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The Heckler's Veto

At the recent Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival in Boston, some 30 pro-choice lesbians obstructed access to an exhibitor's table. They sat on the table, threw brochures on the ground, and shouted fierce imprecations—among them, "Fascists!"—at the two gays who were seated there.

The object of the vigilantes was the literature and presence of PLAGAL (the Pro-Life Alliance of Gays and Lesbians). The organization has some 400 members in five chapters around the country. It is decidedly nonviolent and has unequivocally condemned the murders and other violence by alleged supporters of life at abortion clinics.

Philip Arcidi, president of the group, cites—as a particular reason why he and his associates are pro-life—their concern that "if, as recent scientific discoveries suggest, homosexuality has a genetic basis, the day is not far off when doctors will be able to determine if a child in the womb is predisposed to be gay."

"At that point," Arcidi fears, "it will be possible to do by legal surgery what all the homophobes through history have tried and failed to do—eliminate lesbians and gays once and for all."

There was no time to debate this with the marauding pro-choicers, who came to number at least 50, and had become so loud and menacing that the police were called.

Having to shout to be heard, the police told the besieged Philip Arcidi and his colleague James Geller that while they had the right to be there, "we can't necessarily ensure your safety." Two officials of the

festival added that since the pro-life gays' presence was creating a disturbance for everyone else, it would be best if they left.

Arcidi told me that he had every intention of staying "until I realized that nobody was going to support our right of expression."

It was a classic illustration of what, in First Amendment law, is called "the heckler's veto." If someone's right to assemble and speak is shattered by hecklers who suppressed the speakers, the First Amendment has been violated. And it is the responsibility of the police to remove the hecklers rather than urge the speakers to disperse under fire.

One young woman, a lesbian taking part in the

festival, did understand what was happening to free speech that day. She told the invaders, "Look, I'm with you. I'm pro-choice. But what you're doing is absolutely wrong. This has to stop."

The rowdies did stop—once the pro-life gays had been routed, with the approval of the police.

SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY

During reports on the event in several gay weeklies around the country, the police were not so much reprimanded as was the posse of pro-choice lesbians. In an editorial in a Boston gay paper it was noted: "We need not look to the Supreme Court or Capitol Hill to find forces intent on quashing free speech of gays and lesbians. It happened right in the Gay and Lesbian Pride Fest in Boston. . . . We must all realize that when the freedom of anyone to express their pride, their views, or participate in a public event is curtailed, the liberty of us all is threatened."

On the other hand, in a letter to Bay Windows, another gay weekly in Boston, one of the proud warriors, who had been part of that purifying expedition, wrote: "When you know

who you are and walk together, strong and united by love, you advance to build an expanding circle of justice, freedom and passion."

George Orwell might have enjoyed so inspirational an example of newspeak.

Arcidi, understandably rather bitter, wrote an essay on his experience that has been reprinted by several gay publications. "The police's inaction bodes ominously for all gays and lesbians. It implies that the rule of the mob prevails when the gay community gets together.

"First Amendment rights don't matter. You needn't pretend that their civil rights are as good as those of straights. Just let the noisiest queers have their way."

Arcidi then asked: "Suppose we, at the festival, had been encircled by homophobes, instead of lesbians, and the police said they couldn't insure our safety. How would the gay community have reacted to negligence then? With an uproar!

"If lesbians and gays want to overcome dogmatism and intolerance in mainstream society, we must eliminate dogmatism and intolerance in our ranks. We must not do the work of the homophobes by stereotyping ourselves and enforcing a 'party line' to which all must conform."