



A Bête Noir Bites the Dust

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Within an hour or so of the announcement that Jerry Falwell, the Christian right minister and Moral Majority founder, had died at 73, Gay City News received virtually identical messages - via e-mail and cell-phone text - from two early ACT UP stalwarts who have remained active over the past 20 years on critical health issues facing gay men and others.

As advocates, Eric Sawyer and Spencer Cox are very serious men, but the thrust of the messages from both was: "I'm reminded of Bette Davis' probably-apocryphal comment on the passing of Joan Crawford: 'My mother always said one should only speak good of the dead. Joan Crawford is dead. Good.'"

In San Francisco, AIDS activist Michael Petrelis led a group of six who gathered at the corner of 18th and Castro Tuesday at 5 p.m. to hold an "anti-memorial," backed up by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence who performed "a purification ritual, to heal all gays who had been subjected to Falwell's hatred over the decades."

And Andrew Miller, also an AIDS activist dating back to the '80s and the news editor of New York's Outweek magazine at that time, quickly circulated the Times' Web obituary, apparently to numerous addresses, with the note, "Forgive the mass e-mail, but I've been waiting so many years to send this obituary."

Such venom will surely strike some as disproportionate for a man who in recent years seemed almost to have become a caricature of himself.

In 1999, National Liberty Journal, the monthly that Falwell's Lynchburg, Virginia-based Liberty University publishes, alerted parents to the threat posed by Tinky Winky, one of the beloved Teletubbies of public TV-fame.

"He is purple - the gay pride color - and his antenna is shaped like a triangle - the gay pride symbol," the magazine wrote, with no tongue visible in cheek.

Two-and-a-half years later, on September 13, 2001, Falwell, appearing on fellow Christian right minister Pat Robertson's "700 Club," offered an explanation for that week's terrorist attacks on New York and Washington that, for almost anyone else, would have been a career-ender.

"I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

The remark was immediately blasted from all quarters, Falwell apologized later the same day, and looking back on that and the Teletubbie farce, it is tempting to dismiss Falwell as a marginal figure, a crank on the American political landscape.

Yet, in the two decades from the founding of the Moral Majority until the Tinky Winky denouement, Falwell fully earned the epitaph offered this week by Matt Foreman, executive

director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force - that he was "a founder and leader of America's anti-gay industry."

In 1977, when Anita Bryant, the gospel singer and orange juice huckster, mounted her Save Our Children crusade to overturn a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida, Falwell had 21 years under his belt as a nationally-known fundamentalist preacher, broadcasting his radio and television "Old-Time Gospel Hour" from the sanctuary of his Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg. For many of those years, he had eschewed politics; in fact, as a segregationist in the 1960s he was critical of African-American ministers who mixed religion and politics- figures who provided much of the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Roe v. Wade abortion ruling in 1973 apparently radicalized him, opening up his eyes to the need to become politically engaged. But it was in Miami, four years later, that he seems to have truly warmed to his later role, initially as an acolyte of Bryant's.

According to "Out for Good," Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney's history of the gay rights movement, at an overheated rally late in the successful repeal campaign, Bryant told the crowd that gay people are "human garbage," who want the right "to have intercourse with beasts." Falwell jumped in right behind her, warning, "So-called gay folks would just as soon kill you as look at you."

A year later, Falwell would tail Bryant out to California as she joined the effort waged by state Senator John Briggs to pass a voter initiative barring gay men and lesbians from teaching in public schools. Unlike Dade, in California the right wingers over-reached, making strange political bedfellows of San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk and former Governor Ronald Reagan, who united to defeat the bid.

Curiously, Falwell did not cut a large figure in the view of gay activists who battled his cause in Florida and California. Ethan Geto, a longtime gay activist in New York, was in the trenches in Miami; this week, in an e-mail, he wrote, "I have no recollection of Falwell's role in 1977 in Dade County, although apparently he 'supported' Anita Bryant and her anti-gay crusade."

David Mixner, a New Yorker now who was for decades among the most prominent gay leaders in California, similarly minimized the role Falwell played in the Briggs fight.

"He was a little me too, me too, me too," Mixner said of Falwell's second-fiddle stature relative to Bryant.

But, significantly, Mixner added, in the wake of Dade and Briggs, Falwell soon ramped up his overt political profile. A year later, he founded the Moral Majority-and at the top of that group's agenda, right alongside ending abortion and restoring school prayer, was halting the rise of the radical homosexual movement.

"When Briggs ended, there was a period of quiet and he then he revived it," Mixner recalled of the aftermath of the 18-month flare-up during which gay rights took it on the chin in Florida and came back in California. "Hating homosexuality was a cash cow for him."

The 1980 presidential election provided the perfect opportunity for Falwell and the Moral Majority to flex their political muscle. Reagan, despite his apostasy on Briggs, became the darling of the religious right, first in his primary battle to dispatch George H.W. Bush, and then in his challenge to the born-again Christian incumbent, Jimmy Carter.

At the Republican Convention that summer, Reagan, snubbing the moderation of former President Gerald Ford, inserted an explicit anti-abortion plank in the party's platform, which has endured to this day. In August, he questioned evolution in front of a group of evangelicals. And just weeks before the November election, the future president traveled to Lynchburg at Falwell's

invitation to address a crowd of 8,000.

Still, for the moment Reagan remained a bit aloof regarding the Moral Majority's mission. According to a Time magazine account of the Lynchburg rally, the most fire-and-brimstone the Republican candidate mustered was the observation, "I don't believe we should ever have expelled God from the classroom."

Still, by 1981, Falwell had an ally in the White House, and as the AIDS tragedy unfolded beginning that year, he quickly grasped his main chance. It was his posture on AIDS, more than anything else, that seems to have fueled the rage so many gay Americans feel toward Falwell.

At an "I love America" rally in Cincinnati in July 1983, Falwell explained that he did not hate gays, just their "perverted lifestyle." In a debate with the Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the LGBT Metropolitan Community Church, on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation the same year, Falwell took aim at gay bathhouses, saying they were the site of "dirty, vulgar, filthy, bloody occurrences, or worse, including anal sex."

"God does not judge people, he judges sin," he said. Homosexuality, he continued, is a "violation of God's law, and the laws of nature and decency. We pay the price when we violate God's laws."

Carmen Vazquez, the deputy executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, who for years served as policy director at New York's LGBT Community Center, recalled the impact of Falwell's tirades.

"His contribution to the public hysteria about AIDS made it so much more difficult to have a rational discussion with the American public about an epidemic which was just as dangerous to them as it was to us," she said this week.

Michael Bronski, a Boston-based gay journalist and author, writing in 2004 in Z Commentary Online, pointed to Falwell's more insidious impact as a political insider. His words had a profound impact on right-wing members of Congress including California's William Dannemeyer and North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, who, along with Reagan domestic policy advisor Gary Bauer, played the lead roles in guaranteeing the staggering underfunding for the epidemic in its early years. A 1995 New York Times article quoted Helms as arguing that minimal AIDS funding was justified because gays contracted AIDS through "deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct."

"He terrorized the Reagan people to not do anything," Mixner said. "If I had to pick five people who did the most damage to the AIDS movement- we could have had protease inhibitors in the '80s instead of the '90s- Jerry Falwell would certainly be among those five. No question about it."

Foreman offered the very same judgment, saying Falwell "exacerbated the nation's appalling response to the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic."

According to the Reverend Mel White, a gay minister who now leads Soulforce, a group dedicated to turning around religious thinking about the LGBT community, Falwell explicitly acknowledged the financial bonanza the AIDS epidemic offered him. When Falwell turned up in San Francisco at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, he was met by an enormous turnout of AIDS and gay activists. Appearing on CNN's "Anderson Cooper's 360" Tuesday evening, White, who at that time had not come out and worked for Falwell, remembered the Moral Majority leader telling him, "They played right into my hands. Those poor dumb fairy demonstrators gave me the best media coverage I've ever had. If they weren't out there, I'd have to invent them."

Clendinen and Nagourney write that Falwell used photographs of that gay protest in a fundraising mass-mailing, using envelopes stamped with the message: "For adults only. Explicit photographs enclosed. Please do not let these photos fall into the hands of innocent, impressionable children." The photographs inside included two men kissing and one demonstrator dressed as Christ, and complaints from Falwell that he witnessed "tongues intertwined, openly in public" and a warning

that "Homosexuals everywhere are doing these immoral acts, blatantly, openly, in plain view of our children."

Some news accounts this week have suggested that Falwell mellowed in his attitude toward gays in more recent years. Indeed in 2005, he told MSNBC's Tucker Carlson that he did not view gay rights protections as "special rights," a concession for which he won praise from the Washington-based Human Rights Campaign.

Still, in 2003, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, threw out the nation's sodomy laws, he said, "This is probably as bad a day as the court has had on social issues since *Roe v. Wade*."

He was an implacable foe of gay marriage.

And to the day of this death, Falwell remained a totemic political figure. In 2000, as presidential candidate George W. Bush faced criticism for his visit to Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist Christian college that barred interracial dating, his chief rival for the Republican nomination, John McCain, charged that the Texas governor was cozying up to the likes of Falwell and Robertson, whom he described as "agents of intolerance" and "corrupting influences on religion and politics."

Bush surmounted the liabilities of such associations; in fact they were a key to his victory in the South Carolina primary, which proved a defining turn in his contest with McCain. Six years later, in May 2006, the bitterness of 2000 as well as Falwell's outrageous 9-11 comments apparently forgotten, or at least forgiven, McCain, undoubtedly mindful of his intention to seek the presidency one more time, gave the commencement address at Liberty University in Lynchburg.