

ADVOCATE.COM

Play Nice, Folks

Why confrontation is exactly the wrong approach when it comes to getting what you want.

By James Kirchick
February 02, 2009

Leave it to Melissa Etheridge to demonstrate more political savvy than the entire gay rights establishment.

When Barack Obama announced that Rick Warren -- pastor of the 20,000-member Saddleback megachurch in California -- would deliver the invocation at his inauguration, the Grammy-winning composer of the theme song to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* reached out to Warren. Overcoming her initial hesitation, Etheridge invited the reverend to her home for dinner with her partner and their children. They discussed the tribulations of breast cancer, which both Warren's wife and Etheridge have endured. More significantly, they found common ground on the status of gay unions, with Warren saying, according to Etheridge, that "he believed every loving relationship should have equal protection." Not bad for a rock star.

Compare Etheridge's approach to that of activists and writers who immediately denounced Obama. The Human Rights Campaign's Joe Solmonese called the choice "a genuine blow to LGBT Americans," and **the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force declared that Warren is nothing less than "an affront to our common humanity."**

To be sure, Warren is not the gay-friendliest person in the country. But then, not many religious leaders are, and most Americans sit in their pews. Warren's detractors point out that he supported Proposition 8. But so did most Californians.

As Etheridge discovered, Warren is a far cry from Jerry Falwell. Indeed, up until the Prop. 8 battle he had largely ignored homosexuality, devoting his time and attention to AIDS prevention and alleviating poverty in the Third World. Most important, he's on record as supporting some form of legal recognition for gay couples. Rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater, wouldn't it be smarter to try to persuade Warren and his flock that gay people deserve marriage rights?

It seems that many gays, especially those living in liberal cocoons (that is, most gay writers and the gay rights establishment), take an all-or-nothing approach. "This tone-deafness to our concerns must not be tolerated," declared Kevin Naff, editor of the *Washington Blade*. But if anyone demonstrated tone-deafness over the Warren selection, it was Obama's critics. Contrast their outrage over Warren to the way Warren himself reacted when Obama chose V. Gene Robinson, the gay Episcopal bishop who had joined the attacks on Obama just weeks earlier, to read a prayer at the opening of the inaugural ceremonies. Though Robinson has been the source of as much controversy from antigay forces as Warren has been from pro-gay ones, the Saddleback pastor rejected the easy antagonistic rhetoric of the religious right and opted for conciliation instead. Warren praised Obama by saying he "has again demonstrated his genuine commitment to bringing all Americans of goodwill together in search of common ground." Gays had a right to feel perturbed at the Warren selection. But with the 0-30 record we have in defeating antigay marriage amendments, gays are going to have to respond more carefully when such controversies arise in the future.

We have no choice but to engage with the moderate majority of Americans. But rather than engage, too many of us are prone to attack, and messily at that. For instance, the most oft-repeated charge against Warren -- that he had compared homosexuality to incest and pedophilia -- was exaggerated. Asked in an interview if he thought gay marriage was equivalent to pedophilia and incest, Warren uttered, "I do." Yet not long after those comments were publicized, Warren recorded a video clarifying his remarks, stating that what he meant to say was that redefining marriage could lead to the legalization of other, less benign relationships. Many people, myself included, may find this slippery-slope argument to be silly and cynical. Still, it's not the same thing as alleging that gay people are morally equivalent to pedophiles or fathers who wish to elope with their children. Certainly, to mention these practices in the same breath as homosexuality is dog whistling, and it's good that gay activists got Warren to recant. Yet even after his clarification, many continued to peddle the line that he'd equated homosexuality with incest and pedophilia in a way that was misleading and uncharitable.

Other aspects of the response to Prop. 8 have been similarly counterproductive. Looking at photos of the protests, I cringed every time I saw a poster with the equation *prop. 8 = hate*. A group of activists started a website titled Californians Against Hate, which lists donors to the Yes on 8 campaign. Of course, much of what is said about gay people could be qualified as hate speech. But not every argument against gay marriage is hateful. Many gay-marriage opponents support giving same-sex couples all the legal rights that straight ones enjoy but oppose calling these unions marriage for no more malevolent a reason than their stubborn resistance to change. We might disagree with these individuals, but in order to win legal equality we must persuade them, not hurl accusations of bigotry.

For too long gay activists have operated as if the righteousness of our cause was self-evident. This attitude is certainly understandable, seeing that for gay people, the virtue of fighting for equality is obvious. It feels demeaning to have to seek validation from a world that remains averse to acknowledging our dignity. Yet this is the world in which we live. It's a far-from-perfect place. But we've made great strides over the past few decades. And the situation gets better with each passing day. Reassuring demoralized African-Americans who never thought they would see the time when their government treated them equally, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." He might as well have been speaking about the struggle for gay equality.

Reading the history of the African-American civil rights movement, one notices that what's missing from today's gay activism is a sense of optimism. The marchers on Selma and the men and women who sat at the Woolworth's lunch counters in Greensboro were beaten, sprayed with water hoses, attacked with dogs, spat on, thrown into jail. But they waged those battles -- and emerged from the centuries of slavery, lynching, and terrorism preceding -- still preaching love and understanding toward the white people who treated them like animals. Such absolution seems unimaginable today, in part because so many gays reject religion, having realized at an early age that it supports an irrational rationale for homophobia. I'm not calling on the gay community to find God. But if we can capture the same equanimity displayed by the Freedom Riders and act with their sense of faith that the wind of history is at our back, we'll do a better job persuading the persuadable.

Some activists have pointed to the civil rights-era boycott as an example of an effective protest tactic. It made sense for blacks to boycott a bus system that made them sit in the back. And it's more than fair to boycott companies that contributed large amounts of money to revoke marriage equality. But what message does it send to moderate Americans when we demand the boycott of a mom-and-pop taco restaurant, one of whose employees gave a measly \$100 to Yes on 8? Or call for the firing of a film festival director who donated \$1,500? Such a tactic might be a good way to release pent-up anger, but it's only that: self-gratification. We're not winning any friends by ruining people's careers. It's thus heartening to hear that another national march on Washington is being planned for this fall, styled on King's history-changing 1963 rally. Let's hope the message

is positive and focuses on why gay citizens deserve the same rights as straight ones and not on why this or that preacher, this or that restaurant employee, is a bigot. As my friend Daniel Blatt of the GayPatriot blog says, most Americans are not instinctively pro-gay or antigay; they're anti-antigay. Let's use that temperament to our advantage.

In 1991 a group of activists from the radical gay group Queer Nation infiltrated the set of *The Arsenio Hall Show* and interrupted the comedian's opening routine, demanding to know why he didn't invite more openly gay guests to be on his program. The audience booed the hecklers, and the stunt represented the last gasp of the in-your-face tactics that gay activists had utilized since Stonewall. In the 1980s, when a whole generation of gay men was dying and no one seemed to care, we needed angry, brash gay activists to wake up the rest of the country. But we don't have to scream at Arsenio Hall to interview Gus Van Sant anymore -- and not just because Arsenio is washed up. That confrontational approach is as dated as the slogans on the Queer Nation T-shirts: *Queer Liberation Not Assimilation*. We need a gay movement that reflects its amazing successes, not its continuing frustrations.

For now, to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld in a way he never imagined he would be paraphrased, we must go to war with the movement we have, not the one we might wish to have. And by recognizing the common humanity of those people who don't recognize ours, we'll make our movement stronger. "There are also good people out there, Christian and otherwise, that are beginning to listen," Etheridge wrote of people like Warren. "They don't hate us, they fear change." That's an inconvenient truth that the gay rights movement would do well to recognize.