

OPINION

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'Homophobia' cannot excuse public restroom 'tea time'

In Britain, "tea time" means Earl Grey, crumpets and pleasant conversation. At the University of Minnesota, however, the phrase has acquired an entirely different meaning. According to recent media reports, many university restrooms are late afternoon havens for anonymous gay sex. These trysts often occur at "tea time" in what are euphemistically known as "tearooms."

And, judging by the number of complaints, more men are choosing to take



COLUMNIST

their "tea time" at the university. Janitors are finding greater amounts of used condoms, pornography and semen in the restrooms. The university police are receiving more reports of sexual activity in places like bathrooms and stairwells. In recent weeks, the number of arrests have markedly increased.

Robert Halfhill, secretary-treasurer of ACT-UP, a gay activist group, believes that the university is cracking down on "tea time" because it is gay sexual activity.

"The university is putting more shame on gay men who've already had enough, growing up in a straight society," he says, adding that "this behavior is not going to stop until we live in a society where gay men can meet people as easily

as heterosexual men [can meet women]."

Wrong, Mr. Halfhill. This is not a harassment issue. This is about accepting one's responsibility to follow the same rules as every else. No one has the God-given right to engage in sexual activity in bathrooms or other public places — no matter what their sexual orientation.

What people choose to do in truly private places is their own business. When one enters a public domain like a university restroom, then the freedom to "let it all hang out" gets scaled back.

What is most disturbing about "tea time" is not the fact that there are anonymous sexual encounters in university bathrooms. Anonymous sex — gay or otherwise — is certainly nothing new. The real problem is the "it's-all society's fault" reaction of some gay activists. These misguided souls believe that America's homophobia makes gay men resort to clandestine sexual quickies in bathrooms and deserted stairwells.

This argument is illogical and fuels the paranoia of the homophobic. Think about it for a minute. Should one be able to break laws and social mores just because one feels "oppressed?" Does that mean that young African-American males, who

are among America's most persistent victims of discrimination, should be able to use profanity in public places, harass and threaten white people without consequence?

Of course not. No reasonable person would condone letting such conduct go unpunished. Our society believes that public use of profanity and threatening behavior is not acceptable. We do not tolerate it — even when the perpetrators are members of historically victimized groups.

One of the most common arguments during hullabaloo over the gays in the military was the fear of raging gay hormones. Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., and Gen. Colin Powell were able to use the images of gay bathroom sex to emasculate President Clinton's valiant effort to treat gays like human beings. Unfortunately, many Americans still believe that "gayness" equates to unbridled promiscuity. "Tea time" further fuels their self-righteous loathing of homosexuals.

Halfhill believes people should be able to do whatever they want to as long as it does not hurt others. He says that "consensual 'tea room' sex should be tolerated. I don't see how it harms anyone.

After all, the 'tea rooms' are one of the few places that gay men can feel safe."

Halfhill's thinking ironically makes gays less safe because it places gay men at greater risk for violence and reinforces the notion among some that they are some "different" from the rest of us.

Gays are not different. They bleed, laugh, cry, work and do all the same things that the rest of us do. They rightfully castigate the heterosexual majority for treating them like a subclass of citizens. Gays should be able to join the military, teach school and do anything any other American can do.

In return, gays should not use their history of oppression to condone anti-social and illegal conduct. Public restrooms should not be used for any purpose other than that for which they were designed. Sexual activity of any sort, between any combination of individuals, is unacceptable there. University authorities should continue patrolling the restrooms and breaking up "tea parties."

And, all local gay rights groups support them in doing so.

Collins is a Minneapolis lawyer, writer and media commentator.