



## **Liberal Mayors v. Chick-fil-A: Another Culture War America Doesn't Need**

David Lampo / August 7, 2012

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Nothing better illustrates the culture war going on in America, with all its quirky and irrational sideshows, than the current boycott against Chick-fil-A for its anti-gay marriage stance and the outspoken counter protest movement it has spawned, resulting in last week's "Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day." The gathering was kicked off by former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee and led to hundreds of thousands of supporters mobbing Chick-fil-A franchises around the country to show their support for the embattled company.

It began simply enough: Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy spoke out against same sex marriage and for traditional values, even bragging that all of his company executives were still married to their first wives. By doing so, he implicitly invited public reaction, and he certainly got what he asked for. But contrary to his defenders, it wasn't just Cathy's remarks against marriage equality that drew the ire of gay rights supporters, it was the company's long history of funding anti-gay marriage organizations and initiatives to the tune of \$5 million in campaigns such as California's Proposition 8 in 2008, which rescinded that state's legislative passage of same-sex marriage. No one disputed Mr. Cathy's right to say whatever he wants about same-sex marriage; rather, it was his political actions, which have led directly to the repeal of equal rights for gays and lesbians, that sparked the outrage and then the boycott of Chick-fil-A.

Boycotts, after all, are as American as apple pie. Certainly, the religious right and various anti-gay marriage organizations like Focus on the Family and the National Organization for Marriage have been calling for boycotts against what they perceive as pro-gay companies for years. Just in the past year, for example, J.C. Penny, Google, and Starbucks were all targeted by "pro-family" activists for their public support of gay rights. Ironically, the very same week that the Chick-fil-A boycott became national news, anti-gay activists announced a similar action against the CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, for his recent gift of \$2.5 million to the pro-marriage-equality side in Washington State, which will vote in November on whether to keep or overturn that state's new marriage equality law. So both sides in the culture war have been using boycotts as a weapon for many years.

So far, so good: the line between those who favor moving toward same-sex marriage rights and those who are adamantly opposed to them was, and is, pretty clear, with supporters on both sides putting their money where their mouths and hearts are.

But then the mayors stepped in, and it got very complicated, very quickly.

The liberal Democratic mayors of Chicago and Boston not only condemned Chick-fil-A's anti-equality views about marriage, they raised the specter of using government force against the franchises in those cities, accusing them of intolerance. Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel said, "Chick-fil-A's values are not Chicago values" and stated the restaurant would have difficulty opening new outlets in his city. Boston's mayor Tom Menino issued an outright threat: "Chick-fil-A doesn't belong in Boston," he said. And San Francisco mayor Edwin M. Lee tweeted, "Closest Chick-fil-A to San Francisco is 40 miles away & I strongly recommend that they not try to come any closer." Even though their motives were perhaps noble (in that they were indicating their support for gay rights), in fact these mayors used their bully pulpits to become, well, bullies. And in doing so, they seemingly handed the moral high ground to the anti-gay supporters of Mr. Cathy, who now charged that Mr. Cathy's right to free speech and freedom of religion were under attack.

And, to a certain extent, they were right: government officials in at least several cities were threatening to use their political power to deny Chick-fil-A the right to do business in their respective cities. Even some supporters of gay rights and gay marriage were appalled by the explicit threats against Chick-fil-A franchise owners, many of whom don't share Mr. Cathy's social views. Illinois ACLU attorney Adam Schwartz said, "What the government cannot do is to punish someone for their words." Libertarians like the Cato Institute's Roger Pilon also spoke out against the threats by these mayors. "They go over the line when they threaten to use their power to punish Cathy for expressing his opinion," he wrote. Like it or not, he argued, we have to tolerate free speech even from the intolerant.

And remarkably, even some gay rights advocates condemned the actions and words of the mayors for changing the terms of the debate about intolerance. None other than Kevin Naff, editor of one of the most widely read gay weeklies, the *Washington Blade*, wrote a column entitled, "In Defense of Chick-fil-A," first asking and then answering this question: "What's worse than the president of a large national company denouncing marriage equality and donating millions in company profits to anti-gay causes? How about government officials using homophobia as an excuse to deny that company the right to operate?"

"To now applaud politicians who would deny business licenses to companies based on the political views of their owners might feel good," Naff continued, "but are we so desperate for validation that we want to stoop to the ugly (and unconstitutional) practices of our opponents?" In other words, he argued, some gay rights supporters helped transform the usual purveyors of bigotry and government persecution into the victims, handing them their new-found status on a silver platter. And they couldn't have been happier.

None other than R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and influential voice in the social conservative movement, wrote that the Chick-fil-A controversy "is a clear sign that religious liberty is at risk and that this nation has reached the brink of tyrannical intolerance." Such hyperbole is useful for rallying the faithful, of course, but just like the words and actions of the mayors, it muddles the issue of who really practices intolerance. Many would argue that it is the organizations and leaders of the Christian Right who are pushing us to "the brink of tyrannical intolerance" by their use of government to punish gays and lesbians for their sexual orientation,

willfully excluding them from many of the same legal protections and privileges that they and other Americans enjoy. Certainly, that is the stated intent of the very organizations that Mr. Cathy supports.

The true test of tolerance is not simply allowing people who share your values and beliefs to have the same rights that you do: rather, it is extending those rights to everyone, including those who have different personal or religious values, even ones you may strongly disagree with. *That* is what tolerance is all about. The culture wars will end only when both sides call for a cease fire and adopt the live-and-let-live philosophy this nation was founded on. Unfortunately, that day is not likely to come anytime soon.

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