

# Give and Take at Y2K

BY GREG D. KUBIAK

Just as we leap into a new year, it is in our interest to recognize that for every step the GLBT community makes forward, there is often a step back to challenge us. Indeed, it seems that as the new year giveth, Y2K taketh away. Let's review.

Making a frightfully slow conversion, President Clinton has finally said that the "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military is "out of whack." He is joined in this observation by such candidates as Al Gore. But how many of us who trusted the Clinton-Gore Administration to fulfill the promise of ending military discrimination in 1993 believe that a Gore administration will follow through in 2001?

In contrast to mere words at home, there is action abroad. Great Britain has decided to end the ban on homosexuals in the armed forces with a new code of conduct to be introduced next year. Though Britain currently prohibits gay men and women from serving in the military altogether, their new policy will specify that sexual orientation will not be a punishable offense. The British military minister says, "Someone's sexuality is a private matter ... people are entitled to a private life."

The marriage issue suffered a setback recently when the Hawaii Supreme Court opted to let stand the public referendum allowing for a constitutional change barring marriage between same-sex couples. Similarly, the Knight Initiative in California, if passed, would mean that the most populous state in the nation could join the list of those with "defense of marriage" laws. Fortunately, the future looks bright in Vermont.

In the area of punishment for hate crimes last year, juries found the two murderers of Matthew Sheperd guilty. Furthermore, the judge threw out the attempt to use the so-called "gay panic" defense.

Conversely, the court martial that found a soldier guilty of the Kentucky beating death of Private First Class Barry Winchell did not look beyond the immediate results of this crime. For months, the brass and the killer's colleagues stood by while the eventual murderer harassed and threatened Winchell. This is an ironic twist in military tradition, where the chain of command and responsibility doesn't stop at the PFC level. But that takes us back to "don't ask, don't tell."

In the religious world, an unprecedented meeting occurred this past fall between anti-gay crusader Jerry Falwell and openly gay activist and minister Mel White. They joined 200 gays and lesbians around tables with 200 of Falwell's followers to start a dialogue that might curb the hateful speech that has led to dangerous intolerance and violence. But on the other hand, Rev. Jimmy Creech was finally defrocked from the United Methodist Church for conducting a holy union ceremony of two gay men in April of last year.

In the private sector, the number of employers expanding domestic partner coverage and including non-discrimination policies to human resources practices continues to grow. These organizations, like the University of New Hampshire, a most recent addition - recognize the competitive advantage and justice in extending these benefits and rights to all of their employees. But just last month, we learned that the newly merged Exxon-Mobil is taking away exactly those benefits, which Mobil already offered. There is more at stake in this monopolistic marriage than anti-trust issues.

Our interest in these issues should be clear. It is in our interest to write the White House and tell them to do what is right and scrap "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." The President has the power to do it just as President Harry S Truman did

when he desegregated the armed services back in 1948.

It is in our interest to contribute to the "No on Knight" campaign in California. It's not just a state issue, as Mormons and national religious groups send money to help this anti-gay initiative. As Ken Kero, legislative director to Rep. Ellen Tauscher (D-CA) warned and reminded me recently, oftentimes, "as California goes, so goes the country." Likewise, it is in our interest to let Vermont state legislators know that it is their court-mandated responsibility to ensure our equality.

Next, it is clearly in our interest to write to our members of Congress and demand that federal hate crimes legislation be passed immediately! It's not just our livelihood that depends upon passage of the legislation, it is our lives.

Likewise, with hate often cloaked in the mantra of religious fervor, it is in our interest to support and work with religious organizations to create a more gay-friendly, affirming environment within those institutions. Perhaps in no other place can the spirit and contributions of one individual bring more change than one's local place of prayer and service.

Finally, it is in our interest to contact Exxon-Mobil and express our disappointment. Boycotts have worked in the past, and when a company is considering a bottom line, a large enough outcry can create positive change.

As our new millennium dawns, remember it is in our interest to be engaged and let our voices be heard. Our gains and strides are indeed a step forward. But if we remain silent, we risk losing a great deal.

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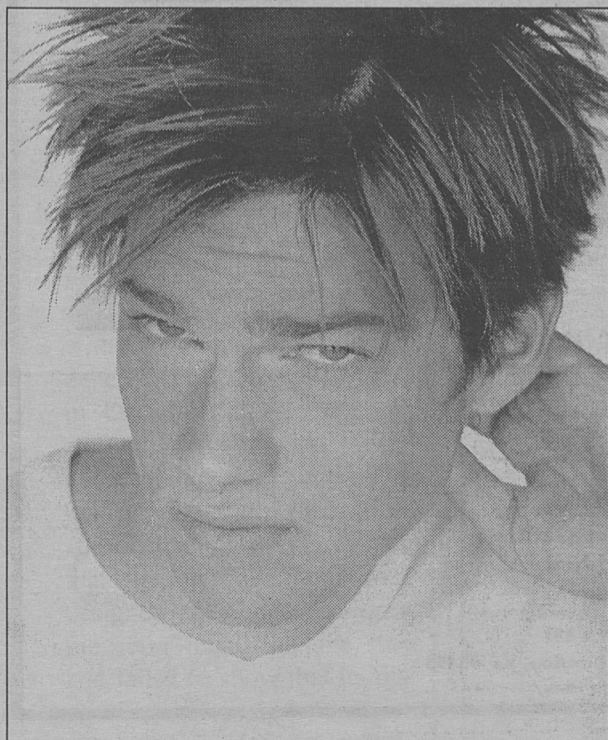
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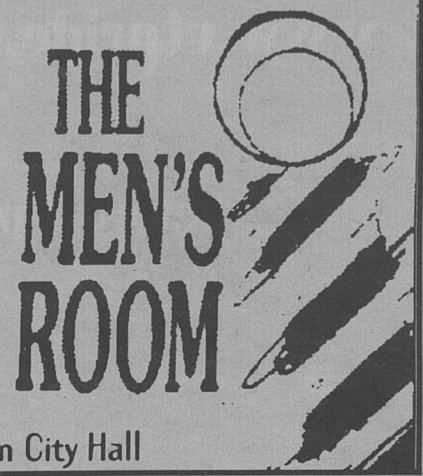


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