



## Marches on Washington

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The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights movement in the United States grew tremendously during the last quarter of the twentieth century, a phenomenon perhaps best demonstrated by the success of the first three national marches held in Washington, D. C.

Each march was much larger and more diverse than the previous one, as greater numbers of people became open about their sexual and gender identities and created a wide array of glbtq subcommunities.

A less flattering trend was reflected in the fourth march: the increasing corporatization of the movement, with grassroots activists having less of a role in setting its goals and priorities.

[However, the most recent march may have reversed this trend. Organized primarily by younger activists energized by the passage of Proposition 8, which nullified marriage equality in California, the emphasis of the October 2009 National Equality March was on grassroots activism.]

### **The 1979 March**

Marking the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall riots and coming in the wake of the lenient jail sentence given to Dan White for the assassination of openly gay San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk, the First National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights on October 14, 1979 was an historic event that drew more than 100,000 people from across the United States and ten other countries.

National lesbian and gay groups were initially reluctant to support the 1979 march, fearing that such a public display would not attract many people or, if it did, that it would generate a right-wing backlash similar to Anita Bryant's 1977 "Save Our Children" campaign. But these concerns proved to be unwarranted, as the march helped solidify a national lesbian and gay rights movement.

The march also featured the first National Third World Gay and Lesbian Conference, which was attended by hundreds of people of color and was convened by the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, an organization that had been organized the previous year by Delores Berry and Billy Jones.

### **The 1987 March**

On October 11, 1987, more than a half million people (between 500,000 and 650,000, according to organizers) descended on the capital to participate in the second national March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. Many of the marchers were angry over the government's slow and inadequate response to the AIDS crisis, as well as the Supreme Court's 1986 decision to uphold sodomy laws in *Bowers v. Hardwick*.

With the first display of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, the 1987 march succeeded in bringing national attention to the impact of AIDS on gay communities. In the shadow of the U.S. Capitol, a tapestry of nearly two thousand fabric panels offered a powerful tribute to the lives of some of those who had been

lost in the pandemic.

The march also called attention to anti-gay discrimination, as approximately 800 people were arrested in front of the Supreme Court two days later in the largest civil disobedience action ever held in support of the rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people.

The 1987 March on Washington also sparked the creation of what became known as BiNet U.S.A. and the National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Organization (LLEGÓ), the first national groups for bisexuals and glbtq Latinas and Latinos, respectively.

Prior to the march, bisexual activists circulated a flyer entitled "Are You Ready for a National Bisexual Network?" that encouraged members of the community to be part of the first bisexual contingent in a national demonstration. Approximately 75 bisexuals from across the U. S. participated and began laying the groundwork for an organization that could speak to the needs of bi-identified people and counter the animus against bisexuals that was commonplace in both lesbian and gay communities and the dominant society.

By 1987, Latino glbtq activists from Los Angeles, Houston, Austin, and elsewhere had been meeting for two years, discussing ways to work together to further the basic rights and visibility of glbtq Latinas and Latinos. But with AIDS having a disproportionate impact on Latino glbtq communities throughout the United States, the activists recognized the need for a national organization and met at the March on Washington to form what was then called NLLGA, National Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Activists. Renaming themselves LLEGÓ the following year, the group has since expanded to address issues of concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Latinas and Latinos in other countries.

Along with the formation of new national groups, the most lasting effects of the weekend's events were felt on the local level. Energized and inspired by the march, many activists returned home and established social and political groups in their own communities, providing even greater visibility and strength to the struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights.

The date of the march, October 11, has been celebrated internationally ever since as National Coming Out Day to inspire members of the glbtq community to continue to show, as one of the common march slogans proclaimed, "we are everywhere."

### **The 1993 March**

The growing strength of the movement was evident six years later, on April 25, 1993, when nearly a million people attended the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. It was the largest demonstration in United States history to that time.

With the defeat of George Bush's bid for re-election the previous fall ending the Reagan-Bush era, the mood of the march was much more celebratory and hopeful than in 1987.

The 1993 march received unprecedented media coverage for a glbtq event, including a cover story in *Newsweek* and news reports on the front page of many newspapers across the country.

The march was also groundbreaking for receiving the unanimous endorsement of the board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People--the first time that direct institutional ties had been made between the glbtq rights movement and the civil rights movement--and for explicitly including bisexuals in its name (although the march steering committee voted to add just "bi," fearing that the word "bisexual" would overly sexualize the event). Although attempts to add the word "transgender" to the march title failed, the rights of transgender people were included in the list of march demands.

The failure of the government to respond adequately to the AIDS crisis continued to be a major concern, but other glbtq issues were also prominent during the march. The right of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals to serve in the armed forces was an especially prominent theme, as President Clinton had failed to carry through on a campaign promise to repeal the military ban.

In addition to the march, participants could take part in more than 250 related events, including conferences, workshops, protests, congressional lobbying, dances, readings, and religious ceremonies.

### **The 2000 March**

While the first three Marches on Washington were largely grassroots efforts with a broad section of the glbtq community represented on the organizing committees, the Millennium March on Washington for Equality in 2000 was called and directed by the Human Rights Campaign and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, with little initial consultation of other national, state, and local groups.

The march organizers sought to allay criticism that the event was being planned by a white, affluent, and relatively assimilated segment of the glbtq movement by including a more diverse representation on the board of directors. However, criticism continued about the closed nature of the planning process and the lack of a coherent political agenda and sense of purpose as compared to previous marches.

The focus appeared to be mainly on entertainment and corporate sponsorship. Because of these concerns, many prominent glbtq leaders joined a boycott movement, and a number of glbtq organizations opposed or subsequently withdrew their support from the march, including the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum.

The disputes resulted in the Millennium March's being smaller and less diverse than the 1987 and 1993 marches. Approximately 200,000 people attended the rally. Other main events included a stadium concert, a wedding ceremony involving about 1,000 same-sex couples on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and a festival of gay-friendly vendors and entertainment.

The festival was supposed to raise money for local glbtq groups, but it lost money amid charges of inappropriate expenditures and an F. B. I. investigation into the theft of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Millennium March thus ended the same way it began: in controversy.

Despite the relative failure of the Millennium March, the marches on Washington in support of the rights of glbtq people are an important part of the modern movement for equality.

### **National Equality March, 2009**

[The National Equality March on October 11, 2009 was born out of frustration: frustration with the loss of referenda on same-sex marriage and other rights; frustration with the alleged co-opting of the gay rights movement by the Democratic Party; and frustration with the failure of President Obama to fulfill the promises he made in his 2008 campaign for the presidency.

The March, which was hastily organized in only six weeks, initially without the support of the major gay rights organizations, was called by veteran activists Cleve Jones and David Mixner, but those who responded to the call and made the March a success were primarily young activists who had been stirred into action by the passage of Proposition 8 in California, which they attributed to a failure of strategy and vision on the part of the established gay political organizations.

Their disappointment with the loss of that election was compounded by their disillusionment with the Obama administration, which seemed to distance itself from the promises that had been made in the presidential election of 2008, especially the failure to end the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy that precludes the

service of openly gay men and lesbians in the military.

The contrast between the attitudes of the gay political establishment and the grassroots activists was highlighted by the fact that on the eve of the March when President Obama addressed the national dinner of the Human Rights Campaign he was greeted by picketers who called attention to his failure to advance gay rights in the first nine months of his presidency.

In calling for the March, Jones and Mixner emphasized the need for a change of direction by the movement. Jones characterized the current practice of seeking rights on the local level as a failed strategy. "The endless pursuit of fractions of equality, state by state, county by county, locality by locality is not enough," he told the *New York Times*. "Until we get federal action, every one of those local victories--as important as they are--every one is incomplete and impermanent."

Despite detractors such as Congressman Barney Frank, who said the march was an exercise in futility that would apply pressure only to the grass, the Equality March attracted upwards of 250,000 highly diverse but predominantly youthful participants. Since the march was promoted primarily by bloggers through the Internet, its success was itself a tribute to the power of the World Wide Web.

The mood in 2009 was far less celebratory than the 1993 march. The focus was on the need for grassroots activism, suggesting a lack of faith in the gay and lesbian political establishment, which was widely seen as having been coopted by the Democratic Party, which itself was seen as more interested in raising money from the glbtq constituency than in enacting laws that would promote equal rights.

Julian Bond, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, delivered the keynote speech. Not only did he personally ally himself with the gay rights agenda, he also pointed out the continuities between the civil rights movement and the gay and lesbian movement.

Other speakers included Cleve Jones, Academy Award-winning filmmaker Dustin Lance Black, actress Cynthia Nixon, entertainer Lady Gaga, activist for the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Lt. Dan Choi, activist for hate crimes legislation Judy Shepard (the mother of slain college student Matthew Shepard), and David Mixner.

Mixner captured the spirit of the March perfectly in the following words, "When people tell me to be patient, when people tell me, oh lord, not now. All I can think about is how many more tears must be shed so some politicians in a back room can figure out when it's convenient to join us and to fight for our freedom."]

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Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.