



The Struggle for Gay Rights Is Over

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I briefly wondered if I had wandered into the wrong conference.

In January 2018, the National LGBTQ Task Force held its annual Creating Change conference at a hotel around the corner from where I live in Washington, D.C. Creating Change, which bills itself as the “foremost political, leadership, and skills-building conference for the LGBTQ social justice movement,” brings together thousands of activists from across the country. Yet surveying the various panel discussions left me confused. “Elephant in the Waiting Room: Self-Love, Health, Queering Fat Acceptance” was the title of one workshop. “The Politics of Colony and Post-hurricane Politics in PR and USVI” was another. Most puzzling for a gathering ostensibly dedicated to the political interests of people discriminated against because of their same-sex attraction was the discussion simply entitled “Asexuals.”

As the topics of conversation at America’s largest assembly of gay activists suggests, America is rapidly becoming a post-gay country. Gay people were once policed as criminal subversives, depicted in the popular culture as deviants, and pathologized by the medical establishment as mentally ill. Now most of America views homosexuality as benign. Only 30 years ago, 57 percent of Americans believed consensual gay sex should be illegal. Today, same-sex marriage has been achieved nationally, gays can serve openly in the military, and most gay people live in states which protect them from discrimination. An openly gay man is running a serious campaign for president and his homosexuality is considered immaterial, if not an advantage that distinguishes him from a crowded field. According to the Pew Research Center, 70 percent of Americans say homosexuality should be accepted, an all-time high.

On television, one cannot change the channel without coming across prominent lesbian and gay characters. In the short-lived *Roseanne* reboot, noted for its sympathetic portrayal of socially conservative, middle-American Donald Trump supporters, the show’s eponymous star doted on a cross-dressing grandson. At last year’s WWE WrestleMania, a leading professional wrestler made a gay-pride-themed entrance to a boisterous crowd, with an inverted rainbow triangle on his jacket. For this childhood fan, it was a marvel: A sport with heavily oiled men running around in spandex tights that was nevertheless notorious for crassly homophobic stereotypes now celebrates gay inclusivity.

Every day seems to bring welcome examples of how Americans are becoming more relaxed about sexual orientation. Many young gay people today experience the coming-out process as a formality, and not the wrenching, fraught ordeal it was for gays my age (and I’m just 35).

Identifying as gay, bisexual, trans, or “queer”—anything but straight—is, in some milieus, a new marker of cool. In one recent survey, less than 50 percent of 13-to-20-year-olds (all part of Generation Z) identified as “exclusively heterosexual.” This sea change in both public attitudes and the legal landscape is astonishing, especially to any gay person old enough to remember when President George W. Bush campaigned on an amendment to the Constitution prohibiting same-sex marriage in 2004.

Of course, such open-mindedness does not apply to the whole country. For many gays and lesbians, coming out of the closet still risks familial banishment, the loss of friendships, or even violence. In many places it’s still dangerous to be gay. Homosexuals continue to face higher rates of depression than heterosexuals, and gay teenagers attempt suicide more frequently than their straight peers.

But trends are undeniably moving in the right direction. Since gays began organizing politically in the 1950s—meeting in secret, using pseudonyms, and under constant surveillance by the FBI—their movement for legal equality and societal acceptance has arguably advanced faster than any other in American history. By the time President Trump took office, the sodomy laws that effectively made gay people criminals had been repealed, the right for gays to serve openly in the military was won, and marriage equality was achieved nationwide. (One original ambition—a federal law protecting gays from discrimination—remains elusive.)

Fittingly, a raft of organizations committed to achieving these objectives have closed their doors. After the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was repealed, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a group that represented gay soldiers discharged under the directive, merged with OutServe, an advocacy group for gay military personnel. (That amalgamation has itself since been fused with a group representing the families of LGBTQ soldiers.) Not long after the Supreme Court delivered its decision recognizing a constitutional right to same-sex marriage in 2015, Freedom to Marry declared its job finished and wound down operations. Later that year, the Empire State Pride Agenda, the major gay-rights organization in New York State, declared that it, too, would disband after 25 years of work. A host of other federal and state-level organizations have followed suit.

Despite evident progress, however, many gay-rights activists are hesitant to exult in their victories. To listen to some movement grandees is to think that the situation has actually never been worse. “The coordinated, systematic onslaught of attacks on L.G.B.T.Q. civil rights has been unprecedented in scale and scope,” Chad Griffin, the president of the Human Rights Campaign, said of the Trump administration in an interview with Benoit Denizet-Lewis for *The New York Times Magazine* this past January. “For Gays, the Worst Is Yet to Come. Again,” declared the headline of a characteristically pessimistic *Times*op-ed by the legendary gay activist and playwright Larry Kramer.

Behind this gloominess lies the 2016 election, which many gay activists believe threatened to halt, if not reverse, all of the progress they have made. Yet while Donald Trump built his campaign upon resentment of various minority groups, gay people were conspicuously not among them. At a time when Americans are riven by tribal differences related to politics, race, gender, geography, religion, and other factors, it is hard to find another issue around which there is so much consensus as basic fairness for gay people. Writing recently in *The New York Times* about a road trip through red-state America, Samantha Allen, a self-described “queer transgender woman,” observed that in “what is ostensibly Trump country, I met many L.G.B.T.

people who saw no need to flee their conservative home states for the coastal safe havens of generations past, thanks to local progress.” The headline read in part: “In the heartland, it’s never been a better time to be L.G.B.T.”

If only the people running America’s gay organizations would listen. “The Trump administration’s anti-LGBTQ policies are bad enough,” read a 2018 fundraising email from the Victory Fund, an organization committed to electing LGBTQ public officials. “But his vile rhetoric—as well as that of his allies—could be even *more* dangerous.” As an example of the president’s “vile rhetoric,” the organization cited a private comment he reportedly made about his vice president, Mike Pence, wanting to “hang” gays (which the White House summarily denied). It was an obvious joke about Pence’s religiosity and social conservatism, an example not of Trump’s purported homophobia but the lack of respect he has for even his most loyal followers, up to and including his own vice president, whom he is apparently willing to mock before a group of White House visitors. No matter. Not to be out-outraged, the Human Rights Campaign called Trump’s sarcastic comment about Pence “evil.”

Perhaps fearing that few beyond their perpetually infuriated base of die-hard supporters will listen, some gay groups have reached for dubious statistical evidence to back their claims of a Trump-induced homophobic backlash. “In the past year, there has been a swift and alarming erosion of acceptance” of LGBTQ people, the CEO of the media watchdog GLAAD declared one year after Trump took office, announcing the results of a public-opinion survey it had commissioned and unveiled at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Days later, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP), a group committed to combating antigay hate crimes, published a report claiming a shocking 86 percent increase in “hate violence related homicides of LGBTQ people” from 2016 to 2017.

Such findings would be alarming, if true. A closer look at both studies, however, reveals little reason for panic. Nearly all of the negative shifts in public attitudes cited by GLAAD are quite small. For instance, in 2016, according to the survey, 53 percent of heterosexual adults reported feeling “very” or “somewhat comfortable” around LGBTQ people in all situations. By 2017, the year Trump took office, that number declined to 49 percent—a drop of 4 percentage points. Likewise, the portion of heterosexual respondents who said they would feel uncomfortable “learning a family member is LGBTQ” was 27 percent in 2016, and rose to 30 percent the following year.

As for the report on LGBTQ homicides, it is unclear how many of the murders included in the report were actually motivated by antigay animus. According to Walter Olson of the Cato Institute, who researched the individual incidents, “it is hard to see any evidence at all that the perpetrators were motivated by such bias” in 16 of the 20 slayings of gay men. “In two cases, it’s mentioned specifically that police *don’t* attribute the killings to hate.” Using such specious data to claim a “massive increase in anti-LGBTQ violence since Trump took office,” as the Victory Fund did in a fundraising solicitation, is irresponsible.

Nonetheless, hysteria about America’s supposedly deepening homophobia flourishes. Earlier this year, an academic journal quietly retracted a study by a Columbia University professor purporting to show that living in areas with high levels of antigay sentiment reduces gay people’s life expectancies by a dozen years. Before it was withdrawn, the paper was cited 141 times in other academic publications. More infamously, the gay actor Jussie Smollett claimed that Trump supporters yelling “This is MAGA country” assaulted him at 2 a.m. on a Chicago street in the

middle of a polar vortex. That so many people initially believed his story reflects the pervasiveness of the sentiment that a tide of homophobia descended upon America in the time since Trump became the 45th president.

The picture is different for transgender Americans. They have seen some of their progress curtailed, in the form of the Trump administration's ban on (most) transgender military service and some administrative rulings that remove gender identity from federal antidiscrimination regulations. But it is the conflation of transgender issues with the gay rights movement, a recent development and not one undertaken without some controversy among gays and lesbians themselves, which accounts for much if not most of the evidence cited as representing regression on gay rights.

When it comes to marriage equality and other protections for gays advanced by the Supreme Court, Justice Anthony Kennedy's "opinions seem secure because his jurisprudence largely mirrors changes in society," Saikrishna Prakash of the University of Virginia Law School told Politico, referring to the former Supreme Court justice's majority opinions in the 2003 case striking down sodomy laws and the 2015 case legalizing same-sex marriage. Trump has shown no inclination to reverse these decisions, recently telling Fox News that he thought the Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg's same-sex marriage was "great." Asked about gay marriage on *60 Minutes* days after his election, Trump answered, "It's irrelevant, because it was already settled. It's law."

What if the larger question of gay equality in America is settled as well? On the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, what if we've arrived, at least in this country, at the end of the struggle for gay rights?

The idea that gay Americans might have achieved something approaching equality goes against a central assumption of the zeitgeist, which, in this age of Trump, Brexit, and a rising global tide of nationalism and illiberalism, postulates that Enlightenment values are on the decline. If humanity itself feels to be degenerating, it sounds churlish to suggest that things might not be as bad as they seem.

Consider, however, the top priority item for the gay-rights movement today: the congressional "Equality Act." This measure adds "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to the classes protected against discrimination by the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act. As it remains legal to discriminate against LGBTQ people in employment, housing, and public accommodation in nearly 30 states, the Equality Act would rectify state-level disparities in antidiscrimination statutes. With 69 percent of Americans telling pollsters that they would support a federal nondiscrimination law protecting LGBTQ people, such a measure is long overdue.

But is it even necessary? Gay people today do not face anything like the state-sanctioned terror inflicted upon African Americans during the 1950s and '60s, when the major Civil Rights Acts were passed. And unlike the disparity between African Americans and whites a half century ago (or today, for that matter), gays economically outperform heterosexuals. A 2017 study conducted by two Vanderbilt University economists reports that gay men earn 10 percent more on average than their straight peers. (Researchers have long identified a similar trend among lesbians.) HRC's Corporate Equality Index, which tracks LGBTQ inclusiveness among the country's leading employers, reports that 609 companies earned a 100 percent rating in 2018. (Only 13 companies won this honor in 2002.) And while some businesses may discriminate

against LGBTQ people in hiring, their numbers are dwindling and they regularly face pressure campaigns to change their practices.

Moreover, the majority of gay people live in the 22 states where nondiscrimination statutes are already on the books. A federal law will do nothing more to protect them. When I asked the Human Rights Campaign, the country's leading gay-rights group, for statistics on the number of LGBTQ people annually denied employment, housing, or service at a hotel or restaurant due to their sexuality or gender identity, the group was unable to provide me with any. Most social movements are able to identify the extent of the problems they seek to address. Gun-control advocates, for instance, can readily give you the number of people killed every year by firearms. Anti-hunger campaigners can recite by memory the percentage of malnourished children.

Instead, HRC directed me to a poll in which 63 percent of LGBTQ people self-reported "discrimination in their personal lives." Such language is sufficiently vague to encompass everything from a stray homophobic comment heard on the street to being fired, and is thus not a useful gauge of the extent of a problem remediable by government action. Blanket discrimination against gay people simply on the basis of their sexual orientation is not widespread. According to the gay legal advocate Andrew Koppelman:

Hardly any of these cases have occurred: a handful in a country of 300 million people. In all of them, the people who objected to the law were asked directly to facilitate same-sex relationships, by providing wedding, adoption, or artificial insemination services, counseling, or rental of bedrooms. There have been no claims of a right to simply refuse to deal with gay people. Even in the large number of states with no antidiscrimination protection for gay people, I am unaware of any case where a couple was unable to conduct a wedding.

Perhaps the most high-profile case of homophobic discrimination in recent memory was the one that led to last year's *Masterpiece Cakeshop* decision from the Supreme Court. In a 7–2 decision, all the more damning for having been written by the judicial hero of the modern gay-rights movement, Anthony Kennedy, the Court decisively ruled against a gay couple's attempt to force a Christian baker in Colorado to make a cake for their wedding ceremony. The court assailed Colorado bureaucrats for running roughshod over the First Amendment rights of the baker, whose religious convictions forbade him not from serving gay people—he offered to make the couple all the baked goods they could ever wish to consume—but from expressing approval for something he considers sinful.

We gay people are expected to be grievously offended by the behavior of Jack Phillips, the owner of Masterpiece Cakeshop. But many, if not most, of the gay people I know can live with the fact that a baker in Colorado does not approve of our relationships. America is a land of some 330 million people, and I do not require every small-business owner across the country to reject 2,000 years of religious teaching in order to pursue my happiness.

Guided by a moral absolutism resembling the religious zeal of those they oppose, some gay activists and their progressive allies have taken a zero-sum approach to the issue of antidiscrimination, seeking to punish and stigmatize people who hold the exact same view of marriage that Barack Obama expressed up until May 2012. One member of the Colorado Civil Rights Commission alleged that Jack Phillip's invocation of his Christian faith was akin to Nazi justifications for the Holocaust. Meanwhile, the state of New York is threatening to close

an evangelical adoption agency that refuses to place children with gay couples, despite the fact that the agency does not even accept government funding and that no gay couple had ever even complained about being denied service.

If you had told gay activists 10 or even five years ago that their energies would center upon campaigns related to various foods—forcing pious pastry chefs to make cakes and boycotting Chick-Fil-A, or “hate chicken,” because its Christian owner has donated money to efforts opposing same-sex marriage—most would have considered their missions complete. To understand why so many in the movement refuse to accept victory, it helps to understand the tensions that have long existed at its heart.

Since the emergence of “homophile” activists in the 1950s, the tenor and aims of the American gay-rights cause have alternated between two tendencies: integrationist and separatist. Broadly defined, integrationists have argued for the incorporation of gay people into all aspects of American society, while separatists believe that American society itself should be upended. If integrationists believe that gay people are pretty much the same as straight people and thus want the same things out of life, separatists contend there is something inherently distinct about “queerness” obligating its adherents to pursue political paths and romantic and social arrangements divergent from the American mainstream. The argument between the two camps was encapsulated in a 1994 debate on the *Charlie Rose* show between Donna Minkowitz, a radical lesbian writer, and Bruce Bawer, the author of the integrationist founding text *A Place at the Table*. “We don’t want a place at the table,” Minkowitz shot back at Bawer. “We want to turn the table over.”

The integrationist and separatist schools of thought are not mutually exclusive, with some activists and groups taking inspiration from both tendencies. But as a means of understanding the friction within the movement, it’s helpful to view the history of gay rights in America through the prism of these ideological tendencies. Frank Kameny, the first person to challenge his firing from the federal government on the grounds of sexual orientation, grounded his arguments for equality in the language of the American founding, citing the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Homosexuals were no different than their heterosexual fellow citizens and deserved all the rights the latter enjoyed, he argued. As a co-founder of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Mattachine Society, one of America’s earliest gay-rights organizations, he organized a groundbreaking picket outside the White House in 1965 protesting federal employment discrimination against homosexuals. Participants, he insisted, had to dress in business attire.

Galvanized four years later by the Stonewall riots, when the patrons of a Greenwich Village bar fought back against police harassment, the gay movement developed a more radical and antagonistic attitude toward straight society as its leaders came under the sway of the countercultural New Left. Sexual freedom was the clarion call, mainstream respectability be damned. According to the scholar of gay history Marc Stein, “Perhaps in no movement was the denial of prior political traditions so complete.”

One of the first groups to emerge in the aftermath of Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front, adopted its name as an homage to the communist National Liberation Front of North Vietnam, derided marriage as “one of the most insidious and basic sustainers of the system,” denounced the “dirty, vile, fucked-up capitalist conspiracy,” and donated funds to the Black Panthers, an organization not exactly known for holding progressive views on homosexuality. “We are a

revolutionary group of men and women, formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished,” the GLF declared in its founding manifesto.

By the 1980s, the deadly AIDS epidemic and resulting government indifference helped swing the pendulum back in the direction of integration. AIDS enforced a maturation on the gay community, and a tempering of the previous decade’s sexual excesses. This shift did not occur without controversy; gays who advocated closing down bathhouses and safer sex practices (like Larry Kramer) were derided as puritans and “sexual Nazis” by their liberationist brethren. But by the time the worst years of the epidemic were over, gays understood how much they had to gain from mainstream social acceptance in the form of hospital-visitation rights and relationship recognition—and had demonstrated that they had more in common with the straight majority than perhaps either side had recognized. “AIDS and its onslaught imposed a form of social integration that may never have taken place otherwise,” Andrew Sullivan wrote in 1996. “Forced to choose between complete abandonment of the gay subculture and an awkward first encounter, America, for the most part, chose the latter.”

In the 1990s, as AIDS developed from a death sentence into a manageable disease, the gay movement set its sights on gaining access to two of America’s most conservative and foundational institutions—marriage and the military. To achieve their goals, activists used tactics ranging from quiet lobbying to civil disobedience. But while the strategies might have varied, the ultimate end to which they were dedicated was essentially integrative: the bringing of gay people and gay life into convergence with that of the straight majority. The language of gay activists during this period, with its emphasis on rights and responsibilities, was all about finding a place at the table, not overturning it.

The leading gay writers and intellectuals at this time of unprecedented political progress and social advancement weren’t the devotees of queer theory and intersectionality who dominate college campuses and define the voice of gay activism and journalism today, but conservatives and classical liberals like Bawer, Sullivan, David Brudnoy, Jonathan Rauch, Norah Vincent, Camille Paglia and other writers affiliated with the Independent Gay Forum. It was their arguments, and not those of the separationists (whose 2006 broadside argued that “marriage is not the only worthy form of family or relationship, and it should not be legally and economically privileged above all others”) that ultimately prevailed.

Dale Carpenter, the author of the definitive account of *Lawrence v. Texas*, the 2003 Supreme Court case striking down sodomy laws, told me that the winning legal team “consciously eschewed argument rooted in sexual liberation in favor of arguments that emphasized commitment, love, and family—and especially the idea that lesbians, gays and bisexuals are ‘just like’ heterosexuals.” The integrationist lawyers had to overrule their separatist colleagues who had “urged that the final Supreme Court briefs mention BDSM and other sexual subcultures as deserving specific constitutional protection.” After the historic decision was handed down, many separatists objected that it didn’t go far enough. One Columbia University professor wrote a law-review article dismissing *Lawrence* as mere “domesticated liberty.”

Like the African American civil-rights movement (which had its own separationist analogue in the form of black nationalism) before it, the cause of gay equality has been most successful when its spokesmen and women addressed the American majority as fellow citizens seeking the same rights and responsibilities they take for granted.

Now that it possesses cultural and political power, the gay-rights movement is reverting to the control of its radical element, with many in the vanguard bent on upending the American social order that only recently accepted it. Success has lowered the stakes; responsible leaders (including many of the moderate and conservative gays who played an unsung role in the movement's success) have retired from the fight, clearing the field for the sort of culture-war topics roiling the left at large.

Under Trump, the gay-rights movement is beset by mission creep. Just what are we trying to accomplish anymore, and on behalf of whom? The ever-proliferating set of sexual and gender identities one encounters is a direct result of the radicals' hold over the movement. Take, for example, the Wesleyan University Open House, which once described itself as “a safe space for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Flexual, Asexual, Genderfuck, Polyamorous, Bondage/Disciple, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism (LGBTQQFAGPBDSM) communities and for people of sexually or gender dissident communities.” Gay is passé.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the prevalence of the word *queer*. Once the sort of epithet that William F. Buckley Jr. would forever be ashamed of uttering on national television, “queer” is now affirmatively deployed by homosexual and heterosexual alike despite the discomfort it still causes many gays—due not just to its history as a slur, but the political and lifestyle radicalism it connotes.

And again, there's the uncomfortable merger of sorts with the transgender movement. As a demonstrative example, the most recent Pride edition of the pioneering gay magazine *Out* is devoted largely to transgender issues and doesn't featuring a single living lesbian within its pages. Although many gay people are sympathetic to the transgender cause, it nonetheless sometimes comes into conflict with gay concerns, as in the case of transgender participation in women's sports. Martina Navratilova, one of the most prominent lesbians in the world, was denounced as a bigot by transgender activists for arguing that “it's cheating” that “hundreds of athletes who have changed gender by declaration and limited hormone treatment have already achieved honors as women that were beyond their capabilities as men.” As she explained later, she was merely trying to ensure that “girls and women who were born female are competing on as level a playing field as possible.”

Even if the connection to the transgender cause makes a certain sort of sense, left-wing activists are also exploiting the gay-rights movement to push agendas utterly extraneous to gay equality. Twice in the past three years, anti-Zionist activists have hijacked the stage at the Creating Change conference to attack Jewish delegates and Israel, the only country in the Middle East which even remotely respects the dignity of LGBTQ people. Meanwhile, it has become an annual ritual for followers of the Black Lives Matter movement to halt gay-pride parades in major cities across North America to protest the very presence of uniformed police officers, despite a recent survey finding that 79 percent of LBTQ people (and 77 percent of nonwhite LGBTQ people) support a police presence at Pride celebrations. Considering that law enforcement used to terrorize gays—indeed, that one such episode of police brutality inadvertently helped stir the modern gay-rights movement 50 years ago this week—it is the height of absurdity to antagonize police departments eager to protect gay people, much less demonize gay cops.

Starved of real enemies, many in the gay community are turning on their own. Among many queer types, the three words *gay white men* have become a euphemism for all that's wrong with the world. *Them*, the LGBTQ web channel launched two years ago by Condé Nast, is a stew of resentments against this entire demographic group. Some sample headlines from a recurring column: "Dear White Gay Men, *Black Panther* Is Not About You." "Dear White Gay Men: Stop Turning Yourselves Into Heroes." "Dear White Gay Men: Labeling People of Color 'Divisive' Isn't a Critique – It's Racism."

With his unabashed religious faith, military service, and bourgeois domesticity, the South Bend, Indiana, mayor and Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg is the political embodiment of gay integration. For precisely this reason, the separatist, "queer" left despises him. "Buttigieg doesn't seem terribly sold on the idea of gayness as a cultural framework, formative identity, or anything more than a category of sexual and romantic behavior," complains Christina Cauterucci of *Slate*, assailing Buttigieg for understanding homosexuality by its literal definition. Writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, a Yale professor sees a historic *Time* magazine cover of Buttigieg and his husband and bemoans how it represents "heterosexuality without women." A culture that once preached individuality and personal freedom has become conformist and hectoring, its self-appointed queer commissars constantly policing the language and bringing pressure to bear on those who run afoul of their ever-evolving standards.

The end of gay rights does not mean the end of homophobia. As long as gay kids commit suicide at rates higher than their straight peers, as long as even one gay person is denied a job because of his sexual orientation, there will be a need for activism, education, and other efforts toward positive social change. But for the gay movement to persist in its current mode risks prolonging a culture war that no longer needs to be fought because one side—the gay side—has already prevailed.

California now bans taxpayer-funded travel to any state that "authorizes discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression," a list that includes Alabama, Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Texas. Who does that help? Not gay people in red states. But it does boost those political forces bent on convincing Americans that the gay-rights movement will only be satisfied once every individual citizen agrees with its precepts (a tough proposition in a religious country), and that gays will use strong-arm tactics to achieve this goal.

Trump's promise to protect religious liberty from a hegemonic secular left is one of the major reasons why so many evangelical Christians supported a thrice-married sexual reprobate in 2016, and it lies at the heart of a recent debate among conservative intellectuals over whether they ought abandon civility altogether and, in the words of its instigator, "fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy and enjoying the spoils in the form of a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good." The illiberal queer left and the illiberal religious right exist in a mutually reinforcing, codependent relationship.

From a legal standpoint, the movement has achieved nearly everything it needs for gay people to prosper as equal citizens. Instead of fighting this pointless war over wedding cakes, it should declare unilateral victory. Of course, it's unreasonable to expect this to happen. For many of those whose political identities have been shaped by crusades against government discrimination and pervasive societal ignorance, victimhood is too essential an identity to be so easily discarded.

But there might not be many people left willing to foot the bill. As gays grow more comfortable with their place in America, it's going to be harder and harder to sustain gay organizations. According to a study of same-sex couples in Massachusetts, the first state to legalize gay marriage, "Married and unmarried participants alike articulated a pervasive feeling that having access to legal marriage had greatly diminished the sense of need that had fueled organized LGBTQ community in the past" and that "since gaining the right to marry there was less need to organize for rights and acceptance."

Gay bars and other physical hangouts are vanishing across America, not only due to dating apps taking their place as mediums of human connection, but because the very idea of a bar specifically catering to one sexual orientation is becoming obsolete. For the coming generations who will grow up hearing the expression *gay marriage* as an antique misnomer and wondering what the fuss had been about, homosexuality will be a less meaningful human trait, similar to left-handedness.

Perhaps this is why so many gay activists have resorted to alarmist rhetoric, fanning the flames of hysteria to scare donors into opening their wallets. Devoid of genuine bigotry to condemn and substantive assaults on equality to resist, they resort to ever more desperate accusations and pettier concerns, complaining about a directive from the State Department prohibiting embassies from flying the rainbow flag (but not from displaying it on embassy walls), or cynically misconstruing a presidential joke told at the vice president's expense as a wish for gay people to be lynched. Each of these contrived outrages is presented as a terrifying blow against gay equality, when they are nothing more than blips.

The smallness of the American debate over these issues does not really strike you until you've spent time overseas in places where it is truly dangerous to be gay. Across wide swaths of the planet, homosexuality itself—or even the advocacy of equal rights—is criminalized, and societal acceptance lags far behind that found in the liberal democratic West. The money and resources poured into suing bakers and florists would be far better spent on these genuine fights for human liberty.

As long as homosexuality remains a minority trait, gay people will probably always feel a sense of being outsiders. The coming-out process, with all the emotional exertions it can entail, is something straight people never have to contemplate, much less endure. In a society where heterosexuality is the norm, a feeling of alienation is inherent to being gay, but it is one gay people have the capacity to reconcile, if not overcome. For those born into a form of adversity, sometimes the hardest thing to do is admitting that they've won.