

Wounding Words

Although gay Americans' rights are steadily increasing, anti-homosexual voices are also growing louder
Sunday, 2 July 2006

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SUN REPORTER

Chicago White Sox Manager Ozzie Guillen called a sportswriter a "fag."

A gubernatorial appointee is fired for describing homosexuality as a "deviant lifestyle."

And a Sopranos episode is punctuated by gay bashing and the brutal slaying of a homosexual mob boss.

In an era when the line between free speech and hate speech has grown blurry, gay men and lesbians often find that they are targets in a verbal free-fire zone, where their expressions of sexuality conflict with politics, morality and religion.

Guillen touched off a furor last month when he used the derogatory term to describe Jay Mariotti, a Chicago Sun-Times sports columnist. Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig hit Guillen with a fine and ordered him to undergo sensitivity training.

Robert J. Smith, a gubernatorial appointee to a transit board, was promptly fired by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., a Republican, who called his comments "highly inappropriate, insensitive and unacceptable." Appearing on a cable talk show, Smith had equated homosexuality with "sexual deviancy" and attributed his view to his Roman Catholic faith.

Michael Papa, chairman of the department of communications and dramatic arts at Central Michigan University, said the polarizing gay-marriage debate has made it more acceptable to make negative comments about gays and lesbians. And it's a license that often extends to comedians and entertainers.

"We're embedded in a culture that increasingly considers such type of commentary acceptable, whether it's joking or biting or dismissive," Papa said.

But in the case of some politicians and religious figures, the rhetoric is used as a tool to build support, Papa said.

"I think politically, particularly among people who are conservative, there has been an increase in the intensity of feelings against people who are homosexual," he said.

To gay activists, the comments are indicative of a continuing pattern of insensitivity and homophobia.

"In the public arena, we are the exception right now," said Roberta Sklar, director of communications of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "There seems to be a willingness to slur gay people where, at this point in our country's development, we would not use the language, the attitudes, the demonizing words against any other group."

Others see uncivil speech in a broader context.

In the early 1970s, comedian George Carlin had a monologue about "seven dirty words" that could not be uttered on TV. Today, as a result of court battles knocking down restrictions on the First Amendment, all of those words - and more - can be heard on cable TV and in some popular music. As the restrictions on free speech disappeared, the barrier separating decency from indecency faded - and, according to some, so did the level of civility as people felt more freedom to say

what was on their minds.

"When it comes to language, the use of language, in part because of the prevalence of the use of the Internet, we are getting used to a sort of extreme informality that can cross into incivility," said P.M. Forni, a professor in the department of romance languages and literature at the [Johns Hopkins University](#).

The Sopranos episode focused on the bias against homosexuals in the macho world of the Mafia. Although the episode was punctuated by anti-gay language, it drew support from some gay advocates.

In a May New York Daily News article, Damon Romine, entertainment media director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination, wrote: "This was a complex commentary on the struggle that so many people face in living openly and honestly. This was a story that laid bare the ugliness of prejudice and bigotry of so many characters on the show."

Meanwhile, the sports world continually struggles with outbursts of anti-gay sentiment.

"It's very common," said Helen Carroll, sports project director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights. "Sports is really the last arena where we're trying to get to the point where this kind of thing is socially and legally unacceptable."

As controversy swirled around Guillen, a former Atlanta Braves pitcher, John Rocker, mounted a defense for Guillen's right to free speech. In 1999, Rocker caused an uproar with this description of New York that appeared in a Sports Illustrated article:

"Imagine having to take the 7-Train to Shea looking like you're in Beirut next to some kid with purple hair, next to some queer with AIDS, right next to some dude who got out of jail for the fourth time, right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids," Rocker told the magazine.

In another episode, New York Giants tight end Jeremy Shockey criticized Dallas Cowboys coach Bill Parcells in a New York magazine story three years ago, calling him a "homo."

Shockey later apologized for the comment. Shockey also once made inflammatory comments against gays on Howard Stern's radio show. When asked if he thought there were any gay players in the NFL, Shockey said, "I don't know; I don't like to think about that. I hope not."

Asked if he thought he had had any gay teammates at the University of Miami, Shockey replied, "No. I mean, if I knew there was a gay guy on my college football team, I probably wouldn't, you know, stand for it. You know, I think, you know, they're going to be in the shower with us and stuff, so I don't think that's gonna work."

Jeff O'Brien, associate director for Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, said Shockey and Guillen's comments reflect a mindset of masculine dominance that is widespread in society.

Society, he said, often teaches boys to be men in a dominant, aggressive sense and to equate courage with manhood. Anything that isn't considered manly is perceived as girlish.

"It's normalized throughout the culture. You hear these words around the office every day," O'Brien said. "People use them, and they say that they didn't mean anything. Culturally, we haven't caught up with the fact that there's a problem with it."

But many gay men and lesbians say that despite more hostile name-calling from some, the tolerance for discriminatory comments and epithets is going down, both in the sports world and the larger climate. And the fact that public outrage mounts when such comments come to light is progress itself.

Brad Luna, a spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign in Washington, D.C., noted that 83 percent of corporate America has nondiscrimination policies protecting gay and lesbian employees.

"I think it's becoming less and less acceptable for these kinds of comments," said Luna. "The movement in public opinion

is toward equality for gays and lesbians."

Guillen has tiptoed across the line of appropriateness before. Last August, he jokingly announced that a friend he was meeting on the field was a "homosexual," and he joked to female reporters that a team member must be "queer" for not wanting to date them.

This time he defended himself by saying he has gay friends and goes to Madonna concerts and WNBA games.

And then, finally, still under scrutiny, Guillen did the only thing left that he could do. He apologized.

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