

Harvey milk

People



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Not since the accident at Three Mile Island disaster occurred mere days after the release of the nuclear disaster film *The China Syndrome* has there been a convergence of topical events aligned with the release of a film as will happen when the biographical film about Harvey Milk starring Sean Penn is released. In light of the groundswell of movement in opposition to the passage of Proposition 8 in California that bans same-sex marriage, a Milk movie could never be more timely.

Harvey Milk became worthy of a big budget Hollywood biopic because he was a countercultural leader of what remains, in light of the recent election of an African-American to the Presidency, the last great counterculture left in America that must still struggle on a daily basis to live up to the promise of being granted the same access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that all other cultures have been granted: gays and lesbians.

The upcoming fictionalized cinematic treatment of the story of Harvey Milk is actually the second time Hollywood has told his fascinating story. The first was a documentary titled *The Times of Harvey Milk* and it went on to win an Academy Award for Best Documentary. As a hero of the counterculture, Harvey Milk stands in stark contrast to the violent members of the Weather Underground and even the non-violent leaders of the protest against the Vietnam War. His greatest claim to American heroism is that resonates just as broadly today as it did during the 1970s.

It says much about America's historic aversion to sweeping change that many of the very things that Milk was such an activist for during his time remain fiery issues in contemporary society. The manner in which Harvey Milk died also remains a testament to the entrenched violence that marks the

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cultural traditions against which the counterculture has tried with such might to rebel. Gay rights is even today one of the social issues that is used to define the differences between liberals and conservatives.

Although even in a year in which a black man was elected President there can still be discovered deep pockets of racial antipathy that would make the America of 2008 appear far closer to the America of 1958 or even 1858, it remains dubious to the point of ridiculous to suggest that a ballot initiative denying the rights of two African-Americans to marry could ever pass; the very idea would have been laughed off the table well before it could have made it onto the ballot.

That so many Americans in California and ten other states would vote en masse to openly discriminate against the rights of individuals stands not only as a testament to the fact that the U. S. still has a long way to go to live up the ideals on which it was founded, but is also a testament to the hard work of activists like Harvey Milk. But did Harvey Milk die in vain? Like many members of the counterculture, Harvey Milk was not born into a world of activism.

Just as some men have greatness thrust upon them, so did Milk have the counterculture thrust upon him once he moved from New York to that hotbed of 1960s counterculturalism, San Francisco. It was in San Francisco in 1972 that Milk and his romantic companion Scott Smith opened a photography store on infamous Castro Street. Milk became just another out of the closet homosexual attempting to carve out a living with little to suggest that he could one day become not just one of the most famous and effective

members of the gay counterculture, but eventually one of its most beloved martyrs.

Sometimes heroism is a product of an equation involving time and place; Harvey Milk was in the right place at the right time to enter into the counterculture and work his way into the history books. The San Francisco/Berkeley area was ground central for the radical explosion of the counterculture in the 1960s in general and Castro St. was the centerpiece for the countercultural gay revolution (Bailey 60). If countercultural heroes are made and not born, then Harvey Milk was made into a countercultural icon in San Francisco in record time.

Shortly after establishing his photography store, Milk was coronated as the unofficial Mayor of Castro Street because of his efforts to lead grassroots movements in support of gay rights. In fact, Harvey Milk soon was spending far more time working for the counterculture of gay rights than he working for the establishment by attempting to become a business leader. The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence both speak vaguely of rights for Americans that when taken at face value implies that those rights be extended to every single American; no exceptions.

This has never been the case, of course. Originally most rights established in the Bill of Rights were extended to a very small minority of Americans in reality. The history of American has long been the struggle of marginalized minorities within the larger majority to fight for the rights that white, male landowners have always had. One of the rights that is implicit in a country as much defined by free enterprise as by democracy is the right to contribute to the American Dream of all by being allowed to work.

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Harvey Milk began his meteoric rise to countercultural hero by stepping to the plate and leading a boycott against beer companies which had openly refused to hire truck drivers simply because they were gay (Bailey 291) . In essence, what Harvey Milk did by leading a boycott against Coors beer was no difference from what took place during the Boston Tea Party. Both the beer boycott and that emptying of tea into Boston Harbor were protests against a way of life that was defined as normal by the governments.

Just as Britain declare it a normal state of affairs to have the right to tax without representation, so had America created an atmosphere in which the leaders of Coors felt that it was right to deny people the right to work simply because they were gay. What the story of Harvey Milk represents is not just old-fashioned American dissent—one of the defining virtues of what it means to be American—but his story is also singular example of the sociological theory of social conflict.

That conflict between basic human decency and those who would deny people rights simply because their perfectly legal lifestyle happens to differ is the story of American in miniature. Across the breadth of American history are people like Harvey Milk who take a stand and commit an act and commit themselves and while their actions may not change the country, it sets forth in motion a series of events that eventually will result in change.

Harvey Milk is not dissimilar to John Brown and the analogue between gay rights and the abolition of slavery runs profoundly deep on several levels. In 1973 Milk decided to run for elected office and lost big. Following the election of the pro-gay rights George Moscone as Mayor, Milk decided to try again two years later, but again lost. Finally, 1977 Harvey Milk not only won,
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but instantly established that someone who is not part of the establishment culture and tradition could be successful in the bureaucratic jungle of big city local politics.

Perhaps Milk's most radical belief was not the idea that homosexuals should have the same rights as heterosexual murderers released on parole for good behavior, but that the job of the government was not to line one's pockets or help make campaign contributors become even richer, but address the basic needs of constituents and meet those needs before it attempted to do anything else. Truly that is an idea that is a much a countercultural idea as anything. Since there can be no counterculture without a culture, Harvey Milk's story would not be complete unless he had an establishment figure to come into conflict with.

Dan White was elected to office for the first time during the very same election as Harvey Milk. White is almost the prototypical "traditional values" conservative candidate; he was the Sarah Palin of his era. Milk's nonconformity and White's staunch conservatism represented the polar opposites that are a necessity for the social conflict theory to come to fruition. The third element in social conflict that creates change is an event around which those polar opposites can lock heads.

Just as 2008 witnessed the movement to outlaw gay marriage, 1978 witnessed another incredibly organized effort by the anti-gay movement to create a law that would allow openly gay teachers to be fired. This legislation was popularly known as the Briggs initiative, and on the ballot was called Proposition 6. Unlike the gay marriage bay, the Briggs initiative failed at the ballot box, but the dramatic conflict between supporters and opponents had

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the greatest effect in that it polarized the issue in a way that it had never been before because, of course, in the past gay rights had been safely closeted.

Over time Dan White became increasingly open with his opposition to all forms of gay rights and came into constant conflict with the counterviews of Harvey Milk. The specifics of the disagreements between Dan White and Harvey Milk ultimately become less important than the larger picture. While gay rights may have affected Harvey Milk most closely because he himself was gay, he strides the countercultural pantheon because what he expanded beyond that narrow constriction. Harvey Milk's fight was for the under-represented, the oppressed, for all minorities without access within the establishment ("Times of Harvey Milk").

The clash between the progressive ideas of Harvey Milk and the reactionary resistance to change of Dan White became just the latest in a series of American conflicts that began with the clash between the progressive ideas of Thomas Paine and the reactionary resistance to change of King George III was followed not long after by the clash between the progressive ideas of John Brown and the reactionary resistance to change by Jefferson Davis. The story, fortunately, seems to always end the same way; the only real difference is the time it takes.

As Harvey Milk himself observes in The Times of Harvey Milk: "If we learn from history, the struggle goes on. Eventually we will win. All the Governor has to do is turn the pages of history a little faster." The story of America is one of the counterculture always coming into conflict with the cultural establishment and the establishment always, eventually, assimilating that

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counterculture. By the time Dan White unloaded his gun into Harvey Milk and George Moscone a page of history had turned, but the bulk of the book was still left to read.

Thirty years later not many more pages have been turned and the book on discrimination against gays remains open and widely unread. That is the story of America and its culture, however. Eventually Harvey and his counterculture will win and the majority of Americans will understand that discrimination against any law-abiding citizens is just plain wrong. Works Cited Bailey, Robert W. *Gay Politics, Urban Politics: Identity and Economics in the Urban Setting*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Dir. Rob Epstein. Perf. Harvey Milk, Dan White. DVD. New Yorker Video, 1984.