



New Right

by Vicki L. Eaklor

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The emergence of a political "New Right" in the United States during the last two decades of the twentieth century has been of particular importance to glbtq people because of its record of open hostility to glbtq rights. Reacting to the political and social gains of the gay and lesbian movement--as well as the feminist, Black, and other minority rights movements--the neoconservatives of the late 1970s and after especially opposed abortion rights and what they came to call "the gay agenda."

The New Right, as opposed to previous conservative movements, combined evangelical Christian views of morality with a political agenda. Typical of the New Right are the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and the Reverend Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, organizations founded to channel a specific moral and social vision into politics, primarily through the Republican party. In "The Goals of the Moral Majority" (1980), for example, Jerry Falwell stated, "We must stand against the Equal Rights Amendment, the feminist revolution, and the homosexual revolution."

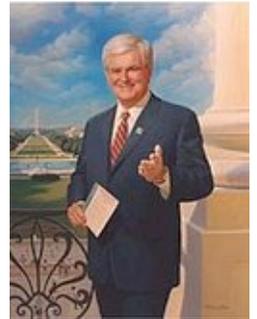
Calling for a return to "family values," New Right activists sought, sometimes successfully (as in Anita Bryant's 1977 "Save Our Children" campaign), to stop or rescind ordinances protecting gay men and lesbians from discrimination, and perpetuated harmful stereotypes of glbtq people as inherently criminal, sick, and dangerous to children.

The election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 was consequence as much as cause of the New Right. Its influence would only increase during the Reagan (1981-1989) and George Bush administrations (1989-1993).

With the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, news that the initial victims were gay men and intravenous drug users appeared to many on the Right to vindicate their ongoing attacks on both groups as not only sick (now, literally) but dangerous to the nation as well.

While some evangelicals suggested that AIDS was a just punishment for sin, the Reagan administration became notorious for its lack of response, funding, and compassion. At the same time, some historians argue that the crisis gave the gay and lesbian movement direction and forced it into action. The result was important proactive responses such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis, ACT UP, and Queer Nation. At the same time, the United States Supreme Court decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), declaring sodomy laws to be constitutional, struck another blow against the equality of glbtq people and bolstered New Right ideology.

In the 1980s the "Culture Wars" escalated. Rooted in the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s, these wars were fought especially on the fronts of public institutions, such as libraries, schools and colleges, and the National Endowments for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities. Censorship--of library holdings, public school texts, and artworks funded by the NEA--was a central issue, with gay-friendly books such as *Heather Has Two Mommies* especially targeted.



Top: Former president Ronald Reagan.
Above: Former speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

In New York City, the 1992 controversy surrounding a proposed Rainbow Curriculum, which sought to teach respect for all families (including glbtq families) gained national attention. Ultimately, the books and sections concerning glbtq families were removed from the curriculum.

Although the election of President Clinton in 1992 seemed to signal a diminishment in New Right political power, its agenda continued to be reflected in Congress, as in Speaker Newt Gingrich's conservative "Contract with America" and the Republican take-over of Congress in 1994. The New Right's influence may have extended also to the Democrats, many of whom felt that their party had become more centrist in response to the ultra-conservative challenge.

Whatever the source, the Clinton administration dealt perhaps its most famous blow to glbtq causes when in 1993 it accepted the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" compromise after pledging to end the ban against gay men and lesbians serving openly in the military. The compromises continued, as with the passage and signing of the Defense of Marriage Act (1996), which outlawed same-sex marriage in the United States, even as an Employment Non-Discrimination Act nearly passed the Senate.

Opposition to same-sex marriage, domestic partnership benefits, and other rights sought by glbtq people continued into the new millennium and reflect the persistence of the New Right's infusion of conservative Christian morality into politics, while an "ex-gay" movement was fueled from similar sources.

While glbtq activists generally see the New Right as a negative force, some argue that it is only against such opposition that glbtq movements have more clearly defined their goals and proposed actions, offering as examples the emergence of such national organizations as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign, effective responses from the movement to the AIDS crisis, and the four national marches on Washington for glbtq rights (1979, 1987, 1993, 2000).

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About the Author

Vicki L. Eaklor is Professor of History at Alfred University. She is a past chair of the committee on Lesbian and Gay History and is especially interested in pedagogy. She has written extensively on sexuality and gender, especially as they intersect with politics and culture. Among her books is *Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century*.