



Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

by Claude J. Summers

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HRC headquarters in Washington, D. C.
Photograph by Judy G. Rolfe.
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The largest glbtq political organization in the United States, now claiming in excess of 1,000,000 members and an annual budget of \$40,000,000, the Washington-based Human Rights Campaign was founded in 1980 as the Human Rights Campaign Fund by activist Steve Endean. Originally formed as a Political Action Committee, or PAC, to support gay-friendly political candidates and elected officials, it has since broadened its purview to encompass lobbying, research, education, and media outreach. In light of its expanded range of activities, the organization dropped "Fund" from its name in 1995.

The formation of the Human Rights Campaign Fund was a response to the success of such right-wing organizations as the Moral Majority and the National Conservative Political Action Committee, which had raised large sums of money and provided other support for anti-gay political candidates.

Because it is composed largely of white, affluent, and assimilated males, the Human Rights Campaign has sometimes been criticized as unrepresentative of the glbtq community. In addition, it has often been seen as arrogant and unresponsive to local issues and concerns and too deferential to powerful interests. Still, the Human Rights Campaign has become the most influential voice of the national glbtq movement for equal rights.

Human Rights Campaign Dinners

From the beginning, the HRC has been committed to mainstream political advocacy and organizing. Key to its attempt to put a "respectable" face on groups that were frequently considered fringe at best or disreputable at worst is its strategy of holding gala fundraising dinners in fashionable hotels, featuring big-name speakers.

In the beginning, many of these speakers often seemed uncomfortable appearing before predominantly gay and lesbian audiences. In 1982, for example, former Vice President Walter Mondale spoke to an HRCF fundraiser at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, and quickly exited after delivering a canned campaign speech. While he barely mentioned the subject of glbtq rights, his appearance nevertheless recognized the legitimacy of HRCF and the potency of its ability to generate money for political candidates.

Since then, HRCF and HRC dinners--held in most major cities in the United States--have attracted a wide range of celebrities, human rights figures, and politicians, ranging from Coretta Scott King and Elie Wiesel to Vice President and Tipper Gore and Congressman John Lewis.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton accepted the HRC's invitation to appear at a dinner, thus becoming the first president to speak publicly before a glbtq rights group. Clinton pointedly compared his address at the HRC dinner to President Truman's 1947 appearance at an NAACP meeting. President Obama has also spoken at HRC events.

Endorsements

In the early history of the organization, some candidates repudiated its endorsement, sometimes even returning checks. These days, however, most Democratic and moderate Republican candidates welcome the endorsement of the Human Rights Campaign, both for the money an endorsement generates and for other help, including volunteers, that the organization provides for candidates in key races.

Some of the Human Rights Campaign endorsements have proved controversial, however. In 1998, for example, using a formula that favored the endorsement of incumbents, the organization endorsed Republican New York Senator Alphonse D'Amato, whose support of gay rights was spotty at best, over his Democratic challenger Representative Charles Schumer, whose record on glbtq issues was by any measure far stronger.

The endorsement created an uproar and led to a number of resignations. The fact that Schumer, in defeating D'Amato, received a large percentage of glbtq votes made the HRC endorsement even more embarrassing to the organization. In reaction, HRC claims to have changed its endorsement procedure to be more responsive to the opinions of local activists.

Although the HRC attempts to endorse candidates from both parties, most of its endorsements have gone to Democrats, if for no other reason than more Democrats have been supportive of glbtq issues than Republicans. HRC's first presidential endorsement went to Bill Clinton in 1992. President Clinton also received the organization's endorsement in 1996, as did Vice President Gore in 2000, Senator John Kerry in 2004, and Senator Barack Obama in 2008.

Lobbying

Now firmly ensconced as a major contributor to political campaigns, HRC is also a major lobbying organization. In 1985, the HRCF merged with the Gay Rights National Lobby in order to strengthen its effectiveness in the area of lobbying.

Among its legislative concerns are job discrimination protection, hate crimes legislation, AIDS policy and lesbian health issues, and judicial appointments. The organization is credited with having defeated a number of anti-gay bills and amendments on a variety of issues, and with helping derail the 1987 United States Supreme Court nomination of noted homophobe Robert Bork.

In addition to its political lobbying, the organization also lobbies corporations and other employers to adopt fair employment policies, including domestic partner benefits. It issues an annual "Corporate Equality Index" that reports on the practices of leading companies in regards to their treatment of glbtq employees.

Coming Out Project

In the belief that only by coming out can glbtq people attain sufficient visibility to achieve equality, the Human Rights Campaign has promoted coming out as a political as well as a personal activity. On October 11, 1988, it celebrated the first National Coming Out Day to commemorate the anniversary of the 1987 March on Washington. Since then, October 11 has been an annual day of celebration and lobbying.

An extension of the organization's National Coming Out Day is its National Coming Out Project. This project, fronted by Candace Gingrich, promotes honesty and openness about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender on campus, in the workplace, and in the community.

HRC's Future

The Human Rights Campaign has emerged as the leading national organization that speaks out on behalf of glbtq concerns and interests. Its leaders--Steve Endean, 1980-83; Vic Basile, 1983-89; Tim McFeeley,

1989-95; Elizabeth Birch, 1995-2003; Cheryl Jacques, 2003-2005; and Joe Solmonese, 2005-2012--have been media-savvy coalition builders who have worked to ensure a voice for glbtq people in the corridors of power.

In March 2012, Chad Griffin, Los Angeles-based political strategist and a founder of the American Foundation for Equal Rights, which sponsors the legal challenge in federal court to California's Proposition 8, was tapped to succeed Solmonese as head of the organization.

Griffin takes over HRC at a pivotal moment in the organization's history. Under Solmonese's leadership, it grew both in resources and in influence, yet it was been criticized for not being sufficiently attuned to the aspirations of the grassroots, especially for not challenge the Obama administration to move more decisively to secure equal rights.

During the first two years of the Obama administration, when the Justice Department was opposing gay rights in court and when the Democratic majority in Congress failed to move aggressively on gay-friendly legislation, critics accused HRC's leaders of having been co-opted by the Democratic Party and more interested in White House invitations than in holding the President and other politicians accountable for their failure to fulfill the promises they made in the 2008 election.

Many observers hope that Griffin will bring more aggressive leadership to the HRC. They note that despite Griffin's having been a major fundraiser for President Obama in 2008, he has been openly critical of the President's evolving position on marriage equality, calling Obama's support for states' rights on deciding who can marry "a step backwards."

Moreover, Griffin has demonstrated his ability to defy conventional thinking and take bold action. At a time when most glbtq legal groups cautioned against fighting for marriage equality in federal court, Griffin pressed ahead with his plan to challenge the constitutionality of Proposition 8 on grounds that could lead to a major victory in the Supreme Court of the United States.

Similarly, despite his deep connections in the Democratic Party, having served as a 19-year-old as a press assistant in the Clinton White House, Griffin has made a point of attempting to involve Republicans in the fight for marriage equality, most notably through engaging former Solicitor General Theodore B. Olson as co-counsel in the Proposition 8 case.

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