



Hormel, James C. (b. 1933)

by Linda Rapp

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James C. Hormel has a distinguished record as a philanthropist and a proponent of the cause of gay rights. His nomination to become the first openly gay ambassador from the United States drew criticism from conservative groups. A handful of Republican senators managed to forestall his confirmation for almost two years.

Hormel comes from a prosperous family. In 1891 his German-born grandfather, George Hormel, founded Hormel Foods, which has grown into a leading meat packing company. Among its best-known products is Spam.

James Catherwood Hormel was born on January 1, 1933 in Austin, Minnesota and grew up on the family estate there. He graduated from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania with a B.A. in history in 1955. He went on to the University of Chicago Law School, where he earned his law degree in 1958. Hormel remained to teach in the law school at Chicago, eventually becoming dean of students.

Hormel married in 1955, but a decade later he and his wife decided to divorce, mainly because of Hormel's sexual orientation. The couple have remained good friends, however, and Hormel has always enjoyed an excellent relationship with their son and four daughters.

Hormel began a long-term relationship with artist Larry Soule in the early 1970s. The couple lived together for eighteen years.

After sojourns in New York and Kauai, Hormel moved to San Francisco in 1976. There he founded Equidex, a company that manages his family's investments and philanthropic projects.

Hormel has made generous contributions to cultural and educational institutions. He established a professorship in social justice at Swarthmore College, and his \$500,000 donation to the San Francisco Public Library led to the creation of the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, which houses the largest collection of glbtq literature in the world. He has also provided much-needed support for the research and treatment of AIDS and breast cancer.

To promote the cause of gay rights Hormel became a founder of the Human Rights Campaign, a leading advocacy group for glbtq rights, in 1981.

An active member of the Democratic Party, Hormel was on the host committee when the national convention met in San Francisco in 1984. He returned as a delegate at future conventions, serving on the platform committee in 1992, when Bill Clinton ran successfully for the White House.

Clinton first considered Hormel for an ambassadorship in 1994, but since the posting that he had in mind, Fiji, proved to have repressive laws against gay men--a homosexual act being punishable by fourteen years in prison--the nomination was not put forth.

Hormel was named to the United States delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1995, and in 1997 he became an alternate delegate for the United States at the United Nations General Assembly.

Hormel's appointment to the U. N. General Assembly post was quickly and unanimously confirmed by the United States Senate, but when Clinton nominated him to be ambassador to Luxembourg in October 1997, a lengthy and rancorous political battle ensued.

Because of Hormel's excellent record, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved his nomination in November 1997 by a vote of sixteen to two, with only conservative Senators Jesse Helms of North Carolina and John Ashcroft of Missouri opposed. Although an estimated 60 of the 100 senators supported the appointment, three Republicans--James Inhofe of Oklahoma, Tim Hutchinson of Arkansas, and Robert Smith of New Hampshire--launched a vigorous campaign against it.

Republican Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi refused to take the necessary steps to bring the matter to a vote. In public remarks Lott called homosexuality a sin and compared it to alcoholism and kleptomania.

Abetted by conservative groups such as the Traditional Values Coalition, the dissenting senators charged that Hormel was pro-pornography and anti-Catholic and would not be accepted in largely Catholic Luxembourg.

Their evidence was ludicrously flimsy. In support of the pornography allegation, the senators offered a list compiled by the Traditional Values Coalition of materials in the Hormel collection at the San Francisco Public Library. Hormel had not selected any of the publications in question, many of which were also in the Library of Congress. (Inhofe was subsequently embarrassed when in 1999 his aides downloaded so much pornography from the internet that they disrupted the operation of the office computer system. Inhofe declined to comment on the incident, citing "legitimate privacy concerns.")

Opponents based the charge that Hormel was anti-Catholic on the fact that during an interview he had laughed at a joke about the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of gay men who dress as nuns and adopt humorous names for their characters.

Objections regarding Hormel's possible reception in Luxembourg were blunted when officials of the country, which has laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation, indicated that he would be welcome.

Among those speaking out on Hormel's behalf were his former wife (who had since remarried), Alice Turner, and his son, James Hormel, Jr., both of whom praised him as a man of great integrity and a good father.

His political supporters included not only Democrats but also some prominent Republicans, such as Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah and former Secretary of State George Schultz. Even staunchly conservative Senator Alphonse D'Amato of New York found the blatantly homophobic obstruction of the nomination an embarrassment and urged that Lott bring the issue up for a vote.

Since Lott continued to stall, Clinton used the process of "recess appointment" to name Hormel ambassador while the Senate was out of session for the Memorial Day holiday in May 1999. Inhofe expressed outrage at the tactic--which was completely legal and had been used with far greater frequency by Clinton's Republican predecessors Ronald Reagan and George Bush--and vowed to block all 149 of Clinton's pending appointees in retaliation. Lott agreed, although both eventually relented.

Hormel was sworn in as ambassador on June 29, 1999 with Timothy Wu, his partner since 1995, holding the Bible at the ceremony. Also in attendance were Hormel's former wife, his five children, and several of his

thirteen grandchildren.

Hormel served as ambassador through December 2000. His sexual orientation was not an issue during his tenure.

Only after his return to the United States did Hormel publicly discuss the political battle. He stated that despite the stress, he was determined to see the process through, and added that enduring the vexatious experience together with Wu had strengthened their relationship.

Wu, who was born in New York but grew up in Singapore, explained that the ordeal had brought him closer to his Chinese-born parents, who had had difficulty accepting his sexuality. He said that the "incredibly vicious accusations" against Hormel had helped them to realize the "need to take a stand" for both men.

During Senate Judiciary Committee hearings in 2001 on the nomination of John Ashcroft to be attorney general, Ashcroft's role in the attempt to thwart Hormel's confirmation became an issue. Appearing before the committee in January 2001, Hormel disputed Ashcroft's previous testimony that he had, as dean at the University of Chicago Law School, "recruited" Ashcroft to study there, as well as the nominee's further claim that he had "known Mr. Hormel for a long time." Hormel stated, "I cannot recall ever in my life having a conversation with Mr. Ashcroft."

In the wake of Hormel's appearance, the Traditional Values Coalition distributed "information packets" of examples of sexually graphic passages in materials from the Hormel collection at the San Francisco Public Library, which Hormel himself had still had no hand in choosing.

Although Ashcroft was eventually confirmed, several senators including both Paul Wellstone and Mark Dayton of Minnesota mentioned the Hormel matter in explaining why they voted against him.

Hormel and Wu, a public interest lawyer, live in the San Francisco area. They are active and generous in supporting gay rights organizations, cultural institutions, and AIDS research.

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