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Breakthrough: The 1979 National March

AMIN GHAZIANI

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, on October 14, 1979, an estimated 75,000 to 125,000 lesbians and gay men from all across America marched on Washington at a moment in the movement's history that was remarkably different from the current one. This was the first such March on Washington staged by American gays, rendering it in collective memory as the symbolic coming out and birth of a national movement for lesbian and gay rights. Gleaning insights into why this march happened and how it was organized both commemorates the 25th anniversary of the event and offers clues into contemporary gay culture and politics.

The gay liberation movement of the late 1970's legitimized a range of causes that it was advancing by linking itself to other grassroots demonstrations, especially the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington. Such connections helped to establish the movement as a progressive one and also emphasized the need for an autonomous lesbian and gay political presence. In a letter dated Sept. 10, 1979, and circulated to major gay organizations and leaders throughout the U.S., march coordinators Steve Ault and Joyce Hunter wrote,

> Dear Sisters and Brothers, On August 28, 1963, there was the first mass Civil Rights March on Washington. Lesbians and gay men were there, hidden in the crowd that cheered Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. There have been many marches since then—anti-war, Earth Day, ERA—and slowly, lesbians and gay men began to raise our own banners and march behind them. Now, on October 14, 1979, lesbians and gay men, and our supporters, will march for our own dream: the dream of justice, equality, and freedom for twenty million lesbians and gay men in the United States.

It was our turn.

Where did the idea for this first march come from? The earliest paper trail dates the organizing back to a meeting held during Thanksgiving weekend in 1973 by the National Gay Mobilizing Committee in the student union at the University of Illinois' Urbana-Champaign campus. Jeff Graubart, who coordinated the meeting, said one of the goals of the proposed march was "to gain solidarity for the gay movement in the country, which ... is now isolated and fragmented." March co-coordinator Joyce Hunter echoed this concern six years later when she remarked that part of the goal for having a march was to transform a "highly fragmented movement that is local in focus into a reasonably unified movement."

The lesbian and gay movement had not yet achieved a national identity or self-consciousness. Ten years after Stonewall, political activity was not yet nationally networked, despite rising insurgent sensibilities provoked by an onslaught of local-level threats that attracted national media attention such as Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children Campaign" in Miami and Senator Briggs's Proposition 6 in California. Early organizers faced daunting barriers to creating a national movement. It had been only six years since the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Relatively few lesbians and gay men were out of the closet to their families, neighbors, and coworkers, and hence they were reluctant to participate in any public protest event. The gay press, according to march organizer Eric Rofes, was still in its infancy and mostly ineffective at reaching potential participants, while the "straight press" generally did not provide much coverage of the movement. Activists who were involved in the movement represented a broad spectrum of cultural backgrounds and had not yet developed the skills needed to work effectively across their own lines of difference. The challenge was to construct a unified, national movement using the fragments of locally insurgent activists, however burdened by their disparate cultural commitments.

> The 1979 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights was an unprecedented mass event that brought together people whose work had until then been largely carried out on the local level.

The meeting at Urbana-Champaign never blossomed into an organizational infrastructure for a March on Washington. After 1973, the next major organized attempt to involve leaders from across the U.S. to contemplate a Washington march occurred five years later, in October 1978. A group calling itself the Committee for the March on Washington, based locally in Minneapolis, also began tossing around the idea of organizing a national demonstration in D.C. The Minneapolis Committee conceived the march with two intentions: to demonstrate to the nation that gay rights were part of the larger issue of human rights; and to unify what at the time were local, highly disconnected and scattered gay organizations. Unfortunately, a little over two weeks before a scheduled weekend meeting of lesbian and gay leaders from across the country, the Minneapolis group dissolved itself after deciding that serious internal disputes over racism and classism in the organizing process would keep it from effectively planning the march.

This event prompted San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk to assume responsibility for continuing efforts to organize the march. With him, the organizational epicenter shifted to San Francisco. Milk astutely recognized that infighting was intimately woven into the fabric of gay politics and culture but still believed that the march could symbolically unify an otherwise fragmented movement. In taking up the organizational efforts,

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Milk commented, "I hope that the gathering will take place on the weekend following the Fourth of July. That would have great symbolic impact, reminding people of the Declaration of Independence, in which gay people were left out."

Less than a month after Milk assumed responsibility for organizing the march, Mayor George Moscone and Harvey Milk were both assassinated by fellow supervisor Dan White in San Francisco's City Hall. Steve Ault vividly traces his involvement with the 1979 demonstration to Milk's death. Ault recalls being at a meeting in New York when a man walked into the room and announced that Harvey Milk had been shot. "There was a stony silence in the room," Ault reminisces, "and a lot of people figured there would be no march. To the contrary, we had a greater reason to march."

Milk's death served as an integrative force that reignited passions for organizing a national march on Washington. Invoking Milk's memory, Steve Ault and Joyce Hunter wrote to gay leaders all across the country: "This project must be carried out as a tribute to Harvey Milk and to the countless others who have suffered and perished at the hands of bigots. We must fulfill Harvey's dream for those who are still alive and for those yet unborn who shall love a person of their own sex." This was, after all, a movement fighting for the right to love.

Soon after Milk's assassination, individuals in San Francisco organized a committee that set out to ensure that Harvey's dream would come true. The San Francisco group, along with activists in Philadelphia and New York, put out a call for a national conference to be held in Philadelphia over the weekend of February 23, 1979. Unlike Minneapolis, the Philadelphia Conference did not fall apart. Over 300 lesbians and gay men from all over the country met there on February 23 and 24, a weekend of intense debate that ended with a historic vote to plan the march for the fall of 1979. The Fourth of July weekend was voted down because both the President and Congress would be out of town, hotels would be filled with tourists, and college student organizations would be inactive. And 1979 was chosen instead of 1980 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots.

An editorial written in the *Gay Community News* (*GCN*) in June 1979 captured this connection to Stonewall, declaring: "Stonewall means fighting back. In the past ten years, gay people have begun fighting back: in cities and in small towns, in the courts and legislatures, and in the streets. The fights have been local, the leaders unconnected, the movements disparate. Slowly, we have begun to develop a national consciousness, a sense of our own common identity."

In addition to voting on whether and when to have the march, the Philadelphia Conference also decided on the demands of the march. The Five Demands, as they came to be known, included the following:

• Pass a comprehensive lesbian/gay rights bill in Congress.
• Issue a presidential executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in the federal government, the military, and federally-contracted private employment.
• Repeal all anti-lesbian/gay laws.
• End discrimination in lesbian mother and gay father custody cases.
• Protect lesbian and gay youth from any laws that are used to discriminate against, oppress, and/or harass them in their homes, schools, jobs, and social environments.

Organizations that had national memberships, such as the National Gay Task Force, did not immediately endorse the march because of what they perceived to be "serious deficiencies in planning and the organizing structure" of the march (in the words of NGLTF's C. F. Brydon, *GCN*, 7/7/79). Despite this lack of support, organizing for the event continued to generate productive energy and momentum. After Philadelphia, the remainder of the organizing took place over the course of several local, state, and regional conferences along with one more national conference in Houston on July 6, 7, and 8—a weekend gathering one attendee described as "the first regionally, sexually, racially, and ethnically representative body in the history of the lesbian and gay movement" (*GCN*, 7/21/79). These various conferences together established at least three incentives to organize a march on Washington, reflecting the state of gay politics and culture in the late 70's: to build a national movement out of the scattered clusters of local activity; to spur organizational development within the community; and to continue inspiring lesbians and gay men to come out—a mantra both of gay people anchored in the New Left and also of the Stonewall generation.

The 1979 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights was an unprecedented mass event that brought together into a unified national movement an incredibly diverse body of lesbians and gay men, people whose work had until then been largely carried out on the local level. With the Salsa Soul Sisters carrying the March banner and the Third World Lesbian/Gay Conference, the first-ever national collection of workshops targeted at enhancing the visibility of lesbians and gay men of color, the march was a spectacular showcase of American gays fabricating unity and community amid considerable internal diversity and division within the movement. An editorial published in *The Advocate* in November 1979 exemplified this sentiment: "Here we are knitting a whole new identity out of the once-scattered threads of our community."

Lesbians and gay men forged a national movement the weekend of October 14, 1979, in what one attendee called "the Great American Coming Out Party." Indelible images of this political party were captured in a *GCN* editorial published the weekend after the March. This editorial declared the birth of a national lesbian and gay movement in the language of unity, family, and freedom: "Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, were lesbian sisters and gay brothers—from all over, from all walks of life, gay human beings in numbers unanticipated, in a mood of exultant expectation like nothing ever before. This was our day; this was our Declaration of Independence. We were in the capital of our country. We were suddenly, as a mass of humanity, not as isolated individuals, free and dignified."

Holding a march on Washington was discovered to be a strategy that provided, in the words of Florida activist Nadine Smith, not only "a platform for ... political organizing, but [also] an irreplaceable opportunity to break through isolation" by making visible and therefore linking local lesbian and gay communities in a highly symbolic, concentrated physical space. The 1979 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights and the three other such national marches—those in 1987, 1993, and 2000—have together left behind imprints that preserve lesbian and gay history while bringing into focus the state of contemporary political organizing and cultural development.