



Milk, Harvey (1930-1978)

by Susan Stryker

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Harvey Milk filling in for Mayor Moscone in 1978. Photograph by Dan Nicoletta. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2.

Elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977, Harvey Bernard Milk was among the first openly gay men to be elected to public office in the United States. (Allan Spear was elected to the Minnesota State Senate as an openly gay man in 1974, the same year that Kathy Kozachenko, was elected to the Ann Arbor, Michigan City Council and Elaine Noble was elected to the Massachusetts State Assembly.) His tragic assassination in San Francisco's City Hall made him the American gay liberation movement's most visible martyr.

Milk was born May 22, 1930, in Woodmere, New York, and grew up in a middle-class Jewish home on Long Island. Milk was aware of his sexual orientation from an early age. His biographer Randy Shilts has written that Milk's first homosexual experiences were as a teenager in the "standing-room-only" balcony section at matinee opera performances in Manhattan.

Milk graduated from Albany State College in 1951, and he intended to become a high school teacher. Shortly after graduation, however, Milk entered the U. S. Navy, where he served on active duty during the Korean War. He trained as a deep-sea diver, and advanced to the rank of chief petty officer on the U.S.S. Kittiwake.

Milk was proud of his military service, and wore a brass belt buckle bearing his Navy insignia until the day he died. After Milk entered politics, a rumor circulated that he had been dishonorably discharged from the military when his homosexuality was discovered, but this was untrue.

Milk worked in the insurance and financial services industries in the 1950s and 1960s. Except for a brief period living in Dallas, Texas, Milk's life during these years was centered in New York, where he maintained an apartment on the fashionable Upper West Side of Manhattan, near Central Park.

He was an avid patron of the arts, particularly opera and theater. This avocational interest, coupled with his financial experience, led to his becoming an associate producer for several Broadway and off-Broadway productions in the late 1960s, including *Hair* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. Milk's lover in the later 1960s, Joe Campbell, a member of the Andy Warhol crowd, achieved pop cultural fame as "Sugar Plum Fairy" in Lou Reed's classic rock song, "Walk on the Wild Side."

Milk in San Francisco

When Harvey Milk traveled to San Francisco with the touring company of *Hair* in the early 1970s, he fell in love with what was to become his adopted city. By the time he moved there in 1972, Milk had experienced a counter-cultural awakening, and he threw himself into San Francisco's burgeoning post-Stonewall gay liberation scene. He replaced his Brooks Brothers suits with Guatemalan peasant shirts and ripped blue jeans, and opened a camera store on Castro Street, in the heart of San Francisco's new gay enclave.

Milk wholly embraced the new militant gay sensibility, and his decision to move to San Francisco was

motivated in part by his desire to "come out" and live in society as an openly gay man. He also wanted to bring the politics of gay pride to City Hall, and began to think about a career in politics almost as soon as he arrived in San Francisco.

Milk was initially regarded as an upstart maverick by San Francisco's established gay community, as well as by the local political establishment, but against all expectations he succeeded in mobilizing gay voters and eventually winning election to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

The secret of Milk's eventual electoral success was his intuitive grasp of grass-roots activism, combined with a flair for grand theatrical gestures and a great deal of hard work to organize the Castro neighborhood as a political and economic force. Milk founded the Castro Valley Association to represent the needs of small business owners, and launched the first annual Castro Street Fair in 1974. By the later 1970s, the Castro's economy was generating nearly \$30 million a year.

Milk also forged pioneering alliances between the gay community and organized labor. In addition, he cast himself in the role of a populist champion representing San Francisco's dense patchwork of ethnically diverse neighborhoods against the interests of downtown corporate culture.

Milk first ran for the Board of Supervisors in 1973, finishing well out of the race in tenth place, with approximately 17,000 votes. He finished seventh in a race with six vacant seats in 1975, when he received more than 52,000 votes. After an unsuccessful bid for the California State Assembly, Milk finally won a seat on the Board of Supervisors in 1977.

A critical factor in his victory was a shift, which he helped orchestrate, from citywide to district elections, which allowed Milk to capitalize on his immense visibility and popularity in the heavily gay Castro neighborhood and its environs.

When Harvey Milk was inaugurated on January 9, 1978, it represented an important symbolic, as well as practical, accomplishment for the gay movement. That day, he and tens of thousands of his supporters marched down Market Street, San Francisco's main commercial thoroughfare, from the Castro to City Hall.

As a member of the Board of Supervisors, Milk authored an important anti-discrimination ordinance. He also used his position to campaign against and help defeat Proposition 6, the so-called Briggs Initiative, which would have banned gays and lesbians from teaching in California public schools.

Success and Tragedy

Milk's tenure in office was tragically short-lived. On November 27, 1978, after serving on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors for only 11 months, Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were assassinated by Dan White, a disgruntled former Supervisor who had resigned in opposition to the recent passage of Milk's only significant piece of legislation, the landmark gay rights ordinance.

White crawled in through a basement window at City Hall to avoid the metal detectors; he walked into the Mayor's office and shot Moscone at point-blank range; then he reloaded his gun and walked down the corridor to kill Milk.

Milk's fate at the hands of an assassin was not entirely unexpected, given the violence and homophobia that have characterized American politics. Milk himself was haunted by the possibility of assassination. He tape recorded several versions of his political will, which he labeled "to be read in the event of my assassination." One of the tapes included the following statement: "*If a bullet should enter my brain, let*

that bullet destroy every closet door."

White, who had been a police officer before entering politics, was convicted not of premeditated murder, as had been widely expected, but of the lesser crime of manslaughter, the result of what is now referred to as the "twinkie defense." White's attorney argued that the defendant could not be held accountable for his actions due to the amount of junk food he had eaten on the day of the crimes.

When White was sentenced on May 21, 1979 to less than eight years in prison, enraged citizens, sensing a conspiracy, swarmed City Hall in what came to be known as the White Night Riots. San Francisco suffered more than \$1 million in damages to city property, including rows of police cars set on fire by angry protesters. Later that night, the police staged a retaliatory raid on the Castro, where they vandalized gay businesses and beat passers-by on the street. (White was paroled after serving six years in prison and committed suicide shortly thereafter.)

The Legacy of Harvey Milk

In the years since his untimely death, Harvey Milk--known to his friends as a secular, lusty, hard-drinking, party animal (though he apparently quit drinking and avoided the bathhouses when he embarked on his political career)--has been transformed into an almost saintly martyr for the gay liberation struggle. As gay writer Andrew Epstein has noted, this transformation has occurred with good reason; Harvey Milk represents "our Kennedy, our King, our Malcolm X. Our bullet."

In the years since his life was brutally cut short, the presence of Harvey Milk has continued to be felt. In the year following his death, 100,000 people marched on the nation's capitol in support of gay and lesbian civil rights, chanting "Harvey Milk Lives." His successor on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Harry Britt, an openly gay man running as Milk's political heir, was the only incumbent to win in the city election subsequent to the assassinations.

There is a Harvey Milk High School for at-risk glbtq students in New York, as well as the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy elementary school in San Francisco's Castro neighborhood, where both the MUNI public transit station and the branch library have been named in his honor. An annual candlelight march down Market Street commemorates the date of Milk's assassination.

Milk's life and legacy have been the subject of a specially-commissioned opera, as well as numerous books and films, including Randy Shilts's *The Mayor of Castro Street* (1982) and Rob Epstein and Richard Schmeichen's Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984).

[The most recent film biography, Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008), a large-budget feature, brings Milk to mainstream audiences. Starring Sean Penn in a riveting, Oscar-winning performance in the title role, the film, based on Dustin Lance Black's Academy Award-winning original screenplay, tells Milk's story both authentically and movingly. Without varnishing Milk's sometimes messy private life, Van Sant presents him as an engaging and courageous individual who, with the aid of young activists such as Cleve Jones and Anne Kronenberg, helped transform the gay rights movement, especially through his insistence on openness and honesty.

In 2008, a statue of Milk was unveiled at San Francisco's City Hall.

On August 12, 2009, President Obama awarded Milk a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. In presenting the medal to Milk's nephew, Stuart Milk, who is also gay, Obama remarked: "For much of his early life, he had silenced himself. In the prime of his life, he was silenced by the act of another. But in the brief time in which he spoke--and ran, and led--his voice stirred the

aspirations of millions of people. He would become, after several attempts, one of the first openly gay Americans elected to public office. And his message of hope--hope unashamed, hope unafraid--could not ever be silenced. It was Harvey who said it best: 'You gotta give 'em hope.'

A movement to commemorate Milk's birthday, May 22, as "Harvey Milk Day" in California finally achieved success after years of lobbying. The bill establishing "Harvey Milk Day" passed the legislature in 2008, but was vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger on the grounds that Milk was a "local" figure rather than one of state-wide significance.

Despite this setback, supporters of the holiday persisted, seeing it as a means of recognizing the slain leader's contributions to gay rights in California. The legislature again passed the bill in 2009.

This time, however, conditions were different. Schwarzenegger's contention that Milk was only a figure of local significance had been rendered untenable by the success of Gus van Sant's film biography, the bestowal of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Milk's induction into the California Hall of Fame. The governor signed the bill on October 12, 2009, the day after the National Equality March in Washington, D. C.

The first celebrations of "Harvey Milk Day" occurred on May 22, 2010.]

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