



In 1970, the first gay pride parade was a daring and hasty political protest by about 200 marchers. By last year, the parade was a six-hour party that drew hundreds of thousands of spectators.

Michael Evans/The New York Times

## For Gays, a Party In Search of a Purpose

### At 30, Parade Has Gone Mainstream As Movement's Goals Have Drifted



J. Emilio Flores/The New York Times

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

On a bright and sunny Sunday morning 30 years ago this week, a flock of perhaps 200 men and women — nervous and unsure of precisely what they were doing — gathered at Sheridan Square and then stepped onto the Avenue of the Americas to create a moment in history. For 60 minutes, they marched hastily up to Central Park, observing the first anniversary of an uprising at a gay bar in Greenwich Village, the Stonewall Inn.

It was a gay pride parade, the city's first, and it was as much a curiosity to the sometimes hostile onlookers as it was to the gay men and lesbians who dared to join it.

When that same parade steps off at noon today, this time onto Fifth Avenue,

its ranks will include some of the same gay men and lesbians who were there that first day, many of whom went on to create the nation's first post-Stonewall gay liberation groups, the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance. But the parade will also include the Democratic first lady of the United States, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and the Republican mayor of New York, Rudolph W. Giuliani.

It will count among its sponsors United Airlines and Budweiser beer. And if recent history is any guide, it will be a six-hour party — at points both randy and rowdy, albeit with political overtones — drawing hundreds of thousands of people from across the Eastern Seaboard. There will be gays and lesbians, to be

sure, but also their heterosexual friends, parents and even children, and enough elected politicians to fill a quorum in most city halls.

But to what end?

When the first march was organized from the Bleecker Street apartment of Craig Rodwell, one of many activists who said they were present when patrons fought back when police raided the Stonewall, the parade was intended as an act of anger and political affirmation. Mr. Rodwell, who died in 1993, envisioned a purposeful protest in a nation where there was no gay rights law, where sodomy was illegal, where police crackdowns on gay bars were commonplace,

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where homosexuality was portrayed in entertainment as perverse and threatening, if at all, and where the idea of living openly as a homosexual, much less announcing it with a march through Manhattan on a Sunday morning, was unthinkable.

But in the weeks leading up to the 30th anniversary of that first march, the State Legislature, after years of resistance by Republicans, passed a hate crimes bill that included protections for gays, just days after the United States Senate passed its own version of the bill. A run of corporations, including Coca-Cola and the big automakers in Detroit, have granted partnership benefits to same-sex couples.

President Clinton spoke before the Empire State Pride Agenda in Manhattan in October, his presence ultimately a reminder of how unremarkable it has become for a sitting president to appear before a gay lobbying group. Four years after Bob Dole refused to accept a contribution from a gay Republican organization, gay leaders sat down for a high-profile meeting with Gov. George W. Bush of Texas, the Republican candidate for president. The State of Vermont legalized gay civil unions, and even the C.I.A. has established a caucus for gay employees.

"Who would have dreamed 30 years ago that this much valuable progress would have been made?" asked Martin Duberman, one of the nation's preeminent gay historians. "I'm thrilled."

Yet as a result of that, the gay rights movement seems at times on the brink of being rendered irrelevant by its own success, as will no doubt be clear today in a march that is a far cry from the day of protest Mr. Rodwell envisioned 30 years ago. The fundamental question challenging the movement since its founding members gathered in the weeks after Stonewall, the uprising that marked the beginning of the modern gay rights movement, seems as daunting as ever: what, beyond the general notion of seeking what its leaders call equal rights, is it fighting for?

There is, of course, still abundant evidence of antipathy toward homosexuals: the fatal beating of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming in 1998, the denunciation of homosexuality by some Republican leaders, and the difficulties reported by gay men and women living outside urban centers. But a glance at the halls of Congress by day, or at the typical fare on television by night, suggests the vast cultural and legal advances this movement has made in a short 30 years.

Indeed, it was particularly striking that when Representative Rick A. Lazio, Mrs. Clinton's Republican opponent for the Senate, chose to skip today's parade, his decision was described even by Republicans as politically foolish. It almost went unnoticed that Mrs. Clinton went to a Democratic Party dinner in the Bronx, a county that has never been identified with the struggle for gay rights, to denounce it.

These questions of purpose are not new and they are, arguably, distinct to a movement that is not quite like any other civil rights movement that has crossed the American stage. As even a cursory glance at the participants in today's march will reveal, this is a highly diverse group of people of different colors, ideologies and incomes, bound by their sexual orientation and their perception that they are victims of discrimination because of it. It is hardly surprising that this movement has had such difficulty agreeing on a political agenda, a chronic battle that has accounted for much of the upheaval that has marked gay organizing in the 31 years since Stonewall.

When Janice Thomas, the chairwoman of this year's march organizing committee, was asked to describe its political agenda, she responded: "We're marching in favor of our equal rights. It is not more specific than that."

President Clinton's attempt to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the military captured the attention of the public in 1992 and dealt the movement one of its most visible defeats. But it was not a fight sought by many leaders of the gay movement, which still includes several veterans of the antiwar movement. Similarly, the push for gay marriage, which from the outside might seem to be the organizing goal of the movement these days, is scorned by a number of gays who argue that they neither want, nor need, that kind of societal sanction of gay relationships.

"My issues are not whether we

should be allowed to join the killing machine, and whether or not we should beg the state to legalize our unions," said Mr. Duberman, who was on the founding board of what was then called the National Gay Task Force. "I'm much more interested in how we can dismantle the killing machine and how we can challenge the orthodoxies relating to marriage."

The organizing call of the first wave of post-Stonewall leaders, or at least male ones, for sexual freedom has largely been overtaken by the AIDS epidemic, and the assertion by some that the disease was one consequence of the celebration of promiscuity. Even the hate-crime bills,

## Once a political protest, now brought to you by Budweiser.

which would create an extra level of penalties for crimes motivated by hatred of homosexuals, are a matter of dispute. While most gay leaders describe it as a fundamental issue, there are those like William K. Dobbs who argue that the legislation is patronizing and a violation of First Amendment prohibitions.

Jeff Soref, the co-executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, asserts that given the accomplishments of the gay rights movement so far, and the effort by gay couples to become, in effect, part of mainstream society, the task for organizations like his is to adjust by lobbying for a new round of gay concerns, such as permitting gay and lesbian couples to adopt children. "I don't agree with the people who say there's no agenda any-

more," Mr. Soref said. "I think it's an expanding agenda, and maybe it's more nuanced and subtler because the definition of who is considered part of the lesbian and gay community is now much more complex, and much more challenging."

Yet many gay leaders chafe even at that. "We may be becoming too mainstream; we've lost some of the bite," said Robert W. Bailey, an associate professor of public policy and administration at Rutgers, who has examined gay voting patterns.

And today's march? For 30 years, the parade has offered a window on the statement of the gay movement in New York City, be it the rough-hewn expressions of political protest it offered in the early 1970's, the heartbreaking wake it became during the height of the AIDS crisis, or even the party it has become today. Mr. Rodwell would no doubt be unhappy to see what has become of his march, today anchored by floats representing the city's gay bars and discos, and sandwiched by a procession of parties and dances. To his death, Mr. Rodwell lamented how bar owners had succeeded in changing the route of the parade so that it went south into Greenwich Village, spilling thousands of celebrators onto the streets and into gay bars, which learned early that there was profit in politics.

But then, the world has changed a lot since Mr. Rodwell's death, and so has the march. And is that such a bad thing? Virginia Apuzzo, one of the most influential lesbian leaders of the 1980's, said that the parade had become a "manifestation of political clout," and at that, was no different from the Puerto Rican Day Parade. Emily Giske, the openly lesbian vice chairwoman of the New York State Democratic Party, has an even less numbered view of this day.

"It's a celebration," Ms. Giske said. "New York's gays and lesbians, and their friends and families, look at the last Sunday in June as their holiday."