



## How to Collect on Dem 08 Promises?

By: DUNCAN OSBORNE  
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Appearing before 400 gay men and lesbians at a 1992 fundraiser, then-Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas gave a powerful speech.

"If I could wave my arm for those of you who are HIV-positive and make it go away tomorrow, I would do it, so help me God I would," he said. "If I gave up my race for the White House and everything else, I would do that."

Many in the audience had lost friends to AIDS during the '80s. Without drugs to treat the disease, facing a nation that was often hostile to the gay community and indifferent to people with AIDS, it was a horrible experience. Clinton seemed to understand.

Funding for services for people with AIDS grew significantly during Clinton's presidency, but new HIV infections among gay men also increased during the final two years of his administration.

Clinton had another idea that he was selling that evening in Los Angeles - he would end the ban on gay men and lesbians serving in the military. Once in office, however, he was vehemently opposed by the military leadership, most Republicans in Congress, and some Democrats led by Sam Nunn, a Georgia senator who chaired the Armed Services Committee.

What angered activists was that Clinton picked the fight over the ban and then, as president, kept silent during the brutal months-long debate that ensued in 1993. Congress ultimately approved, and Clinton signed, Don't Ask, Don't Tell, a policy that was harsher than a compromise proposal trotted out by the president.

"In the end the administration deemed us too insignificant to fight for," said Thomas B. Stoddard, an attorney and gay activist who died in 1997, in a 1994 interview with the Advocate, the national gay magazine. "Not only did [the Clinton administration] not oppose what Nunn offered, but they endorsed it. Regardless of whatever spin they might try and put on it, that is a deep betrayal."

Today, the Democrats who are seeking the nomination for president are promising to end Don't Ask, Don't Tell and to address the continued HIV epidemic, and they back federal legislation that would ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. They are supportive on nearly every issue the LGBT community is raising, with the exception among the leading candidates of marriage equality for same-sex couples, so the question becomes how does the queer community collect on these promises?

Doubtless, the lesbian and gay community is on a stronger footing in 2007 than it was in 1992 with larger political groups. Community members are active in political parties, particularly the Democratic Party, as volunteers, donors, and officers.

While activists said the community is unlikely to see a repeat of the "deep betrayal" Stoddard complained of, they also cautioned that the support from the current Democratic candidates is not a guarantee that those policies will be implemented.

**"If you look at the Democratic field they are overwhelmingly supportive on our key**

**issues," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF).**

**"The real challenge is not their positions, but what they'll actually do for us if elected."**

For some, getting more than just a statement means pressing the candidates now on how they will achieve those goals, but also telling them how the community will help.

"I think our role as an organization is to be a partner with them in how they navigate doing what they want to do," said Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the nation's largest gay lobbying group.

HRC has issued a scorecard detailing the positions of the Democratic contenders while NGLTF looked at candidates from both parties on the tally it produced.

HRC is sponsoring an August 9 hour-long debate among the Democrats and Hillary Clinton, a New York senator, John Edwards, a former senator from North Carolina, Barack Obama, an Illinois senator, and Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd have said they will participate. (Delaware's Joe Biden has declined.) The debate will be carried live on Logo, the gay cable network, which is also a debate sponsor.

Having identified their views, Solmonese said the community needs to engage the candidates and ask them, "So you say you support X, fill in the blank, how would you implement that?" Based on that conversation, we go from there... Those are the kinds of conversations we need to be having,"

Some groups, such as organized labor, can be very hardnosed when candidates seek their support. They ask for specific items and they offer specific support. Some activists said the lesbian and gay community can too easily give its support during campaigns.

"It is the one time that candidates come to our community and ask for something from us," said Alan Van Capelle, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda (ESPA), New York's statewide gay lobbying group. "I think for a long time we have been too free with giving out our goodies to campaigns."

And the Democratic candidates are certainly asking. Dozens of community members and leading party activists and donors have already committed to one candidate or another. The campaigns have touted those endorsements in press releases on their Web sites.

"There's a hard-court press going on," said Stephen Driscoll, co-chair of the National Stonewall Democrats, who spoke with Gay City News following a call from a campaign that was seeking his support. "The community is being courted in a way that has never been done before."

Driscoll is among those who arguing for caution when pressing candidates for gay-positive positions because those stances could also become fodder for later political attacks from other quarters.

"Strident demands are probably not likely to be productive and could come back to bite us in the ass," he said.

The Iraq war, the debacle over a failed immigration bill, and more basic questions on the competency of the Bush administration have Republicans struggling. Some have complained in news reports that they do not like the candidates in that party's primary. Attacking homosexuals could be an effective organizing tool for the GOP.

"If they can use us as a wedge issue, they're going to do it," Driscoll said. "They have a

disaffected base."

Even a Democrat has done that. In the very last days of his 1996 reelection campaign, Clinton ran ads on Christian radio stations boasting of his support for the Defense of Marriage Act, a law that barred the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages and allowed the states to ignore them as well.

For ESPA's Van Capelle, politics requires tough bargaining and careful thought. Is the queer community positioned to do that?

"Not as much as I would expect from a community that is more sophisticated than it was four years ago," he said. "It is not as sophisticated as it should be."