

With Gay Pride Observances, a Balancing Act

Administration Takes Differing Approaches To Agencies' Events

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"We're Here! We're Career!" That's the slogan of this year's annual gay pride celebration at ... the Justice Department.

That would be the same Justice Department led by Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, a social conservative. Ashcroft has publicly equated homosexuality with sin and, as a senator, opposed a nominee as ambassador to Luxembourg because of the candidate's sexual orientation.

Ashcroft's No. 2, Deputy Attorney General Larry D. Thompson, will speak at the gay pride celebration June 19 in Justice's Great Hall on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Meanwhile, at the Commerce Department, management is allowing gay employees to proceed with events but has withheld official sponsorship.

And President Bush yesterday turned down a government employee group's request for a second straight year to issue a proclamation recognizing June as Gay and Lesbian Pride Month.

"The president believes every person should be treated with dignity and respect, but he does not believe in politicizing people's sexual orientation," White House spokeswoman Anne Womack said.

Justice's endorsement of a gay and lesbian celebration, Commerce's withholding of official support and Bush's denial of a proclamation capture the administration's delicate balancing act when it comes to the gay community: aware of its conservative base, while trying not to alienate moderates and gay Republicans.

The mosaic of policies at various agencies is thrown into greater relief coming after a Democratic administration in which President Bill Clinton, in each of his final three years, issued a proclamation supporting Gay Pride Month.

Kitti Durham, the president of Federal Globe, the government-wide group supporting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender federal workers, expressed disappointment. She noted that in the last six months, Bush has issued proclamations designating February as National African American History Month; March as Irish American Heritage



FILE PHOTO/BY GERALD MARTINEAU—THE WASHINGTON POST

Betty DeGeneres, mother of gay actress Ellen DeGeneres, will speak at the OPM's gay pride celebration later this month.

Month and Women's History Month; and May as both Older Americans Month and Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month.

She pointed out that the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks killed a lesbian federal worker at the Pentagon, the gay co-pilot of American Airlines Flight 77 and a gay employee at the National Geographic Society.

"At a time when we should be unified and the contributions of all Americans should be recognized, for the president to basically remove the gay and lesbian community from other kinds of Americans, to separate us from other American communities, just sends a wrong signal," she said.

But conservative groups praised Bush's move. Family Research Council President Ken Connor said Bush's decision not to issue the gay pride proclamation was "appropriate."

"Having said that," he said, "when you look at the other agencies and the activities going on there, you have to ask yourself, 'Don't we have better things to do with taxpayers' money and federal workers' time, especially after the events of September 11th, than celebrating one's sexual behavior?'"

Andrea Lafferty, executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition, criticized the concept of Gay Pride Month and said that for years she has received e-mails from federal employees dis-



FILE PHOTO/BY TIM SLOAN—AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.) addressed employees in foreign affairs agencies on the global challenge of HIV and AIDS.

turbed by the event. She read from one yesterday: "Your federal tax dollars at work. What would our forefathers think of this?"

Yet gay employees such as Durham feel that progress is taking place.

Just yesterday, Rep. Jim Kolbe (Ariz.), the only openly gay Republican in Congress, addressed employees in foreign affairs agencies, on the global challenge of HIV and AIDS. Kolbe's talk was sponsored by Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies (GLIFAA) and the State Department's Office of Civil Rights.

"I thought it was wonderful that the State Department gave such support to this organization," Kolbe said. He said the group has come a long way since it was founded in 1992 with fewer than a dozen members.

Later this month, Betty DeGeneres, will speak at the Office of Personnel Management's gay pride celebration, with OPM support. Her daughter, actress Ellen DeGeneres, came out as a lesbian in 1997.

The politics of diversity has made for some intriguing twists.

Displaying the GOP "big tent" touch, Bush picked as his transportation secretary Norman Y. Mineta, a liberal Asian American who served in Clinton's Cabinet. Mineta became the only Cabinet official last year to issue a statement supporting Gay Pride Month.

This year, Christine Todd Whitman, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and a moderate former New Jersey governor, will, like Mineta, issue a statement of support.

"We still don't have as many agency heads signing statements as we had under the previous administration, which was almost every agency head," Durham said. "But it took us eight years to get to that point."

Bush has named to head his Office of National AIDS Policy Scott H. Evertz, the first openly gay appointee of any GOP administration, according to Human Rights Campaign, a national lesbian and gay group.

Since Evertz, the administration has appointed at least five other openly gay people, Smith said, including Ambassador to Romania David Guest. At Guest's swearing-in, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, an administration moderate, acknowledged Guest's partner, who was to accompany him to Bucharest.

David Smith, a Human Rights Campaign spokesman, said the Bush administration has been "very careful not to take any significant steps backward" in its treatment of gay citizens and federal workers. It has not rescinded Clinton's executive orders banning sexual orientation as a criterion in establishing security clearances, and barring discrimination in the nonuniform federal workforce on the basis of sexual orientation.

"However," he said, "they have been reluctant to take steps forward."

The Justice Department's participation in Gay Pride Month is understandable as part of "identity politics buffoonery that comes standard with every federal bureaucracy now," said Jonah Goldberg, editor of National Review Online, which provides conservative commentary on politics, news and culture.

Though it may seem "like a contradiction" that social conservatives are allowing such events, he said, they are also good managers who "understand the need to play to the priorities and the needs of the bureaucracy."

But Kolbe, who came out in 1996, said he "strongly" believes that the Republican Party is successful when it is centrist—as well as political parties in general.

"This is a country increasingly made up of diverse populations—minorities, women in politics," he said. "A party that does not recognize this kind of change, that is not flexible enough to absorb those groups into its base, is a party that is not going to survive."