a district other than San Francisco was Lieutenant General Mervyn Dymally. However, he was from Los Angeles where there also was a growing LGBT electorate. In fact, opinion polls showed opposition to Proposition 6 was strongest in the two largest urban cities of California—San Francisco and Los Angeles.⁹⁶ Dymally was an immigrant from Trinidad and one of the first two blacks elected to a statewide office in any state since Reconstruction. Given his own background, he developed sympathies with oppressed minorities, as demonstrated by the following quote where he draws connections between the oppression of different minorities.⁹⁷ “The persons most vocal in opposing gay rights are the same who charge reverse discrimination... the same who protect their economic interests while ignoring the outrageous unemployment of minorities.”⁹⁸

One of the only other politicians who opposed Proposition 6 well before September 1978 who did not represent the sole district of San Francisco was Democratic Governor Jerry

⁹⁶ Field, “A Major Shift to ‘No’ on Prop. 6,” 8.

⁹⁷ “George L. Brown, “First Black to Hold Statewide Office in U.S.,” *Los Angeles Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/apr/05/local/me-passings5.1>, 4/05/06.

⁹⁸ Ward and Freeman, “Defending Gay Rights,” 28.

Brown. As governor, Brown represented the two large cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles where there was a growing LGBT electorate, but he also represented the smaller towns and rural regions of California that generally supported Proposition 6. Brown was one of the California politicians with the highest profile in the Democratic Party, a party which relies on the votes of liberal constituents. Governor Brown opposed Proposition 6 earlier than most politicians, but according to a number of sources, he avoided making his stance very public.

Briggs is causing political discomfort as well... to Jerry Brown, whose big fear, in the words of one top Brown aide, is of “faggot pieces” about him appearing in the press. So, although Brown has come out in opposition to the initiative, gay leaders expect less-than-fervent support from him toward the cause. “He’s definitely one of the people shying away from it,” says a legislative source. “He’s worried about being gay-baited.”⁹⁹

So Governor Brown stated his opposition to the initiative earlier than most politicians, under pressure from the growing LGBT electorate, but he failed to make his opposition very public. It is clear from primary sources that he certainly did not play a leadership role in the campaign against Proposition 6 in the same way that, for example, Harvey Milk did.¹⁰⁰

Given that such an extreme far-right, legally questionable initiative was placed on the ballot by Briggs, who himself was regarded as too extreme by the political establishment, it seems inevitable that at least this handful of politicians, mostly from San Francisco, would oppose the initiative early on. The fact that most the politicians in the entire state that I could find who opposed the initiative before September 1978 all represented the San Francisco or Los Angeles districts strongly suggests that most politicians did not play a leadership role in

⁹⁹ Paul Grabowicz, “California’s Latest Right-Wing Spasm: The Anti-Gay Briggs Amendment,” *New Times*, 7/24/78, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁰⁰ Jerry Burns, “Brown’s Vow on Briggs Initiative,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6/15/78, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

the campaign against Proposition 6. On the contrary, it appears to reflect a politically calculated decision by these politicians to maintain support among their electoral base, whereas most politicians outside San Francisco and Los Angeles failed to take a public stance against the initiative early on.

Grassroots Organizing

The street demonstrations discussed previously were only one visible expression of a massive grassroots campaign built by hundreds of LGBT people, workers, women, and people of color—a campaign that developed a sophisticated degree of organization. In addition to protests, activists spent over a year organizing a whole host of events and activities to fight Proposition 6. These included a boycott, conferences, coalitions, speakers' bureaus, televised debates, media outreach, concerts, voter registration drives, canvassing, literature tables, and fundraisers.

One early tactic that helped build the movement was the national boycott of Florida orange juice launched by the gay liberation movement. Since Anita Bryant was famous for her star role singing in Florida orange juice commercials, gay liberation activists launched a national boycott against Florida orange juice companies. The LGBT community across the country solidly backed the boycott. The boycott stimulated political discussion about the New Right movement among thousands of gay bar customers and workers who normally did not pay much attention to politics. Now they took pride in the fact that Florida orange juice could no longer be found in gay bars or businesses across the country. The political discussions around the national boycott that began in 1977 played a valuable initial role in

preparing the California LGBT community politically for the fight they would face against Proposition 6 the next year.

One organization at the forefront of the grassroots movement was BACABI—the Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative. BACABI was formed in October 1977 in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it networked with organizations and individuals across the state. BACABI opened an office, sponsored protests, and organized a very visible presence against Proposition 6 in the massive 1978 Gay Freedom Parade. BACABI developed an extensive organizational structure of 22 committees with two co-chairs for each committee and 9 coordinators, totaling approximately 53 activists.¹⁰¹ Each committee developed different fliers, newsletters, media ads, and speakers’ bureaus to build support among a different constituency—organized labor, feminists, “Third World People” (as people of color were called by the left at the time), religious groups, the media, and business groups. They secured endorsements from approximately a hundred organizations and prominent individuals. They participated in the statewide conference in December 1977 and sponsored a northern California Conference against the Briggs Initiative on May 13, 1978 in coordination with a conference that took place in southern California in Los Angeles on the same day.

The coalitions that BACABI, the Milk campaign, and other groups built played an essential role in shifting public opinion against Proposition 6. By the end of the campaign, some 15 coalitions against the initiative had been built throughout the state.¹⁰² One partner in these coalitions that played an absolutely decisive role was organized labor. Before Senator Briggs filed petitions to place his initiative on the ballot, the unions had already built

¹⁰¹ BACABI committee structure diagram, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁰² Ledwell, “Prop. 6 Vote to Mark Milestone in Homosexual Controversy.”

extensive networks of activists, an apparatus of offices, full-time organizers, large bank accounts, and a certain degree of authority in the eyes of thousands of workers. Many union leaders and members, particularly in public schools, felt directly threatened by Proposition 6's attack on workers' rights, and they mobilized their powerful apparatus and millions of members to campaign against the initiative. Both teacher union federations, the California Federation of Teachers as well as the California Teachers Association, campaigned more vigorously against Proposition 6 than other unions since they were most directly threatened by it. The California Teachers Association came out very early against the initiative, on October 2, 1977, an entire year before most politicians and major media outlets started speaking out against it. But it was not just teachers' unions that opposed the initiative. Over 1,000 statewide and local unions campaigned against the initiative under the slogan "An Injury to One is an Injury to All."¹⁰³ Both white-collar unions such as faculty unions and blue-collar unions such as Teamsters and construction trade unions joined the campaign.

The trust and collaborative working relationship that Milk, Bay Area Gay Liberation, and other LGBT activists had built with unions through the Coors boycott and other labor struggles now began to pay off in the fight against Proposition 6. The minutes of the September 1977 statewide conference against the Briggs Initiative noted that the LGBT community "already [had] a good relationship with many unions in some areas due to [the LGBT community's] support for the Coors and Gallo boycotts, [United Farm Worker] marches, support to various strikes, etc."¹⁰⁴ The BACABI Labor Committee organized a labor contingent in the Gay Freedom Day Parade and worked to have union leaders speak at

¹⁰³ Memorandum from the President and Vice President of the California Teachers Association, 7/24/78, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁰⁴ Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Council, "Minutes and Reports of Statewide Conference on the Briggs Initiative," Appendix D.

every single rally against Proposition 6 to draw more workers and unions into the movement. Left-wing and labor groups also organized a successful “Statewide Workers Conference against Briggs/Prop 6 for Straight, Gay, Organized and Unorganized Workers.”¹⁰⁵

All these labor groups focused on educating workers about how Proposition 6 threatened their job security and rights as workers, exemplified by the following editorial in the official publication of the San Francisco Federation of Teachers, published in April 1978, well before most politicians and major media outlets came out against Proposition 6.

The initiative... would require school districts to automatically fire any teacher who engages in homosexual conduct. That in itself is bad enough. But it could also very well trigger other repressive measures that could eliminate tenure for teachers, limit their political activity, and abolish collective bargaining... If it does go before voters, all teachers must mobilize to defeat it.¹⁰⁶

Another labor flier explains how Proposition 6 threatened not only LGBT school employees but any school employee.

[Proposition 6] threatens the job of any employee... who publicly or privately opposed discrimination against homosexuals... The Briggs measure gives school boards an excuse to start a witch hunt against any employee they want to harass or fire... If passed, the initiative will pave the way for the firing of workers by other employers based on **any** differences in life styles or political views.¹⁰⁷

As this flier suggests, unions that represented workers outside the public schools probably felt threatened by the precedent that Proposition 6 would set, which would embolden

¹⁰⁵ Flier for “Statewide Workers Conference against Briggs/Prop. 6,” Sept. 9-10, 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco. Also, Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹⁰⁶ Editorial, “Briggs Plan Threatens All,” *San Francisco Teacher*, official publication of the San Francisco Federation of Teachers, April 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁰⁷ BACBI Labor flier, 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

employers outside public schools to curtail employees' rights. Given the shift in public opinion that took place against the initiative, all these efforts by labor groups must have had at least some impact on convincing LGBT and straight workers that Proposition 6 threatened their interests.

Besides LGBT organizations and labor unions, feminist organizations were the third main group that played a decisive role in the campaign, although most historical narratives about Proposition 6 barely mention their role. Feminists recognized that Proposition 6 and the New Right movement were scapegoating not only LGBT people but women as well. Here is just one example of a feminist flier that drew these connections.

The Briggs Initiative poses a special threat to women... Any teacher who is a feminist or living outside the traditional family unit, i.e., divorced women, single mothers, women living alone or with other women, could be viewed as "abnormal" and become suspect. Briggs himself has tried to discredit the National Organization for Women by calling it "90% lesbian."

Our enemies understand the deep links between the fight for women's equality and the fight for gay rights. The forces behind the Briggs Initiative are also seeking to block ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and to deprive women of their hard-won right to choose abortion.

The label "lesbian" has been used too long to divide women and cloud over the real issues that confront us. No woman can be free until the stigma and discrimination that gay people suffer is eliminated.¹⁰⁸

The flier does a good job of explaining how Proposition 6 was a threat not just to LGBT people but also women's freedom to be able to live outside the traditional family unit if they so chose. Some women's organizations that endorsed the No on 6 campaign include the National Organization of Women, California League of Women Voters, Coalition of Labor Union Women, Black Women's Political Caucus, San Francisco Women's Centers, Women

¹⁰⁸ BACABI flier, "Women! March and Rally to Defeat the Briggs Initiative, June 25," Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

in Politics, and Women Library Workers San Francisco chapter.¹⁰⁹ The Lesbian School Workers developed a slide show presentation and printed fliers to campaign against the Proposition 6.¹¹⁰ Most the members of the powerful teachers unions who played a leadership role in the campaign against the initiative were women, since most public school teachers were women. One example of women organizing against Proposition 6 was the fundraiser organized by Gayle Wilson, a real estate broker, at the famous Beverly Hilton Hotel. 256 people, practically all women, came to hear Midge Costanza speak out against Proposition 6 only weeks after Costanza had quit her job at the White House as Assistant to the President for Public Liaison.¹¹¹ Two activists described the leading role that feminist organizations played in the campaign even though most historical narratives fail to mention their role.

During the course of the campaign the press largely ignored the massive grassroots response to Proposition 6, especially the overwhelming participation by the women's community. In towns all over California the most likely place to contact anti-Proposition 6 activists was at the local women's center. The network built over the years by the feminist movement was one of the campaign's major resources. Women were responsible for initiating and organizing mixed groups in city after city, and they were in leadership in nearly all grassroots efforts.¹¹²

LGBT and feminist activists believed that one of the assumptions underlying John Briggs' argument that gay school teachers molest children was that gay men, not lesbians, were predatory pedophiles.¹¹³ LGBT activists responded by repeatedly pointing out that studies by the FBI, the National Council on Family Relations, and the Santa Clara County

¹⁰⁹ Speaker's Manual, Concerned Voters of California / No on 6, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

¹¹⁰ Lesbian School Workers fliers, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco. Also, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

¹¹¹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 384.

¹¹² Ward and Freeman, "Defending Gay Rights," 26.

¹¹³ Harvey Milk, "That's What America Is" speech, delivered at Gay Freedom Day Parade in San Francisco, 6/25/78, transcribed in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 436.

Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Center had found that gay men were no more likely to molest children than straight men.¹¹⁴ They also developed a very conscious strategy of raising the profile of women, especially lesbians, in their campaign in order to challenge the image of gay male molesters that they believed Briggs was trying to conjure up in people's minds. Activists made a systematic effort to ensure that press conferences, media interviews, rallies, and public speaking appearances almost always included an equal number of "co-sexual" speakers, as they called it, i.e. an equal number of male and female speakers.¹¹⁵ They made a similar effort to have speakers at public speaking appearances representing different races as well. Early on in the campaign, the September 1977 statewide conference on the Briggs Initiative passed the following resolution.

In order to counter the incorrect assumption that all gay people are white and male, all organizations which claim to represent the entire gay community shall have co-sexual leadership and co-sexual representation to the public-at-large, and, in addition, strong consideration will be given to third world people.¹¹⁶

When Briggs accepted Milk's challenge to participate in public debates, for example, lesbian feminist activist Sally Gearhart, a speech professor at San Francisco State University, often participated in the panel forums alongside Milk. Gay male sexism and identity politics had contributed to years of hostility and divisions between the gay and lesbian movements which often kept them from working together in the late 1960s and 1970s. However, in 1977 and 1978 many gays and lesbians recognized the mutual threat they both faced by Proposition 6 and found ways to pull together and

¹¹⁴ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 80.

¹¹⁵ Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹¹⁶ Resolution from the public education committee, Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Council, "Minutes and Reports of Statewide Conference on the Briggs Initiative," Appendix D.

work toward a common purpose. They often worked in co-sexual (male and female) organizations where efforts were made to ensure that women played an equal leadership role with men, or sometimes feminists chose to work in their own separate organizations such as the Lesbian School Workers organization. Whether in co-sexual organizations with men or in separate organizations for women only, women, feminists, and lesbians all played a key leadership role in helping defeat Proposition 6.

Anti-racist, left-wing LGBT activists made similar systematic efforts to involve people of color in the struggle against Proposition 6. The network that formed out of the statewide September 1977 meeting sponsored by the California Committee Against the Briggs Initiative was committed to the following principles, the first of which prioritized leadership roles for people of color and women in the campaign:

1. Black, Latina, and other minority and women's visibility
2. Co-sexual leadership and participation
3. Being democratic and built from the grass-roots
4. Building a broad-based coalition of gay and non-gay individuals and organizations
5. Taking on a national focus¹¹⁷

Many LGBT activists of color believed that a major reason why the Dade County campaign resulted in a defeat was that the upper-middle class white gays leading the campaign made little effort to reach out to people of color. To avoid a repeat of the failed strategy used in Miami, Dade County, Lesbian and Gay Action formed a Third World Caucus to mobilize people of color against Proposition 6. One of their fliers stated, "We do not want to see a

¹¹⁷ BACABI newsletter, November 1977, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

repeat of the Miami campaign where white gay men totally dominated the leadership and the media and a majority of voters in Third World neighborhoods voted against gay rights.”¹¹⁸ Fliers were also translated into Spanish to educate Latino immigrants about how Proposition 6 threatened their interests as a racial minority.¹¹⁹ LGBT activists succeeded in convincing Cesar Chavez, the President of the United Farm Workers, and Angela Davis, two of the most respected leaders of the Latino and African American communities, to speak out against the initiative.¹²⁰ The work gay liberation activists had done in the past to support the United Farm Workers grape boycott and consistently attend weekly demonstrations in solidarity with the struggles of oppressed people in Latin America was now paying off.¹²¹ San Franciscans Against Proposition 6 arranged for their campaign co-coordinator Gwenn Craig (an African American lesbian) to go speak about Proposition 6 to black church congregations.¹²² Through efforts like these BACABI/NO on 6 secured endorsements from a variety of individuals and organizations representing communities of color—the Mexican American Political Association, the northern region of the Council for Latin American Advancement, the editor of *The Black Scholar*, Lee Brightman of the United Native Americans, Jose Roblas (the Filipino Community Liaison for the Human Rights Commission), the Gay American Indians, the East Bay Gay Asian Association, and Ida Strickland (Director of the Third World Fund).¹²³ At the final San Francisco rally on November 4 before the vote took place, organizers made sure the program of speakers included the statewide president of the Mexican American Political Association and a

¹¹⁸ Lesbian and Gay Action Third World Caucus Flier, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹¹⁹ NO on 6 fliers in Spanish, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹²⁰ Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 113.

¹²¹ Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹²² Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹²³ BACABI endorsements flier, 1978, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

representative of the Latin American Teachers Association.¹²⁴ According to two gay liberation activists, the election returns for Proposition 6 suggested that efforts by LGBT groups that campaigned in communities of color paid off.

Vote-counting expediency, as well as racist attitudes in the gay community held over from the Miami campaign, led the professionally-oriented No on 6 efforts to discount non-white population blocks. The assumption that people of color are more anti-gay than whites was shattered by the election returns, however, which showed that percentages of those opposed to 6 were at least as high among Spanish-surnamed and Black voters as among whites.¹²⁵

LGBT activists also made a serious effort to open up a dialogue with as many people as they could who had never met an openly gay person before to educate them about homosexuality. The September 1977 Statewide Conference against the Briggs Initiative discussed the following resolution: “We encourage groups to go into unorganized areas for educating the general public and in addition not to neglect groups that are traditionally against us.”¹²⁶ Activists took their campaign into small, rural towns to reach out and speak with the typically more conservative, homophobic populations. The San Francisco-based California Outreach Group focused on traveling to rural communities to speak at church gatherings and on conservative radio talk shows. “We did a lot of speaking in places like that as out-dykes...” explained Amber Hollibaugh, one of the California Outreach Group organizers. “We selected places we thought were crucial because we never get to them.”¹²⁷ Since the LGBT community concentrated in San Francisco could not reach all the rural towns of California, they developed a very conscious strategy of harnessing the time and

¹²⁴ BACABI, Human Justice Rally NO on 6 flier, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹²⁵ Ward and Freeman, “Defending Gay Rights,” 28.

¹²⁶ Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Council, Minutes and Reports of Statewide Conference on the Briggs Initiative.”

¹²⁷ Ehrensaft and Milkman, “Interview with Amber Hollibaugh,” 6.

energy of the relatively large LGBT community of San Francisco to go out and campaign among the heterosexual community. When I asked San Franciscans Against Proposition 6 Co-coordinator Gwenn Craig why the campaign against Proposition 6 succeeded, she presented their systematic outreach strategy as a key factor.

We got an enormous amount of volunteers for the No on 6 campaign. And we got people to canvass. Canvassing is when they actually go and knock on a door and talk to someone. Now usually on campaigns, particularly today, you can get people to go and leave a piece of literature on the doorstep, and maybe they encounter someone and they'll talk to them briefly. But we got people to knock on doors and get people to actually engage, to engage in conversation. That was unheard of. I mean the machinery in this town was amazed. And we didn't just do that in some precincts. Every precinct that could be walked, we did walk, unless it was totally apartment buildings where you couldn't get passed the security gate. We got every precinct. Nobody had ever heard of that.¹²⁸

With the same intention of bringing the debate around Proposition 6 into the homes of tens of thousands of Californians who were not well informed about homosexuality, Harvey Milk challenged John Briggs to a debate at any location of Briggs' choosing—even in Briggs' own conservative Orange County. Briggs took Milk up on this challenge, and the debates were often televised, sometimes on national television. The televised debates thrust Milk into the spotlight, and he came to be seen as the foremost spokesperson for the LGBT rights movement and the campaign against Proposition 6. Videos, transcripts, and reports of the debates show Milk passionately and articulately countering Briggs' arguments while Briggs comes off as arrogant, clumsy, and lacking evidence for his claim that gay people molest children.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹²⁹ Aretha, *No Compromise*, 77-80.

Voter outreach and registration were also key components of the campaign. According to San Franciscans Against Proposition 6, in the month of June 1978 alone, LGBT groups registered over 12,000 new voters. Registering over 12,000 people in one month is a clear indicator of the grassroots campaign's large size and high degree of organization.¹³⁰

Activists also brought to California respected well known individuals from around the country to speak out against the proposition and organize fundraisers. In June 1978, for example, activists sold out of tickets to a benefit concert they organized in Santa Monica city with musicians with a national following such as Joan Baez, Harry Chapin, Holly Near, and Peter Yarrow and raised \$25,000 to fight Proposition 6.¹³¹ A fundraiser with popular Hollywood actors and actresses attracted a large audience of 1,300 people in October 1978 and raised \$100,000.¹³² Due to a public disclosure law that required donations over \$50 to disclose their full name, address, and employer, activists formed an organization called The United Fund against the Briggs Initiative with the sole purpose of raising funds and distributing those funds to various groups working to fight Proposition 6.¹³³ The United Fund against the Briggs Initiative had a 12-page constitution with elaborate details about their mission, organizational structure, project proposals, and decision-making procedures—another clear indication of the existence of a significant organized grassroots movement.

All of this grassroots organizing—the protests, conferences, debates, coalitions, voter registration drives, canvassing, concerts, fundraisers, etc.—undoubtedly played a decisive role in shifting public opinion against the initiative.

¹³⁰ Will Roscoe, San Franciscans Against Proposition 6, "Voter Registration Project Summary," 10/10/78, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

¹³¹ <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Advocate+Archives%3A+20+years+ago+-+Briggs+initiative+defeated.-a020752198>.

¹³² Linda Breakstone, "Two Sides of Prop. 6 Fight: Briggs Attacks While Hollywood Turns Out for Rally," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 10/21/78, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

¹³³ Constitution of the United Fund against the Briggs Initiative, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

Confronting Homophobia Directly

A final key factor that contributed to the success of the campaign against Proposition 6 was the decision by most LGBT activists to directly confront the homophobic arguments underlying Proposition 6. The majority of LGBT activists in California had learned important lessons from the defeat in Dade County, Florida and other cities where LGBT activists had failed to confront Anita Bryant's homophobic arguments, and California activists were determined not to repeat what they believed was a strategic flaw in those campaigns.¹³⁴ The affluent gays such as Jim Foster who had traveled to Miami's Dade County to lead the campaign there believed that most people were not fully ready to accept equal rights for LGBT people, and so they decided to rely on middle-class, "respectable" straight professionals and public relations firms to promote the campaign's message.¹³⁵ As No on 6 activist Ruth Mahaney put it, "They had straight doctors, ministers, and psychiatrists saying that gays were OK."¹³⁶ The gay leaders also tended to restrict their campaign's slogans to general calls for "human rights" and "civil liberties" without focusing much on the specific controversial issue of "gay rights," often avoiding discussing homosexuality. According to activists such as Ward and Freeman, the gay leaders believed that the visible presence of LGBT people and outspoken defense of LGBT rights in the campaign would backfire by turning off straight people who were uncomfortable with or opposed to homosexuality. Historian Barry Adam describes the campaign.

¹³⁴ Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹³⁵ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 300-301, 304-305, 307-309. Also, Aretha, *No Compromise*, p.61.

¹³⁶ Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil.

The gay defense campaign, organized as the Dade County Coalition for Human Rights (DCCHR) and the Miami Victory Campaign opted for a “high-toned” human rights approach of flag-waving and pictures of the endangered American constitution (Merrill 1977-78, 11). Gay businessmen and Democratic Party gay club leaders chose a professionally directed media campaign for the DCCHR, eschewing door-to-door canvassing and ignoring Miami’s large Cuban and black communities... Only the Miami Victory Campaign made belated efforts at popular mobilization.¹³⁷

Two left-wing activists described what they saw as the shortcomings of this strategy.

A small group of San Francisco politicians [had been] imported to help run the show for the Dade County Coalition for Human Rights. These men were referred to locally as the “power brokers” because of their access to money and their reputed ability to deliver a gay vote in high-level California politics.

The “professional” campaign run in Miami relied heavily on slick advertising based on Jimmy Carter’s slogan “human rights are absolute.” The “hot” topics of child molesting and gay sexuality, featured prominently in the propaganda of Save Our Children, were absent from the pro-gay side’s leaflets and newspaper ads. Outreach to the large Cuban community was intentionally avoided on leaflets on the grounds that a gay issue would only “inflare” them. Campaign leaders actually declined the aid of volunteers who wanted to walk precincts, figuring that the presence of homosexuals in the streets would create a backlash. Not until the final week of the campaign was any public leafleting done.¹³⁸

A similar strategy was used in St. Paul, Minnesota, Wichita, Kansas, and Eugene Oregon.

After this strategy failed again and again, a majority of LGBT activists in California decided it was time to try a different strategy than the one that kept resulting in so many bitter set-backs. Polls showed that people who knew gays or lesbians personally were twice as likely to support gay rights as those who said they had never known a gay or lesbian person.¹³⁹ The

¹³⁷ Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 111.

¹³⁸ Ward and Freeman, “Defending Gay Rights,” 23.

¹³⁹ Richard Hagen, “Petaluma Poll Shows Voters Split on Briggs” in *SCLGA News, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco*. Page 1 shows that voters in Petaluma, California with gay acquaintances were 8-10% more likely to oppose Proposition 6. Also, Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 289.

results of these polls were well known and referred to regularly by Milk and other LGBT activists. Many activists in California (where the LGBT movement was stronger than in other states) drew the conclusion that the only way they could beat Proposition 6 was literally if thousands of LGBT people literally came out of the closet and confronted Briggs' homophobic arguments head on. With the very real threat of Proposition 6 hanging over them, many LGBT people concluded that it was a matter of necessity and urgency that they come out of the closet, not only for their own personal emotional health but also to convince straight people that LGBT people should be accepted as equals. As the following excerpt from one of his speeches shows, Milk made the need to come out of the closet a central theme of his speeches, particularly during the fight against Proposition 6.

Gay brothers and sisters...you must come out. Come out...to your parents...I know that it is hard and will hurt them, but think about how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your relatives. ...come out to your friends...if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors...to your fellow workers...to the people who work where you eat and shop... Once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions, for your sake, for their sake, for the sake of the youngsters who are becoming scared by the votes from Dade to Eugene.¹⁴⁰

Milk argued, in fact, that “we can defeat the Briggs Initiative if all the gay people come out,” but that “if they don’t come out, then it will be a very tight race.”¹⁴¹

However, many wealthy gay businessmen and conservative elements within the LGBT community disagreed with this the strategy of openly displaying one’s sexual identity in the campaign against Proposition 6. David Goodstein founded the Concerned Voters of California (CVC) to raise funds to hire non-gay public relations firms to run media ads with

¹⁴⁰ Harvey Milk, "That's What America Is" speech, delivered at Gay Freedom Day Parade in San Francisco, 6/25/78, transcribed in Shilts, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, 438-439.

¹⁴¹ Epstein, *The Times of Harvey Milk*.

socially respected straight professionals speaking about human rights and Proposition 6.¹⁴²

In his magazine *The Advocate*, Goodstein articulated wealthier conservative gays' strategy for fighting Proposition 6.

The bottom line is that it is most unlikely that the Briggs Initiative can be defeated in the November election... We may even lose in San Francisco... Almost all gay people could help best by maintaining very low profiles... The gay media freaks [had to] get off the television and let our friends and allies speak to the non-gay issues. Constructively, we should assist in registering gay voters, stuffing envelopes in the headquarters and keeping out of sight of non-gay voters, except persuading straight friends and relatives. Destructively, we can do a lot to assist John Briggs by being visible and in any way stereotypical.¹⁴³

Proposition 6 stimulated a massive debate within LGBT communities about coming out of the closet. The threat of Proposition 6 forced thousands of closeted LGBT people to ask themselves whether they should come out of the closet to help fight the Briggs Initiative, or remain in the closet (in effect, adopting Goodstein's "low profile" strategy).¹⁴⁴ This very personal, most intimate decision facing thousands of LGBT people would literally have a major impact on how LGBT history would unfold. On one hand, many LGBT people must have been terrified of coming out because they were guaranteed to face intense social ostracism from family members and friends and the possibilities of termination from their job, hate crimes, and police brutality. On the other hand, if they chose not to come out, it was more likely that Proposition 6 would be approved, which would send a signal to politicians that voters supported discrimination against LGBT people and embolden right-wing extremists and groups campaigning to roll back the gains of gay liberation and other left-wing movements of the 1960s and '70s.

¹⁴² Michaels, "Anti-Briggs Forces Expect Tough Fight."

¹⁴³ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 382. Also, Ward and Freeman, "Defending Gay Rights," 23.

¹⁴⁴ Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil.

After the “low profile strategy” had failed in Miami’s Dade County and other states, the feeling grew in the LGBT community that the time had come for LGBT people to come out of the closet and demand their equal place in society. Under the slogan, “Come out! Come out! Wherever you are!” a massive coming out of thousands of people took place over the course of 1977 and 1978 to fight Proposition 6.¹⁴⁵ Larry Berner, a second-grade public school teacher, sparked a massive controversy throughout California when he decided to come out of the closet in Healdsburg, California, a small town of 6,200 people, in March 1978 in order to take a public stand against Proposition 6. Berner explained his decision, saying, “Traditionally, when you call someone a faggot, he runs and hides. Well, this faggot ain’t running.”¹⁴⁶ Workers, such as LGBT waiters, included small cards with the bills they gave to customers “outing” themselves and urging customers to vote against Proposition 6.

The cards stated:

The purpose of this card is to make you aware of the fact that you ride with, talk to, eat with, and see gay people every day. I hope that the time spent with me has helped you to realize that we are people just like you.

Please vote no on Proposition 6 (the Briggs Initiative) on November 7, because it directly affects human rights, particularly mine as a gay person.¹⁴⁷

The decision by thousands of LGBT people to come out of the closet was clearly motivated by the practical need to educate straight people about homosexuality in order to fight back against the right-wing ballot initiatives sweeping the country. At the same time, many LGBT

¹⁴⁵ Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹⁴⁶ Doyle McManus, “Healdsburg: A Town Divided – Gay Teacher in the Eye of Proposition 6 Storm,” *LA Times*, 10/21/78, 1, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁴⁷ East Bay Area Coalition Against the Briggs Initiative / No on 6 card, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

people celebrated their coming out as an expression of their own unique identity and difference.¹⁴⁸

The debate between activists about whether LGBT people should maintain a high or low profile and what image to project during the campaign was connected with a related debate about which arguments were the most effective in convincing straight people to vote against Proposition 6. Some activists, like those in the group Concerned Voters of California (CVC), focused on arguments about civil liberties where they believed they could obtain a great deal of agreement with the public without having to confront the public's underlying homophobia. The CVC Speaker's Manual, designed to train activists and equip them with arguments against Proposition 6, urged activists to focus on three main arguments.

1. The issue is privacy and keeping government out of our lives and homes. The issue is not sex or morality.
2. There is no problem in the schools involving homosexual teachers. According to the state Board of Education, there are sufficient laws to protect any student from any misbehavior or advocacy by a teacher—homosexual or heterosexual.
3. A new and unnecessary bureaucracy to enforce such legislation is a clear waste of taxpayers' money.¹⁴⁹

These arguments, particularly the first one, strongly emphasize that the issue under debate is not sex or morality but rather keeping the bureaucratic government out of private lives and homes. Another section of the CVC Speaker's Manual also advises against using phrases that condone or endorse gay rights or homosexuality. It urges instead to keep the focus on civil liberties.

Do not say: This is a gay rights initiative.

¹⁴⁸ Mahaney, interview with Ramy Khalil. Also, Craig, interview with Ramy Khalil.

¹⁴⁹ Concerned Voters of California / No on 6 Speakers' Manual, 2, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

Do not say: A vote against Proposition 6 condones homosexuality or says that Gay is Good.

Don't use: Gay rights, gay liberation. Instead use: Right to privacy, right to keep government out of our lives, right to keep a job if you are skilled and able, keeping cost of government of bureaucracy down.¹⁵⁰

The left wing of the movement against Proposition 6 agreed with using civil liberties arguments but also believed it was necessary and more effective to confront homophobia and attempt to educate people that LGBT people deserved equal rights. CVC in contrast used more conciliatory arguments in an attempt to persuade conservatives to oppose Proposition 6 without challenging conservatives' underlying assumption that there was something wrong with homosexuality. Here is an example from the CVC Speakers' Manual.

John Briggs, the initiative's author, has gathered the support of fundamentalists who don't understand that one can feel homosexuality is wrong and still support the right of homosexuals to work as teachers. True conservatives oppose Prop 6.¹⁵¹

Here the CVC is not challenging the conservative idea "that one can feel homosexuality is wrong." The CVC is lending credence to the idea that true conservatives can oppose homosexuality and still oppose Proposition 6.

A majority of LGBT activists, however, concluded that the strategy of LGBT people maintaining a low profile and avoiding confronting the public's homophobia would prove to be counter-productive. At the first Statewide Conference against the Briggs Initiative in September 1977 sponsored by the Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Council, the

¹⁵⁰ Concerned Voters of California / No on 6 Speakers' Manual, 6, Harvey Milk papers collection, San Francisco Public Library.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 7.

conference's public education committee urged activists to involve LGBT people in high profile positions in the campaign and discuss homosexuality openly with straight people.

Gay people should be used, without a major emphasis on prominent non-gay people, in public media events in order to demystify gay people. Person to person contact by gay people is very important. The Miami campaign failed to reach the public on a personal level. The ignorance and fear that many non-gay people have will only be changed after they have talked with gay people.¹⁵²

They also unanimously adopted a resolution to ensure that any non-gay campaign management consulting firm hired to work for the NO on 6 campaign involved gays and lesbians in all aspects of their operations.

If there is a need for professional campaign management consulting from non-gay firms, no contract should be let to any firm unless that firm agrees to permit gay women and men with appropriate skills to participate fully in all technical phases of the effort, and observe all work in detail.¹⁵³

The fact that these resolutions were presented is a clear indicator of the debate that existed within the LGBT activist community about the profile of LGBT people within the campaign. The fact that the second resolution was unanimously adopted is an example of how many activists had concluded that LGBT people needed to have a high profile in the campaign.

It is worth quoting at length from an interview with Amber Hollibaugh, a full-time organizer for the California Outreach Group, because she articulates very clearly the ideas of the left wing of the movement who believed it was essential to discuss sexuality openly and educate people about homosexuality.

¹⁵² Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Council, "Minutes and Reports of Statewide Conference on the Briggs Initiative."

¹⁵³ Ibid.

There was one part of the gay movement that I wanted to isolate in anti-6 work—that part of the gay movement that didn't want to be gay. I'm referring to David Goodstein and that part of the "gay" movement whose strategy, right there in the pages of the *Advocate*, was that the campaign should be funded by the gay community but organized and directed by straight public relations firms. Further, no gay people should have anything to do with the campaign because, as they said, "We are our own worst enemies." People who saw us would hate us as much as we expected, so we should go back in the closet and let concerned, good heterosexual PR firms conduct the campaign. They could educate the voters without making them tense, basically by not being gay. That kind of idea is as dangerous as anything Briggs could say. It *is* the end result of something like a Briggs campaign, which neutralized sexuality as an important part of people's lives. It forces people right back into the closet, it makes you dead, and it makes you crazy... I did not want to work with that section of the gay movement.

Letters to newspapers illustrate the centrality of sexual issues in the 6 campaign. The letters that went to the editor when a paper would take a position say "I want to know about homosexuality, I want to know if these homosexuals want to rape my children. I also want to know if I have to support the school system that pays these kind of people. That was how the issue was articulated by proponents, and so people against 6 had to deal with those issues, too. Any organization that tried to play down those things was not very successful in its organizing. It's the difference between a human rights approach and directly confronting homophobia. We didn't decide abstractly that it was important to raise sexual issues—we had no choice."¹⁵⁴

In this quote above, Hollibaugh explains how the left wing of the movement believed that an effective campaign against Proposition 6 would require responding to Briggs' homophobic arguments, rather than internalizing his oppressive ideas. In another part of her interview, Hollibaugh identifies the source of the conservative ideas of the right wing of the LGBT rights movement in their more privileged class position in society.

Many fundamental questions raised by the gay and lesbian liberation movements were avoided – such as heterosexism, the oppressive nature of the conventional family and male supremacy in general. Many liberals and radicals, gay and straight, wanted to fight the initiative on exclusively civil-libertarian grounds so as not to "complicate" the issue and to win as much support as possible from heterosexuals. Furthermore, the San Francisco gay business community—predominantly male of course—also exerted great

¹⁵⁴ Ehrensaft and Milkman, "Interview with Amber Hollibaugh," 8.

influence in the anti-Briggs campaign. Gay businessmen have achieved a measure of economic and political power in San Francisco. They have become accustomed to being accommodated by the system and felt their foothold threatened. They shared with the civil libertarians a disinclination to raise a fundamental critique of heterosexist society and preferred to confine political efforts to defending their position within existing society. These forces mobilized to campaign primarily through the media, putting forward a respectable image of gays and warning of threats to the civil liberties of everyone. Gay people were cautioned against being too flamboyant in their style and asked to keep their “sexual preference” as private and unobtrusive as possible.¹⁵⁵

In the quote above, Hollibaugh is arguing from a left-wing working-class point of view that the privileges enjoyed by the wealthier, predominantly male elements of the LGBT community led them to narrow the range of arguments they used against Proposition 6, restricting their arguments to libertarian arguments. She also argues that those under the influence of gay businessmen tended to campaign against Proposition 6 by attempting to present gays as socially respectable without challenging people to broaden the variety of sexual identities that they find socially acceptable.

One of the great ironies of the New Right’s “crusade against homosexuality” in 1977 and 1978 is that the conservatives rallying around Anita Bryant and John Briggs’ ballot initiatives intended to drive LGBT people back into the closet and silence supporters of LGBT rights, yet their ballot initiatives, especially in the state-wide campaign in the populous state of California, created the widest discussion about homosexuality in U.S. history. The campaigns actually resulted in an historic coming out en masse by thousands of LGBT people. As Hollibaugh explains, the left wing of the LGBT movement took full advantage of the opportunity provided by this right-wing initiative to go out and talk with people about homosexuality:

¹⁵⁵ “Introduction – Gay Politics” *Radical America*, Vol. 13, no. 4, July-August 1979.

The outcome was that unprecedented numbers of people—including the very school children Briggs said he wanted to protect—were exposed to pro-gay arguments. It was a tremendous opportunity to defend sexual freedom and to talk about sexuality in an explicitly political way and the gay left and its supporters took full advantage of the opportunity.¹⁵⁶

Although more conservative elements of the LGBT community urged LGBT people to maintain a low profile and project a “socially respectable” image as they worked against Proposition 6, other groups such as BACABI and the Committee Against the Briggs Initiative in Los Angeles (CABILA) advocated maximum visibility for LGBT people and organized a series highly visible public demonstrations. Historian Barry Adam contrasts the two different approaches in the following passage.

Whereas [Concerned Voters of California], sponsored by *Advocate* publisher David Goodstein, took the cautious approach pioneered in Miami, stressing abstract principles, the respectability of gay people, and conventional public relations strategies, BACABI and CABILA aimed for mass mobilization and high visibility. They took every opportunity to call out public demonstrations and confront Brigg’s supporters in public forums.¹⁵⁷

When a lawsuit forced Briggs to recollect signatures for his initiative all over again, BACABI proclaimed this as a victory for the high profile strategy. They urged the LGBT community to use the time they won through the success of the lawsuit to reach out and talk with potential allies explicitly about homophobia and why LGBT people deserved equal rights.

The Pride Foundation suit won a victory—by lesbians and gay men taking the offensive—not by keeping a low profile. This victory has given us five months more to organize opposition to the potential ballot measure and a more favorable general election.

¹⁵⁶ Ehrensaft and Milkman, “Interview with Amber Hollibaugh,” 3.

¹⁵⁷ Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 113.

We are foolish if we become complacent. The additional time gives us the opportunity to reach out and educate people. It provides us with the opportunity to take the offensive. We must use this time to build a broad based coalition—because we cannot win the battle alone. We must talk to and win allies to our cause. We need to build a movement to ensure lesbians and gay men full rights.¹⁵⁸

The May 13, 1978 Northern California Conference against the Briggs Initiative sponsored by BACABI adopted five principles that included a high-profile strategy and confronting homophobic arguments directly.

Principles: Non-exclusive, democratic; co-sexual and multi-racial; single-issue coalition approach; highly visible campaign; we confront anti-gay myths and stereotypes, including religious ones, that have been used against gay people and gay rights.¹⁵⁹

Given that many LGBT activists had learned from the failed strategy in Dade County, St. Paul, Wichita, and Eugene, and given the strength of the gay liberation movement in San Francisco and California, CVC was eventually pressured by the majority of LGBT activists to “accommodate itself to the principle of gay visibility in the campaign and worked with some coalitions taking a more grassroots approach.”¹⁶⁰ Ultimately, the strategy of being highly visible and confronting homophobia directly became the dominant strategy in California, and the final election results suggest that it proved to be more effective than the low profile strategy used in other states.

¹⁵⁸ BACABI Newsletter, November 1977, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁵⁹ Northern California Conference against the Briggs Initiative, Approved Planning Committee Reports, 5/13/78, Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁶⁰ Ward and Freeman, “Defending Gay Rights,” 23.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Today, forty years since Harvey Milk was elected and Proposition 6 was defeated, the LGBT community is carrying the torch and continuing the struggle for equality. While the LGBT rights movement has made dramatic progress, full equality has remained elusive. The issues under debate and the goal posts have shifted, but there are still striking similarities between the battles of the 1970s and the legislative debates of today. In the 1970s, ballot initiatives focused on stripping LGBT people of legal protections from discrimination in areas such as employment. Since 2004, in contrast, ballot initiatives have typically focused on banning same-sex marriage. In 2004, for example, a majority of voters in 11 states approved ballot measures banning same-sex marriage, usually by 60-70%. Whereas California Proposition 6 in 1978 attempted to ban LGBT people and their supporters from working in public schools, California Proposition 8 in 2008, thirty years later, amended the state's constitution to ban same-sex marriage.

In 2012 and in the future, numerous states across the country will vote on bills or ballot measures to either legalize or ban same-sex civil unions or marriages. In early 2012 the state governments in Washington State and Maryland legalized same-sex marriage, whereas in May voters in North Carolina approved a ballot initiative banning same-sex marriage and civil unions. Similarly, voters in Minnesota will vote in November on whether to codify the ban on same-sex marriage into their state constitution. On February 7, 2012, a federal appeals court in California ruled Proposition 8 unconstitutional, which could open the way for the resumption of same-sex marriage in California, or the ruling could be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Many more state legislatures are considering similar legislation.

In the midst of these controversial legislative battles, in a historic moment on May 9, 2012, President Barack Obama announced his support for same-sex marriage rights. This is the first time that a President of the United States has ever publicly stated his support for equal marriage rights for gays and lesbians. His statement immediately reverberated around the world, quite literally.

Millions of people are discussing and debating the legitimacy of same-sex marriage, and many LGBT activists are wondering how most effectively to fight legislation and ballot initiatives that would restrict same-sex marriage rights. There is a lot we can learn from the history of how Harvey Milk was elected in 1977 and how California Proposition 6 was defeated in 1978. Clearly it was a large number of complex historical processes and political strategies that led to Milk's election and the victory over Proposition 6, and it is a difficult task to identify exactly which factors led to these campaigns' success and which factors contributed more than others. It is clear, however, that the progressive left-wing strategies that activists used ultimately ensured these campaigns' success. Of course, there were certain underlying historical trends that activists had little control over that worked to their advantage—specifically, the protest movements and radicalization of the 1960s, the migration of LGBT people to San Francisco, and, to some degree, the establishment of district-based elections rather than city-wide elections for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. However, if the Milk campaign had not used progressive left-wing strategies—forming coalitions between LGBT people, unions, and other oppressed groups, fighting for low-income workers and exploited groups, and advocating coming out of the closet and demanding full equality immediately—then history probably would have turned out differently, and Milk probably would not have been elected. By the same token, if

California Senator Briggs had not over-reached by writing Proposition 6 in a way that was too extreme and self-serving, and if a majority of California LGBT activists had not used the left-wing strategies of mass protests, grassroots organizing, coalitions with unions, feminists, and people of color, and directly confronting homophobic arguments, then Proposition 6 would probably not have been defeated either. As I explained, high profile politicians and media editors clearly helped defeat Proposition 6 by eventually taking a stance against the initiative. However, it was primarily grassroots activists who played the lead role in shifting public opinion against Proposition 6 which then made it politically safe for high profile politicians and news editors to take a public stand against the initiative toward the end of the campaign. Had it not been for the progressive left-wing strategies that activists used, LGBT history in the late 1970s would have unfolded quite differently.

How strong are the parallels between the role that major politicians played in the struggle against Proposition 6 in the 1970s and the role that politicians such as President Obama are playing in the struggle for equal marriage rights today? President Obama presented the change in his stance on same-sex marriage as the result of a personal, moral journey that led him to the conclusion that it was time to publicly affirm his support for same-sex marriage. The Democratic Party and its supporters are portraying Mr. Obama's change in his public position as a true act of political courage. Obama's critics argue, however, that this change is a politically calculated move designed to boost his own re-election campaign and those of other Democratic politicians this election year.

The growing public support for same-sex marriage rights suggests that, similar to politicians in California in the 1970s, Obama and other Democratic politicians chose to express support for same-sex marriage only after it was politically safe to do so. Decades of

activism and the greater visibility of LGBT people in society has led to a surge in public support for LGBT rights in recent years. In 2004, a Pew Research Center poll found that 60% of Americans opposed same-sex marriage, yet only eight years later, Pew released a new poll in May 2012 showing only 43% opposed it.¹⁶¹ For the first time in history, according to a May 2011 Gallup poll, a majority of Americans (53%) believed “same-sex marriage should be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriage.”¹⁶² Furthermore, a Gallup poll from May 3-6, 2012 found that independent voters favor same-sex marriage rights by a historically large margin of 17%.¹⁶³ In this context, where a growing majority of Americans support same-sex marriage rights, especially independent voters who can often swing an election victory to either the Republican or Democratic Parties, the Obama Administration decided to voice support for same-sex marriage rights. Many commentators have also pointed out that the Obama Administration made this move at a time when there is a growing frustration with the administration’s failure to deliver the change Obama had promised and other unpopular economic policies, such as tax breaks for millionaires and budget cuts in social programs.

A year after Obama was elected president, LGBT activists led by Harvey Milk’s former student intern, Cleve Jones, organized a National Equality March on Washington in October 2009. At least 150,000 people participated in the march demanding same-sex marriage rights and full equality for LGBT people under all aspects of the law. A debate has developed among LGBT activists about whether to organize another march on Washington,

¹⁶¹ Pew Research Center, “More Support for Gun Rights, Gay Marriage than in 2008 or 2004,” 4/25/12, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/25/more-support-for-gun-rights-gay-marriage-than-in-2008-or-2004>.

¹⁶² Frank Newport, “For the First Time, Majority of Americans Favor Legal Gay Marriage – Republicans and Older Americans Remain Opposed,” Gallup Politics, 5/20/11, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147662/First-Time-Majority-Americans-Favor-Legal-Gay-Marriage.aspx>.

¹⁶³ Frank Newport, “Half of Americans Support Legal Gay Marriage – Democrats and Independents in Favor, Republicans Opposed,” Gallup Politics, 5/08/12. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154529/Half-Americans-Support-Legal-Gay-Marriage.aspx>.

possibly in October 2012 on the eve of the elections. Younger, more militant activists argued in favor of another march, while more traditional established groups preferred to focus resources on lobbying politicians instead. LGBT activist Robin Tyler defended the idea of a march, saying, “massive street actions historically have made a difference in the U.S. and elsewhere in prodding political leaders and governments to take action they would otherwise be unwilling to take. If you think mass actions do not work, look at what is happening in Egypt,” referring to the popular revolution that toppled the entrenched Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011.¹⁶⁴ Whatever Obama and the Democrats’ motives may be, as in California in the 1970s, it is clear that grassroots activism, educational outreach, and dedicated leaders like Harvey Milk will be necessary to shift public opinion and keep up the pressure on establishment politicians to pass laws in favor of LGBT rights.

¹⁶⁴ Lou Chibarro, Jr., “Another March in 2012?” *Washington Blade*, 2/18/11.

Appendix

Official Title and Summary of California Proposition 6

The Attorney General of California has prepared the following title and summary of the chief purpose and points of the proposed measure:

School Employees – Homosexuality – Initiative Statute. Provides for filing charges against school teachers, teacher’s aides, school administrators, or counselors for advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging or promoting private or public sexual acts defined in Sections 286(a) and 288(a) of the Penal Code between persons of the same sex in a manner likely to come to the attention of other employees or students; or publicly and indiscreetly engaging in said acts. Prohibits hiring and requires dismissal of such persons if school board determines them unfit for service after considering enumerated guidelines. In dismissal cases only, provides for two-stage hearings, written findings, judicial review. Financial impact: Unknown but potentially substantial local costs to school districts depending on number of cases which receive an administrative hearing.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Paula Lichtenberg papers collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

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