

## Hatred Aimed at Gays Hurts All

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If the Senate passes the Matthew Shepard Act—known also as the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act—a long and ugly history of violence and hate based on sexual orientation may finally approach an end. The legislation was stalled for years in Congress, but with Democrats now in control it passed the House of Representatives and will be voted on by the Senate this summer.

What few people realize is that the culture of terror that has long affected gays and lesbians also threatens heterosexuals. Though the hate-inspired murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 garnered national attention, too many other offenses go largely unreported in mainstream media. Some would argue that to focus on barbaric killings obscures the run-of-the-mill abuse that gays and lesbians suffer.

Such a climate of hate, backed by the ever-present threat of violence, keeps gays and lesbians from holding hands in public, embracing at an airport or from being comfortable in workplaces where heterosexual family photos are ubiquitous.

Such strictures also harm heterosexuals by enforcing narrow norms of how to act in public as men and women. Hostility toward perceived or real homosexuality has a long history.

Much before the official terms and classifications of heterosexual and homosexual developed a century ago in psychology and medical communities, an unusual image from a colonial newspaper reveals that even the founding generations had to watch how they carried themselves.

A bit of doggerel in a Massachusetts newspaper implied that the Freemasons, that venerable but secretive fraternity, were engaged in homoerotic intimacy. The satire, with a graphic engraving, appeared on the front page of the Boston Evening Post in 1751.

Both image and poem mocked the Freemasons in an early version of gay-baiting. The image depicted two smiling men, one bent over receiving a trunnel, or wooden spike, the other, with a hammer raised overhead, ready to strike. It was designed to shock, as were these lines:

I'm sure our trunnels  
look'd as clean  
As if they ne're up A--se  
had been;  
For when we use 'em, we  
take care  
To wash 'em well, and  
give 'em Air,  
Then lock 'em up in our  
own Chamber,  
Ready to trunnel the next  
Member.

The poem escaped obscenity by artfully using the term trunnel as a euphemism for the male member. The poem also declared that “we don’t use trunnels with a Sister,” thus portraying the men as sodomites who were solely interested in intimacy with each other.

Humor carried the message better than a sermon. Demonstrating the ability to joke about the issue portrayed the satirist as savvy and unencumbered by same-sex sex. Humor also removed the reader from the topic, leaving it squarely in the lap of its object of ridicule.

The poem outraged many Boston Freemasons. They subsequently boycotted the Evening Post and met with the lieutenant governor and the provincial council, lobbying them to punish the printer.

This incident underscores another lesson to be learned: Heterosexuals too get bashed as gays. We often hear from gay men and lesbians about how often they have endured harsh name calling. Yet, how many straight men grow up being called fags? Or have been punched or taunted for not appearing masculine enough? How many women have been assaulted for not conforming to feminine ideals?

Fortunately, the hate-crimes legislation currently being considered by the Senate includes protection from violence directed at those perceived to be lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender individuals. According to the Human Rights Campaign, the bill gives the Justice Department the “power to investigate and prosecute bias-motivated violence by providing the department with jurisdiction over crimes of violence where the perpetrator has selected the victim because of the person’s actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.”

Another important and long-overdue bill, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, is being considered by Congress to give federal protection against employment discrimination to LGBT individuals. **According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, “Studies and surveys consistently show that between one-third and one-half of all LGBT respondents have suffered employment-related discrimination.”**

Why does our society need employment protection and hate-crimes legislation? Because anti-gay violence is not just one individual abusing another. As with other hate crimes, it is about establishing a system of terror by sending a message to others with a threat of similar pain.

Such attacks are the product of a culture of hate that punishes perceived gender deviations, be it indicated by clothing, physical behavior, or direct signals of same-gender love. This culture has a deep and complicated history as the Freemasons engraving and poem reveal. But it’s never too late to make a change.