

Freedom from bravery

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There have been two "ideals" which have shaped the development of the United States. While at times little more than myths, the ideals of respect for individual choice and the notion of equality have become intermeshed with the definition of America itself. Yet, today those two ideals are being trampled into the ground over the issue of homosexuality.

As if homosexuals did not already face enough problems in American society, two diseases have joined force to make their lives even more difficult. The first is AIDS which, according to a March 12, 1990 issue of Newsweek, not only has claimed to date the lives of at least 50,500 homosexuals and has infected another 82,500, but has also spread the epidemic of homophobia across the land of the free (as long as you follow white, Christian norms) and the home of the brave (as long as you are fighting for a cause of the free). Yet, homosexuals are clearly brave and are fighting back against both AIDS and against cultural laws that brand them abnormal or legal ones which often make them criminal.

Groups like ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund have formed to work for gay rights. While AIDS remains the number one issue, they are also fighting for family rights including child custody and gay marriage. While only two states (Wisconsin and Massachusetts) have laws banning discrimination against homosexuals, clearly the groups have begun to make progress. In a Gallup poll taken in the fall of 1989, 47 percent of adults believe that homosexuality should be legal (up from 33 percent in 1987) and 71 percent believe that homosexuals should have equal job opportunities compared with just 59 percent two years ago.

The groups also serve another important role: that of a support network in a still hostile world. As author and activist Darrel Rist Yates stated in Newsweek, the increase in anti-gay violence, the perpetuation of sodomy laws and civil rights abuses "are going to destroy more lives than AIDS ever will." American masculinist culture mandates that

all red-blooded American males go as far out of their way as possible to prove that they are not gay and often lesbians are labeled "butch" or "dyke," minimizing their femininity and separating them from the "normal" American woman. Everyday conversation also contains subtle reminders to the homosexual population that they are abnormal. The word "gay" itself has achieved a connotative definition of something weird or bad and being called a "homo" or faggot is clearly not a compliment. For homosexuals, it is far more than achieving mere legal equality. They are demanding that the ideals of *free* choice and equality (on all levels) apply to them as well.

Where are each of us going to fit into the Gay Rights Movement? Will we react violently and oppressively against fellow Americans in a time of need? Or maybe will we just bury our heads in the sand, plant a sign next to ourselves proclaiming "I'm not gay, leave me alone!" and hope that 'it' just goes away? Of course we could take up the banner of equality and free choice in our own actions and lives. This does not require our attendance at a march on Washington or signs in front of our houses proclaiming our support (although it does not preclude such positive action), it does mean working within each of our lives to accept people who have made different sexual choices than we have and to eliminate the discriminatory and often abusive language and actions toward homosexuality which have become part of American culture. Hatred and oppression cannot be overturned in one night, but through the hard work and dedication of millions of activists combined with the personal challenging and acceptance done by all Americans, the United States can live up to its national anthem and truly become the land of the free (for everyone) and the home of the brave (for all who wish to fight for any cause of freedom).

**I strongly urge everyone to read the article "The Future of Gay America" in the March 12, 1990 issue of Newsweek. I also wish to remind those who have a need of the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Student Outreach on campus. The group not only offers support and friendship, but also promises anonymity. For more information, please call Dr. Warren Hopkins at 289-8119.