

GAY RIGHTS: Bigotry splits the party

By Patrick Guerriero and Charles Stadtlander

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Former President Ronald Reagan once said, "Whatever else history may say about me when I am gone, I hope it will record that I appealed to your best hopes and not your worst fears."

Unfortunately, too many Missouri Republican leaders are turning their backs on Reagan's legacy and using the politics of fear in an effort to marginalize gay and lesbian families.

In 1978, Reagan stepped forward to defend common decency by opposing a California ballot initiative that would have prevented gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools. The initiative was heading for victory until Reagan spoke out against it. He understood then what we understand now: All citizens deserve to be treated with basic fairness and respect.

Log Cabin Republicans formed during that pivotal campaign. Three decades later, Log Cabin has become the nation's largest organization of Republicans who support fairness, freedom and equality for gay and lesbian Americans.

The fight for gay rights is truly a conservative one. What is more conservative than protecting hard workers and fighting violent crime? What is more conservative than taking on the responsibility of caring for a life partner so that taxpayers don't have to? What is more conservative than seeking to serve openly and honestly in our military to help win the war against terror? What is more conservative than seeking to worship God as people of faith in churches, mosques and synagogues?

Forty years ago this month huge bi-partisan majorities in both the U.S. House and Senate passed the historic Voting Rights Act. The courageous stand taken by many members of Congress at that time stands in stark contrast to many of today's Republican politicians in Missouri who oppose any measure of basic fairness for gay and lesbian Americans.

The fight for racial equality is very different from the struggle for gay and lesbian rights; however, there are some important parallels. Coretta Scott King, widow of the slain civil rights leader, said that she believes there are significant similarities, so she supports equal rights for gay and lesbian Americans. She said, "As my husband, Martin Luther King Jr., said: 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Like Martin, I don't believe you can stand for freedom for one group of people and deny it to others."

Both these civil rights movements involve issues that are at the core of the meaning of liberty and equality in our free society. Just as you cannot choose your skin color, the overwhelming scientific evidence also indicates you cannot choose your sexual orientation. Countless studies of both humans and animals irrefutably show that human beings don't choose their sexual orientation.

Unfortunately, enemies of science, fact and common sense on the radical right continue misrepresenting the truth by using terms such as "lifestyle choice." We know more about the genetic causes of sexual orientation than we do about the genetic origins of handedness, but we don't say someone chooses the "left-handed lifestyle." Is it realistic to think people would choose to risk getting fired from their job, beat up, rejected by their family or turned away from their faith community? The answer is obviously "no."

We are all created in God's image. It isn't for us to understand why God made us the way we are. Those who advocate the marginalization of gay and lesbian people are turning their backs on God's creation.

People who use faith in an effort to justify their bigotry against gay people should listen to Missouri's former Republican Sen. John Danforth. He's an ordained Episcopal minister who is speaking out about the role of religion in politics. "The only absolute standard of behavior is the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

"Repeatedly in the Gospels, we find that the Love Commandment takes precedence when it conflicts with laws. We struggle to follow that commandment as we face the realities of everyday living, and we do not agree that our responsibility to live as Christians can be codified by legislators."

Danforth encourages dignified treatment of gay and lesbian Americans. "Following a Lord who reached out in compassion to all human beings, we oppose amending the Constitution in a way that would humiliate homosexuals. As a senator, I worried every day about the size of the federal deficit. I did not spend a single minute worrying about the effect of gays on the institution of marriage. Today it seems to be the other way around."

Log Cabin Republicans are working to build a GOP in the model of John Danforth's vision; a party in which every person has value and is treated equally under the law. Missouri Republican leaders must either embrace those values and create a stronger GOP or choose the politics of exclusion that will only lead to defeat. We must choose hope over fear.

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