

In Near Future: A Swan Song for the Closet? Politicos, celebs made news in '06 by coming out

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By Ryan Lee

Having confined and defined much of modern gay existence, “the closet” showed once again in 2006 that it is still a mighty force.

In fact, some believe the closet is steadily inching toward irrelevance, as successive generations of gay and lesbian youth settle into their sexual orientation without first surrounding it with four walls of angst, denial, duplicity and shame.

The 2006 version of the closet helped fuel best-selling memoirs and a breathtaking power shift in Congress. The closet opened its doors on the set of America’s most popular television series and inside one of the nation’s most influential megachurches.

And whereas coming out of the closet was long considered social and professional suicide, in 2006 it proved anything but.

“Lance Bass coming out—it reminded us of the fact that he existed,” said David Ehrenstein, a gay writer and critic who was shocked that a member of a '90s boy band announcing he is gay pulled front-page coverage in People Magazine in 2006.

“Outside of Republicans, [the closet] is going to recede as more and more people are going to be out from Day One so it won’t be an issue,” said Ehrenstein, author of “Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928–1998.”

Celebrities such as Neil Patrick Harris, aka “Doogie Howser, MD,” offered one of the feel-good coming out stories of the year, but the American public was also once again exposed to the darker side of the closet.

“People who weren’t living honest lives hurt a lot of people,” said Patrick Sammon, president of the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay partisan group.

Sammon’s party was sent into a tailspin one month before the midterm elections when U.S. Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) abruptly resigned from Congress amidst allegations that he made sexual overtures to teenage male Capitol pages.

Weeks later, conservatives were rocked by another gay sex scandal, after the Rev. Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, was accused by a gay escort of having sex while high on crystal methamphetamine.

“Sadly, this just happens year, after year, after year—the closet, unfortunately, is an enduring reality,” said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force. “2006 once again underscored the dangers of the closet ... how it can warp and destroy people’s lives and careers.”

Politics of the Closet

Foley's sexually charged instant messages to young Capitol pages became one of the most shameful acts to emerge from the closet in 2006, but the congressman's public fall also offered promising signs about how the American public deals with gay people coming out.

"The most negative thing about this year's closet scandals was the association of Foley to the sexual exploitation of young people," Foreman said. "The right wing went on an orchestrated campaign to repeat blood libel that gay men are prone to pedophilia."

But that effort by conservatives to harp on Foley's sexual orientation was unsuccessful because many voters believed "the way the Republican leadership mishandled it was really the issue here," Sammon said.

Mark Shields, director of the Human Rights Campaign's Coming Out Project, noted that polls taken in the wake of Foley's resignation showed that "people really understood it wasn't a gay issue that made Foley a scandal.

Foley's coming out also revealed other characteristics of the modern closet: its appeal as an "escape hatch" to political figures in crisis (like former New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey, who released his best-selling tell-all in 2006), and the various gradations of being in the closet that currently exist.

Foley's lawyer announced that "Mark Foley wants you to know he is a gay man," within days of the congressional page scandal breaking, though Foley was widely considered an "openly closeted" politician.

But few people seemed to have known about Ted Haggard's double life before it was exposed by a gay male escort. The contrast displays the "different levels of outness" that exist today, Shields said.

"The sadness of the Ted Haggard story was that he was a liar and played on people's fears, and couldn't be true to who he was," Shields said. "I think what people saw there was a hypocrisy to the attacks that go on against gay and lesbian couples, and gay and lesbian families."

That sense of hypocrisy among conservatives and Republicans helped amplify the discontent many voters were feeling with the country's political leadership, Foreman said.

"I think there were much larger issues than Mark Foley that influenced the elections, but with that said, I think both the Foley and Haggard scandals reinforced the perception of the right wing forces of the Republican Party as being cynical hypocrites," Foreman said. "To that extent, I think they helped influence the elections."

Lifting the Curtains

HRC's Shields said many people collectively "rolled their eyes" upon seeing Lance Bass' grinning face on People Magazine with the headline, "I'm gay."

But some young gay people "viewed it as a profound moment" that someone from their childhood came out as gay, Shields said.

But not everyone is convinced celebrity outings have much impact on the way society views gay people.

"Coming out doesn't help Matthew Sheppard, or the kids who come out and could still get disinherited," said David Van Leer, who teaches about gay Hollywood at the University of California, Davis. Still, Ehrenstein believes there were encouraging trends surrounding celebrities who came out in 2006, like actor T.R. Knight, who announced he was gay after

being called a faggot by a co-star on “Gray’s Anatomy.”

“Twenty years ago, a gay actor who someone called ‘that faggot’ on the set—he would have shut up,” Ehrenstein said.

Instead, Knight responded to the on-set incident by issuing a statement to People Magazine: “While I prefer to keep my personal life private, I hope the fact that I’m gay isn’t the most interesting part of me.” The candor of this statement was similar to the one issued to—who else, People Magazine—by Neil Patrick Harri

The statements are also similar since they were issued by stars who are peaking in their careers, as Harris is experiencing a renaissance playing an obnoxious metrosexual on “How I Met Your Mother.”

“There is a growing case to be made that being out and being open does not mean the end of your career,” Shields said.

Ellen DeGeneres coming out of the closet in 1997 prompted global media coverage, but Shields noted that this year’s news about celebrity outings was “barely mentioned on the crawler on CNN” (save for the cover of People Magazine).

But there remains a lavender ceiling in Hollywood, Van Leer said.

“The only reservation I have about [celebrities who came out in 2006] is they’re middle stars,” said Van Leer, noting widespread speculation about celebrities such as Jodie Foster and Anderson Cooper. “You wish we could up it one level.”

The generally nonchalant acceptance of gay and lesbian entertainers, juxtaposed against the turmoil and scandal of closeted politicians and opinion-makers, shows “the political world is at least 15, if not 20, years behind” how the rest of society views gay men and lesbians, Foreman said.