



February 7, 2010

To obtain rights, gays must step up pressure

COMMUNITY VIEW

By *DOUGLAS MARSHALL-STEELE*

Gays, increasingly frustrated by Democrats' inaction on their civil rights issues, are pushing back and setting a new standard for what is acceptable in their political leaders.

It all started with President Barack Obama, whose campaign promises included ending "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," pushing for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, overturning the misnamed Defense of Marriage Act and addressing other lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender priorities. Gay people, already strongly Democratic, jumped aboard with much campaign support. "The fierce urgency of now" suggested the end of advising gays to exercise infinite patience.

More than a year later, the president has signed only one piece of LGBT legislation, the hate crimes bill, which was part of a must-have war funding bill.

The Democratically controlled Congress, too, failed to use its window of opportunity to redress injustice against LGBT citizens -- the only group of Americans today that is discriminated against under federal law. With 79 percent of Americans supporting gays serving openly in the military (CNN, 2007), and 89 percent saying gays should have equal employment opportunities (Gallup, 2008), our Congress could work more strenuously for justice and still save their, um, assets.

When is the time right?

Of course, their defense is that our nation faces greater problems that require their undivided attention: unemployment, health care reform, two wars. That would be credible if the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act had been passed during a tranquil era when nothing much else was happening. Somehow, President Johnson and Congress rose to the occasion despite simultaneously being involved in Vietnam, the War on Poverty, the Cold War and nuclear proliferation.

Into the leadership vacuum have stepped some nationally influential LGBT leaders, who formulated The Dallas Principles to hopefully end assumptions by political leaders that the gay and transgender community can be bought off with promises and incrementalism.

The Dallas Principles document states:

The following eight guiding principles underlie our call to action. In order to achieve full civil rights now, we avow:

- Full civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals must be enacted now. Delay and excuses are no longer acceptable.
- We will not leave any part of our community behind.
- Separate is never equal.

- Religious beliefs are not a basis upon which to affirm or deny civil rights.
- The establishment and guardianship of full civil rights is a nonpartisan issue.
- Individual involvement and grass-roots action are paramount to success and must be encouraged.
- Success is measured by the civil rights we all achieve, not by words, access or money raised.
- Those who seek our support are expected to commit to these principles.

Politicians are put on notice

Politicians whose only contact with the LGBT community is at campaign time would do well to take heed to this new, higher standard -- because there are other actions afoot.

The Gittings Trust Pledge calls for total non-support by the LGBT community of any office-seeker who doesn't sign the pledge. And then there are disenchanted gay and transgender voters who may just sit out an election. This might well play into the hands of anti-equality candidates, usually Republicans, whose platform is openly hostile to LGBT civil rights. Democrats and gays both lose when The Party of No wins.

In our own state, we who strive for LGBT equality have an added burden, "The Delaware Way," which among other things implies excessive political deference. So loath are we to upset the political status quo or disarrange our smiling political equanimity that sometimes we dither when we should be moving forward.

We must remind ourselves that civil rights never came to anyone who just meekly asked for them.
