

THE OVERHAULING OF STRAIGHT AMERICA: WAGING PEACE, PART TWO

by Marshall K. Kirk & Erastes Pill, Guide Magazine, November 1987

The first order of business is desensitization of the American public concerning gays and gay rights. To desensitize the public is to help it view homosexuality with indifference instead of with keen emotion. Ideally, we would have straights register differences in sexual preference the way they register different tastes for ice cream or sports games: she likes strawberry and I like vanilla; he follows baseball and I follow football. No big deal.

At least in the beginning, we are seeking public desensitization and nothing more. We do not need and cannot expect a full “appreciation” or “understanding” of homosexuality from the average American. You can forget about trying to persuade the masses that homosexuality is a good thing. But if only you can get them to think that it is just another thing, with a shrug of their shoulders, then your battle for legal and social rights is virtually won. And to get to the shoulder- shrug stage, gays as a class must cease to appear mysterious, alien, loathsome, and contrary. A large-scale media campaign will be required in order to change the image of gays in America. And any campaign to accomplish this turnaround should do six things.

(1) Talk about gays and gayness as loudly and as often as possible. The principle behind this advice is simple: almost any behavior begins to look normal if you are exposed to enough of it at close quarters and among your acquaintances. The acceptability of the new behavior will ultimately hinge on the number of one’s fellows doing it or accepting it. One may be offended by its novelty at first -- many, in times past, were momentarily scandalized by “streaking,” eating goldfish, and premarital sex. But as long as Joe Sixpack feels little pressure to perform likewise, and as long as the behavior in question presents little threat to his physical and financial security, he soon gets used to it and life goes on. The skeptic may still shake his head and think “people are crazy these days,” but over time his objections are likely to become more reflective, more philosophical, less emotional.

The way to benumb raw sensitivities about homosexuality is to have a lot of people talk a great deal about the subject in a neutral or supportive way. Open and frank talk makes the subject seem less furtive, alien, and sinful, more above-board. Constant talk builds the impression that the public opinion is at least divided on the subject, and that a sizable segment accepts or even practices homosexuality. Even rancorous debates between opponents and defenders serve the purpose of desensitization so long as “respectable” gays are front and center to make their own pitch. The main thing is to talk about gayness until the issue becomes thoroughly tiresome.

And when we say talk about homosexuality, we mean just that. In the early stages of any campaign to reach straight America, the masses should not be shocked and repelled by premature exposure to homosexual behavior itself. Instead, the imagery of sex should be downplayed and gay rights should be reduced to an abstract social question as much as possible. First let the camel get his nose inside the tent -- and only later his unsightly derriere!

Where we talk is important. The visual media, film and television, are plainly the most powerful image-makers in Western civilization. The average American household watches over seven hours of TV daily. Those hours open up a gateway into the private world of straights, through which a Trojan horse might be passed. As far as desensitization is concerned, the medium is the message -- of normalcy. So far, gay Hollywood has provided our best covert weapon in the battle to desensitize the mainstream. Bit by bit over the past ten years, gay characters and gay themes have been introduced into TV programs and films (though often this has been done to achieve comedic and ridiculous effects). On the whole, the impact has been encouraging. The prime-time presentation of *Consenting Adult* on a major network in 1985 is but one high-water mark in favorable media exposure of gay issues. But this should be just the beginning of a major publicity blitz by gay America.

Would a desensitizing campaign of open and sustained talk about gay issues reach every rabid opponent of homosexuality? Of course not. While public opinion is one primary source of mainstream values, religious authority is the other. When conservative churches condemn gays, there are only two things we can do to confound the homophobia of true believers. First, we can use talk to muddy the moral waters. This means publicizing support for gays by more moderate churches, raising theological objections of our own about conservative interpretations of biblical teachings, and exposing hatred and inconsistency. Second, we can undermine the moral authority of homophobic churches by portraying them as antiquated backwaters, badly out of step with the times and with the latest findings of psychology. Against the mighty pull of institutional Religion one must set the mightier draw of Science and Public Opinion (the shield and word of that accursed "secular humanism"). Such an unholy alliance has worked well against churches before, on such topics as divorce and abortion. With enough open talk about the prevalence and acceptability of homosexuality, that alliance can work again here.

(2) Portray gays as victims, not as aggressive challengers. In any campaign to win over the public, gays must be cast as victims in need of protection so that straights will be inclined by reflex to assume the role of protector. If gays are presented, instead, as a strong and prideful tribe promoting a rigidly nonconformist and deviant lifestyle, they are more likely to be seen as a public menace that justifies resistance and oppression. For that reason, we must forego the temptation to strut our "gay pride" publicly when it conflicts with the Gay Victim image. And we must walk the fine line between impressing straights with our great numbers, on the one hand, and sparking their hostile paranoia -- "They are all around us!" -- on the other.

A media campaign to promote the Gay Victim image should make use of symbols which reduce the mainstream's sense of threat, which lower its guard, and which enhance the plausibility of victimization. In practical terms, this means that jaunty mustachioed musclemen would keep a very low profile in gay commercials and other public presentation, while sympathetic figures of nice young people, old people, and attractive women would be featured. (It almost goes without saying that groups on the farthest margin of acceptability, such as NAMBLA, must play no part at all in such a campaign; suspected child-molesters will never look like victims).

Now, there are two different messages about the Gay Victim that are worth communicating. First, the mainstream should be told that gays are victims of fate, in the sense that most never had a choice to

accept or reject their sexual preference. The message must read: "As far as gays can tell, they were born gay, just as you were born heterosexual or white or black or bright or athletic. Nobody ever tricked or seduced them; they never made a choice, and are not morally blameworthy. What they do isn't willfully contrary -- it's only natural for them. This twist of fate could as easily have happened to you!"

Straight viewers must be able to identify with gays as victims. Mr. and Mrs. Peterson must be given no extra excuses to say "they are not like us." To this end, the persons featured in the public campaign should be decent and upright, appealing and admirable by straight standards, completely unexceptionable in appearance -- in a word, they should be indistinguishable from the straights we would like to reach. (To return to the terms we have used in previous articles, spokesmen for our cause must be R-type "straight gays" rather than Q-type "homosexuals on display.") Only under such conditions will the message be read correctly: "These folks are victims of a fate that could have happened to me."

By the way, we realize that many gays will question an advertising technique which might threaten to make homosexuality look like some dreadful disease which strikes fated "victims." But the plain fact is that the gay community is weak and must manipulate the powers of the weak, including the play for sympathy. In any case, we compensate for the negative aspect of this gay victim appeal under Principal 4, below.

The second message would portray gays as victims of society. The straight majority does not recognize the suffering it brings to the lives of gays and must be shown: graphic pictures of brutalized gays; dramatizations of job and housing insecurity, loss of child custody, and public humiliation; and the dismal list goes on and on.

(3) Give protectors a just cause. A media campaign that casts gays as society's victims and encourages straights to be their protectors must make it easier for those who respond to assert and explain their new perspectives. Few straight women, and even fewer straight men, will want to defend homosexuality boldly as such. Most would rather attach their awakened protective impulse to some principle of justice or law, to some general desire for consistent and fair treatment in society. Our campaign should not demand direct support for homosexual practices, but should instead take anti-discrimination as its theme. The right to free speech freedom of beliefs, freedom of association, due process and equal protection of laws -- these should be the concerns brought to mind by our campaign.

It is especially important for the gay movement to hitch its cause to accepted standards of law and justice because its straight supporters must have at hand a cogent reply to the moral arguments of its enemies. The homophobes clothe their emotional revulsion in the daunting robes of religious dogma, so defenders of gay rights must be ready to counter dogma with principle.

(4) Make gays look good. In order to make a Gay Victim sympathetic to straights you have to portray him as Everyman. But an additional theme of the campaign should be more aggressive and upbeat: to offset the increasingly bad press that these times have brought to homosexual men and women, the

campaign should paint gays as superior pillars of society. Yes, yes, we know -- this trick is so old it creaks. Other minorities use it all the time in ads that announce proudly, "Did you know that this Great Man (or Woman) was _____?" But the message is vital for all those straights who still picture gays as "queer" people -- shadowy, lonesome, frail, drunken, suicidal, child-snatching misfits.

The honor roll of prominent gay or bisexual men and women is truly eye-popping. From Socrates to Shakespeare, from Alexander the Great to Alexander Hamilton, from Michelangelo to Walt Whitman, from Sappho to Gertrude Stein, the list is old hat to us but shocking news to heterosexual America. In no time, a skillful and clever media campaign could have the gay community looking like the veritable fairy godmother to Western Civilization.

Along the same lines, we shouldn't overlook the Celebrity Endorsement. The celebrities can be straight (God bless you, Ed Asner, wherever you are) or gay.

(5) Make the victimizers look bad. At a later stage of the media campaign for gay rights -- long after other gay ads have become commonplace -- it will be time to get tough with remaining opponents. To be blunt, they must be vilified. (This will be all the more necessary because, by that time, the entrenched enemy will have quadrupled its output of vitriol and disinformation.) Our goal here is twofold. First, we seek to replace the mainstream's self-righteous pride about its homophobia with shame and guilt. Second, we intend to make the anti-gays look so nasty that average Americans will want to dissociate themselves from such types.

The public should be shown images of ranting homophobes whose secondary traits and beliefs disgust middle America. These images might include the Ku Klux Klan demanding that gays be burned alive or castrated; bigoted southern ministers drooling with hysterical hatred to a degree that looks both comical and deranged; menacing punks, thugs, and convicts speaking coolly about the "fags" they have killed or would like to kill; a tour of Nazi concentration camps where homosexuals were tortured and gassed.

A campaign to vilify the victimizers is going to enrage our most fervid enemies, of course. But what else can we say? The shoe fits, and we should make them try it on for size, with all of America watching.

(6) Solicit funds: the bucks stop here. Any massive campaign of this kind would require unprecedented expenditures for months or even years -- an unprecedented fundraising drive.

Effective advertising is a costly proposition: several million dollars would get the ball rolling. There are 10-15 million primarily homosexual adults in this country: if each one of them donated just two dollars to the campaign, its war chest would actually rival that of its most vocal enemies. And because those gays not supporting families usually have more discretionary income than average, they could afford to contribute much more.

But would they? Or is the gay community as feckless, selfish, uncommitted, and short-sighted as its critics claim? We will never know unless the new campaign simultaneously launches a concerted nationwide appeal for funding support from both known and anonymous donors. The appeal should be

directed both at gays and at straights who care about social justice.

In the beginning, for reasons to be explained in a moment, the appeal for funds may have to be launched exclusively through the gay press -- national magazines, local newspapers, flyers at bars, notices in glossy skin magazines. Funds could also come through the outreach of local gay organizations on campuses and in metropolitan areas. Eventually, donations would be solicited directly alongside advertisements in the major straight media.

There would be no parallel to such an effort in the history of the gay community in America. If it failed to generate the needed capital to get started, there would be little hope for the campaign and little hope for major progress toward gay rights in the near future. For the moment let us suppose that gays could see how donations would greatly serve their long-term interest, and that sufficient funds could be raised. An heroic assumption.

Getting on the Air, or, You Can't Get There from Here

Without access to TV, radio, and the mainstream press, there will be no campaign. This is a tricky problem, because many impresarios of the media simply refuse to accept what they call "issue-advertising" -- persuasive advertising can provoke a storm of resentment from the public and from sponsors, which is bad for business. The courts have confirmed the broadcaster's right to refuse any "issue advertising" he dislikes.

What exactly constitutes "issue advertising"? It evidently does not include platitudinous appeals to the virtues of family unity (courtesy of the Mormons); neither does it include tirades against perfidious Albion (courtesy of Lyndon LaRouche); neither does it include religious shows which condemn gay "sinners"; neither does it include condemnations of nuclear war or race discrimination -- at least not in Massachusetts. Some guys get all the breaks.

What issue-advertising does include these days is almost any communiqué presented openly by a homosexual organization. The words "gay" and "homosexual" are considered controversial whenever they appear.

Because most straightforward appeals are impossible, the National Gay Task Force has had to cultivate quiet backroom liaisons with broadcast companies and newsrooms in order to make sure that issues important to the gay community receive some coverage; but such an arrangement is hardly ideal, of course, because it means that the gay community's image is controlled by the latest news event instead of by careful design -- and recently, most of the news about gays has been negative.

So what can be done to crash the gates of the major media? Several things, advanced in several stages.

Start with the Print

Newspapers and magazines may very well be more hungry for gay advertising dollars than television

and radio are. And the cost of ads in print is generally lower. But remember that the press, for the most part, is only read by better educated Americans, many of whom are already more accepting of homosexuality in any case. So to get more impact for our dollars, we should skip the New Republic and New Left Review readers and head for Time, People, and the National Enquirer. (Of course, the gay community may have to establish itself as a regular advertising presence in more sophisticated forums first before it is accepted into the mass press).

While we're storming the battlements with salvos of ink, we should also warm the mainstream up a bit with a subtle national campaign on highway billboards. In simple, bold print on dark backgrounds, a series of unobjectionable messages should be introduced:

IN RUSSIA, THEY TELL YOU

WHAT TO BE. IN AMERICA

WE HAVE THE FREEDOM

TO BE OURSELVES...

AND TO BE THE BEST

or

PEOPLE HELPING INSTEAD

OF HATING - THAT'S

WHAT AMERICA IS ALL ABOUT

And so on. Each sign will tap patriotic sentiment, each message will drill a seemingly agreeable proposition into mainstream heads -- a "public service message" suited to our purposes. And, if their owners will permit it, each billboard will be signed, in slightly smaller letters, "Courtesy of the Nation Gay Task Force" -- to build positive associations and get the public used to seeing such sponsorship.

Visual Stage 1: You Really Oughta Be in Pictures

As for television and radio, a more elaborate plan may be needed to break the ice. For openers, naturally, we must continue to encourage the appearance of favorable gay characters in films and TV shows. Daytime talk shows also remain a useful avenue for exposure.

But to speed things up we might consider a bold stratagem to gain media attention. The scheme we have in mind would require careful preparations, yet it would save expense even while it elevated the visibility and stature of the gay movement overnight.

Well before the next elections for national office, we might lay careful plans to run symbolic gay candidates for every high political office in this country. (Such plans would have to deal somehow with the tricky problem of introducing gays and straights to sign enough endorsement petitions to get us on the ballot.) Our 50-250 candidates would participate in such debates as they could, run gay-themed advertisements coordinated at our national headquarters, and demand equal time on the air. They could then graciously pull out of the races before the actual elections, while formally endorsing more viable straight contenders. (With malicious humor, perhaps, in some states we could endorse our most rabid opponents.) It is essential not to ask people actually to vote Yea or Nay on the gay issue at this early stage: such action would end up committing most to the Nay position and would only tally huge and visible defeats for our cause.

Through such a political campaign, the mainstream would get over the initial shock of seeing gay ads, and the acceptability of such ads would be fortified by the most creditable context possible; and all this would be accomplished before non-electoral advertising was attempted by the gay community. During the campaign all hell would break loose, but if we behaved courageously and respectably our drive would gain legitimacy in any case and might even become a cause celebre.

If all went as planned, the somewhat desensitized public and the major networks themselves would be readied for the next step of our program.

Visual 2: Peekaboo Advertising

At this point the gay community has its foot in the door, and it is time to ask the networks to accept gay sponsorship of certain ads and shows. Timing is critical: the request must be made immediately after our national political ads disappear. Failing that, we should request sponsorship the next time one of our networks struts its broad-mindedness by televising a film or show with gay characters or themes. If they wish to look consistent instead of hypocritical, we'll have them on the spot.

But the networks would still be forced to say No unless we made their resistance look patently unreasonable, and possibly illegal. We'd do that just by proposing "gay ads" patterned exactly after those currently sponsored by the Mormons and others. As usual, viewers would be treated to squeaky-clean skits on the importance of family harmony and understanding -- but this time the narrator would end by saying, "This message was brought to you by -- the National Gay Task Force." All very quiet and subdued. Remember: exposure is everything, and the medium is the message.

The gay community should join forces with other civil liberties groups of repeatable cast to promote bland messages about America the Melting Pot, always ending with an explicit reference to the Task Force of some other gay organization. Making the best of a bad situation, we can also propose sympathetic media appeals for gifts and donations to fund AIDS research -- if Jerry Lewis and the March of Dimes can do it, so can we. Our next indirect step will be to advertise locally on behalf of support groups peripheral to the gay community: frowzy straight moms and ads announcing phone numbers and meeting times for "Parents of Gays" or similar gatherings. Can't you just see such ads now, presented between messages from the Disabled Vets and the Postal Worker's Union?

Visual Stage 2: Roll Out the Big Game

By this point, our salami tactics will have carved out, slice by slice, a large portion of access to the mainstream media. So what then? It would finally be time to bring gay ads out of the closet. The messages of such ads should directly address lingering public fears about homosexuals as loathsome and contrary aliens. For examples, the following are possible formats for TV or radio commercials designed to chip away at chronic misperceptions.

Format A for Familiarization: The Testimonial. To make gays seem mysterious, present a series of [words illegible on our original copy-]_____ spots featuring the boy- or girl- _____ door, fresh and appealing, or w_____ lovable grandma and grandpa _____. Seated in homey surroundings _____ respond to an off-camera interviewer _____ assurance, good nature, and _____. Their comments bring out _____ facts:

- (1) There is someone special _____ life, a long-term relationship _____ gay stability, monogamy, commitment);
- (2) Their families are very important to them, and are supportive of them (to stress that gays are not “anti-family,” and that families need not be anti-gay);
- (3) As far as they can remember, they have always been gay, and were probably born gay; they certainly never decided on a preference one way or the other (stressing that gays are doing what is natural for them, and are not being willfully contrary).

The subjects should be interviewed alone, not with their lovers or children, for to include others in the picture would unwisely raise disturbing questions about the complexities of gay social relations, which these commercials could not explain. It is best instead to take one thing at a time.

Format B for Positive Associations: The Celebrity Spot. While it might be useful to present celebrity endorsements by currently popular gay figures and straight sympathizers (Johnny Mathis? Marlo Thomas?), the homophobic climate of America would make such brash endorsements unlikely in the near future. So early celebrity spots will instead identify historical gay or bisexual personalities who are illustrious and dignified . . . and dead. The ads could be sardonic and indirect. For example, over regal music and a portrait or two, a narrator might announce simply:

William Shakespeare -- the greatest playwright in the history
of the English language. Yet, if he were alive today, some people
wouldn't let him teach a high school English class. Now isn't
that a shame?

The rhetorical question forces the viewer to answer Yes. And to explain the Bard's failing, the ad would end simply: "A message from the National Gay Task Force." Similar commercials could feature Michelangelo (an art class), Tchaikovsky (a music class), Tennessee Williams (a drama class), etc.

Format C for Victim Sympathy: Our Campaign to Stop Child Abuse. As we said earlier, there are many ways to portray gays as victims of discrimination: images of brutality, tales of job loss and family separation, and so on. But we think something like the following 30-second commercial would get to the heart of the matter best of all.

The camera slowly moves in on a middle-class teenager, sitting alone in his semi-darkened bedroom. The boy is pleasing and unexceptional in appearance, except that he has been roughed up and is staring silently, pensively, with evident distress. As the camera gradually focuses in on his face, a narrator comments:

It will happen to one in every ten sons. As he grows up, he will realize that he feels differently about things than most of his friends. If he lets it show, he'll be an outsider, made fun of, humiliated, attacked. If he confides in his parents, they may throw him out of the house, onto the streets. Some will say he is "anti-family." Nobody will let him be himself. So he will have to hide. From his friends, his family. And that's hard. It's rough enough to be a kid these days, but to be the one in ten . . .

A message from the National Gay Task Force.

What is nice about such an ad is that it would economically portray gays as innocent and vulnerable, victimized and misunderstood, surprisingly numerous yet not menacing. It also renders the "anti-family" charge absurd and hypocritical.

Format D for Identification with Victims: The Old Switcheroo. The mainstream will identify better with the plight of gays if straights can, once in a while, walk a mile in gay shoes. A humorous television or radio ad to help them do this might involve a brief animated or dramatized scenario, as follows.

The camera approaches the mighty oak door of the boss's office, which swings open, and the camera (which represents you, the viewer) enters the room. Behind the oversized desk sits a fat and scowling

old curmudgeon chomping on a cigar. He looks up at the camera (i.e., the viewer) and snarls, "So it's you, Smithers. Well. You're fired!" The voice of a younger man is heard to reply, with astonishment, "But -- but -- Mr. Thornbug, I've been with your company for ten years. I thought you liked my work." The boss responds, with a tone of disgust, "Yes, yes, Smithers, your work is quite adequate. But I've heard rumors that you've been seen around town with some kind of girlfriend. A girlfriend! Frankly, I'm shocked. We're not about to start hiring any heterosexuals in this company. Now get out." The younger man speaks once more: "But boss, that's just not fair! What if it were you?" The boss glowers back as the camera pulls quickly out of the room and the big door slams shut. Printed on the door: "A message from the National Gay Task Force."

One can easily imagine similar episodes involving housing or other discrimination.

Format E for Vilification of Victimiziers: Damn the Torpedoes. We have already indicated some of the images which might be damaging to the homophobic vendetta: ranting and hateful religious extremists, neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klansmen made to look evil and ridiculous (hardly a difficult task).

These images should be combined with those of their gay victims by a method propagandists call the "bracket technique." For example, for a few seconds an unctuous beady-eyed Southern preacher is seen, pounding the pulpit in rage about "those sick, abominable creatures." While his tirade continues over the soundtrack, the picture switches to pathetic photos of gays who look decent, harmless, and likable; and then we cut back to the poisonous face of the preacher, and so forth. The contrast speaks for itself. The effect is devastating.

Format F for Funds: S.O.S. Alongside or during these other persuasive advertisements, we would have to solicit donations so that the campaign might continue. Direct appeals from celebrities (preferably living ones, thank you) might be useful here. All appeals must stress that money can be given anonymously (e.g. via money orders) and that all donations are confidential. "We can't help unless you help," and all that.

The Time is Now

We have sketched out here a blueprint for transforming the social values of straight America. At the core of our program is a media campaign to change the way the average citizens view homosexuality. It is quiet easy to find fault with such a campaign. We have tried to be practical and specific here, but the proposals may still have a visionary sheen.

There are one hundred reasons why the campaign could not be done or would be risky. But there are at least 20 million good reasons why some such program must be tried in the coming years: the welfare and happiness of every gay man and woman in this country demand it. As the last large, legally oppressed minority in American society, it is high time that gays took effective measures to rejoin the mainstream in pride and strength. We believe that, like it or not, such a campaign is the only way of ding so anytime soon.

And, let us repeat, time may be running out. The AIDS epidemic is sparking anger and fear in the heartland of straight America. As the virus leaks out of homosexual circles and into the rest of society, we need to have no illusions about who is receiving the blame. The ten years ahead may decide for the next forty whether gays claim their liberty and equality or are driven back, once again, as America's cause of detested untouchables. It's more than a quip: speak now or forever hold your peace.