

## **The Last Bastion of Hate** **by Dan Jacoby**

After almost a century and a half of progress, America has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a nation of bigots.

During the recent Vice Presidential debate, the one time both candidates were uncomfortable was on the subject of gay marriage. Neither candidate had a good, solid, intelligible answer.

Dick Cheney, of course, has a gay daughter. He claims to love and support her, and insists he is against a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. But he is willing to put party politics above the welfare of his family. So he took a pass when offered the chance to respond to John Edwards.

For his part, Senator Edwards claims that he is against amending the constitution to ban gay marriage, but that he believes marriage to be between a man and a woman. Then he mumbles something unintelligible about states' rights versus federal powers.

And it's a safe bet that at tonight's final debate John Kerry will be just as uncomfortable, while George W. Bush will be just blindly and unthinkingly bigoted.

The basic truth behind the candidates' discomfort is that homosexuals are the last victims of open bigotry in our society. Yes, there is prejudice against blacks and other racial minorities, as well as women, the elderly and members of various religions. Yes, this prejudice is widespread. Despite this, you rarely see people on television supporting these prejudices, and when you do, such people are quite properly labeled as hateful, evil and wrong.

But there are plenty of people on television – and even in the Oval Office – who are openly prejudiced against homosexuals.

It took 250 years of slavery, a war, a hundred years of Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan, decades of marches and worldwide television coverage to overturn overt bigotry against African-Americans. Even today, however, 40 years after landmark civil rights legislation, minority groups face higher poverty and crime, worse schools and fewer opportunities than most white Americans.

We can't solve problems of bigotry overnight. But we can take begin the process. Unfortunately, we're doing just the opposite. Banning gay marriage, as many states are doing, means that for the first time since the civil rights movement began, states are passing laws that institutionalize bigotry. And for the first time in American history, a President supports a Constitutional amendment that discriminates against a group of Americans.

The current gay-rights movement began 20 years ago, when gay people were the primary victims of AIDS. As thousands of people were slowly and painfully dying, their partners were denied visitation rights at hospitals because they weren't "married". A further examination of the law exposed the wide range of rights and privileges denied to gay couples simply because they don't fit the "standard model" of a married pair.

In some states, attempts were made to rectify this situation. Vermont is probably the best-known example, with the passage of the “civil union” bill, granting rights, privileges – and responsibilities – to gay couples that straight couples have enjoyed for centuries.

It’s not enough. Civil unions may ameliorate the problem, but they don’t fix it. Over 50 years of “separate but equal” didn’t work for blacks, and it won’t work for gays.

Of course, most states don’t even extend rights that far, and many states are going in the opposite direction. Which means that the civil rights movement for gay Americans is going to take a long time, probably generations.

But then, progress always seems to move slowly.

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