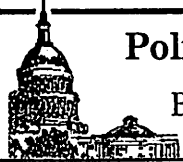


Hormel Nomination Fracas Is About Intolerance

Fifteen years ago, I traveled around New York state for several days with the recently-elected Gov. Mario Cuomo. One evening, he went to a gay and lesbian dinner. In the meantime, his press secretary—a young man who seemed to have a future, named Tim Russert—and I did what reporters and sources did in those days: We went out drinking.

The next day, the governor, always the philosopher-politician, expounded on how to approach homosexuality. He advised me to assume that my then-infant child was gay and then ask how he should be treated on any particular issue.

It was simple but sound advice and has served as an excellent guidepost. Should qualified gays be automatic delegates at



Politics & People

By Albert R. Hunt

political conventions? No. Permitted to serve in the military? Yes. Be allowed to adopt children? Yes, providing the supply of qualified heterosexual couples is exhausted. Then there are the easy calls: Of course, qualified gays or lesbians should be school teachers, judges, CEOs and ambassadors.

Which brings us to the case of James C. Hormel, whose nomination as ambassador to Luxembourg was overwhelmingly endorsed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last November. But it is languishing as Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, pandering to the religious right, refuses to let it come to a vote in the full Senate. The Christian right engages in all manners of distortion to disguise the reason they oppose the wealthy San Francisco investor: He is openly gay.

This is a fight about symbolism. The population of Luxembourg is only 400,000,

and the tiny duchy has no strategic importance. Mr. Hormel was picked because he was a Clinton campaign contributor, but he's well qualified: A former University of Chicago Law School dean, he served capably at the United Nations and has been endorsed by former Republican Secretary of State George Shultz.

But the real significance of the confirmation struggle is what it says about the religious right, its clout with the Republican Party and why the intolerance that has become its hallmark turns off many Americans.

Certainly, most people embrace the conservative Christian movement's family, faith and values agenda; some of the specific positions—against late-term abortions, for example—command considerable public support.

But unlike Billy Graham and other religious leaders, much of the religious right displays personal intolerance. Generalizations are not always fair; Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are apostles of hate, while Gary Bauer is not.

But some hot button issues, especially gays, bring out the worst in this movement. The Oklahoma House of Representatives, for example, under prodding from the religious right, this year voted to preclude public schools from hiring or contracting out to anyone who is a gay or lesbian.

Even many conservatives worry about the religious right. In a brilliant analysis of the GOP coalition's woes, conservative journalist Christopher Caldwell, in the current *Atlantic Monthly*, writes: "Conservative Christians are to the Republican Party what blacks were to the Democrats in the 1970s: its most loyal troops, the source of its most talented activists, its moral code. For that reason, they are also the main source of radicalization and overreach."

Overreaching and outright fabrication are ubiquitous in the ugly fight against Mr.

Hormel. The religious right insists the issue is not that he's gay but that he has publicly supported and financed an offensive gay lifestyle. The particulars include funding the James Hormel Gay and Lesbian Library in San Francisco, which critics say includes material on pedophilia and incest, not to mention that it's right next to the library's teen center; providing funding for a documentary for school teachers entitled "It's Elementary," which critics say promotes homosexuality; and Mr. Hormel's alleged anti-Catholicism, important because Luxembourg is a Catholic country.

Andrea Sheldon, executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition, which represents 32,000 conservative Christian churches around the country, spent two full days at the Hormel Gay and Lesbian Library in San Francisco and says she was "shocked" at some of the material there. But Ms. Sheldon refuses to say whether she believes that homosexuals generally should be barred from diplomatic service. And she ignores the fact that while Mr. Hormel provided funding, he had nothing to do with choosing the library's contents.

The "It's Elementary" documentary—the portion or the excerpts I saw, distributed by the Family Research Council, presumably includes the most uncomfortable parts—is sophomoric. But it's more about acceptance than proselytizing. Mr. Hormel only was a minor contributor. (A wealthy heir of the Hormel meat fortune, over 80% of his charitable contributions have gone to nongay causes like education and the arts.)

The sole basis for the anti-Catholic

charge apparently is that during a televised gay and lesbian parade in San Francisco, an obnoxious group called the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence marched, and Mr. Hormel was supposedly heard laughing off camera. Moreover, Luxembourg has said it would welcome "with pleasure" an Ambassador Hormel.

It's not altogether clear how the purity patrol thinks that Mr. Hormel will spread the gay agenda or why they fear that if it's Luxembourg today, next will come Belgium and then Liechtenstein and then who knows what or where.

But Mr. Hormel has promised that not only does he have no intention of sexual proselytizing, but that he'll have his name removed from any fundraising activities and, while ambassador, will contribute only to educational and cultural organizations. The only boards he would stay on would be Swarthmore College, his alma mater, and the San Francisco Symphony.

The nomination has been endorsed by George Shultz (Ms. Sheldon suggests that the strong-willed former Secretary of State was coerced by his wife), and such stalwart conservative senators as Orrin Hatch (R., Utah) and Gordon Smith (R., Ore.). Some 58 senators publicly support the nomination.

But several conservative senators, including James Inhofe (R. Okla.)—who, incredibly, has likened Mr. Hormel to racist David Duke—are blocking even a vote on the nomination. They are doing the bidding of conservative Christian organizations. Trent Lott, figuring this is an easy bone to throw the religious right, hasn't let the nomination come to a vote.

This tactic may work. It matters little who is ambassador to Luxembourg. But what does matter and what is being revealed here is the intolerance of organizations that too often call the tune in the Republican party.



James C. Hormel