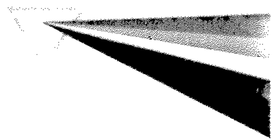

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Amin Ghaziani Spoke with the Late Activist in 2003

How the Militant Movement Began

Frank Kameny

FRANKLIN KAMENY (1925–2011), who passed away last October, is widely regarded as the major architect of the militant phase of the gay rights movement in the mid-1960's, which saw the first public demonstrations of GLBT people for equal rights. He introduced the slogan "Gay is good" in the late 60's (inspired by Stokely Carmichael's "Black is beautiful") and, in 1971, was the first openly gay person to run for Congress (in Washington DC's non-voting district).

Having received a doctorate in astronomy from Harvard in 1956, Kameny was soon drafted into the U.S. Army, from which he was discharged in December 1957 after officials uncovered information about a prior arrest on charges of "lewd conduct." Four years later, in August 1961, with the help of his friend Jack Nichols, Kameny co-founded the Mattachine Society of Washington. The two men later organized the first lesbian and gay public protest for equality in Washington, a picket line that marched outside the White House, on April 17, 1965.

I interviewed Kameny in Washington in the fall of 2003. At the time, I was conducting research for my doctoral dissertation on the four GLBT marches on Washington (1979, 1987, 1993, and 2000), and I was interested in his thoughts on these mass events. What follows is an excerpt from our long conversation of November 21, 2003. It was transcribed only after his recent death (on October 11) and appears here for the first time. — AG

Amin Ghaziani: Can you first tell me about the 1965 organizing you did in Washington?

Frank Kameny: At that point in history, the whole Civil Rights Movement was happening. A demonstration in front of the White House was the mode of expression of dissent par excellence. Such demonstrations were not particularly commonplace prior to the early 1960's. Now and then, like the women's suffrage movement, there had been protests. But by 1963, '64, and '65, if you went down there, you would see any number of groups picketing. Sometimes there were so many in those days that they would take up the sides of East and West Executive Avenues, which are now closed off, on each side of the White House. The police would allocate them a little bit of space and they would go in their elliptical orbits, all of them picketing. So, we considered that. Initially, we didn't take it very seriously.

Amin Ghaziani, assistant professor of sociology at the Univ. of British Columbia, is the author of The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington *(2008).*

AG: May I ask you, who is "we"?

FK: Oh, the Mattachine Society, which I had founded [in Washington] on November 15, 1961. And so, we had thought about it but hadn't taken it too seriously. But then it came out that Castro in Cuba was putting gays into some sort of detention camps. And we thought about that, and we decided to link it—what about America?—to link the two to give us a connection to something that was in the news at the moment. Some of our signs, which I still have in my attic, did just that and made the comparison between what's going on in Cuba and in America.

And so, we checked out what was needed. You didn't need a formal application to picket there. You did need authorization. We had one demonstration in '66 which was in two different places, and we went from one to the other. We did need authorization for the march to go on some of that ground. You didn't need specific pre-authorization here. We didn't notify anybody. What we were afraid of was that if we told anybody, they would

find ways to thwart us. So, ten of us set off. It was Saturday, April 17, 1965.

AG: Why did you choose that date?
FK: Just the way things worked out—and as triggered by Cuba. And so, we simply appeared at the southwest corner of Lafayette Park across from the White House grounds, told the park policeman who was on duty there that we wanted to picket. He allocated us a little place on the street. In fact, he stopped the traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue for us, which impressed us no end.

Kameny being stopped by a guard at the White House gate during a protest in 1965. Photo by Kay Tobin Lahusen, NYPL Digital Library.

AG: What was your strategy and objective in organizing it?
FK: We had our signs. We also had a dress code in those days—suits and ties for men, skirts and high-heeled shoes for women. It was all very elaborate and very formal. Keep in mind, this was before the dress revolution. People weren't wearing blue jeans yet. Men's shirts were white, period. We specified this more explicitly two demonstrations down the line when we were picketing at the Civil Service Commission. Our argument was that if we're picketing for our government jobs, we have to look employable by their standards. So, we were all very nervous. I remember saying to one of the women who was just ahead of me, "Gail, I bet if I had clapped my hands suddenly, you'd have jumped ten feet in the air." And she said she certainly would. After we were finished with our picket—I guess it was two hours—we adjourned to a nearby gay bar just down 18th Street two blocks away.

So, we picketed, and it went off so well that we decided we should do it again, with publicity. We had another one at the end of May [the 29th]. This time, we sent out a news release. And Reuters was there, and one other, maybe the AP or the UPI. So we did get publicity on that one. Again, we had all of our signs pre-made. In fact, we had an order for the signs [in the march]. We settled into a whole procedure. There were three parts: we would send out a news release in advance; at the demonstration, leaflets were handed out giving the reason for the demonstration; and after the demonstration was over, we would send out another release indicating how many people had been there, what all the signs had said, and any other commentary we may have had on the whole thing.

We had a number of issues, several of which were government related. The U.S. Civil Service Commission had a policy of gay exclusion quite as rigorous as the military now has [i.e. in 2003], fully and ferociously enforced. I lost my own job on that account a few years before. We had been trying to negotiate with them without success. Their pat answer was always to say that such a meeting would serve no useful purpose. They changed that after we picketed in June, the result of which was that we did get a meeting with them a bit later on in the summer.

Our feeling was that what we were picketing for were the most basic, fundamental rights that defined what America is all about. So the next place to picket would be Independence Hall in Philadelphia, on July Fourth. We had the first of what was a series of five annual demonstrations there. There we had to get a permit. We negotiated with the police and so on, and we had our demonstration. In July, we had one at the Pentagon in opposition to the military policy. In August [the 21st], we were at the State Department. This was the department that was most traumatized by [Sen. Joe] McCarthy and the Army-McCarthy hearings. I remember almost a decade later, I was talking to one of their attorneys—I had a case over there—and she sort of screamed at me: "Even if you picket us again, we're not going to change our policy!" At one point, we had an actual meeting with them in an office building downtown, including one of their department attorneys, who absolutely refused to discuss the whole issue at all. So, I simply locked the door and said, fine, you're not going to get out of here until you talk. And eventually, he did. You sometimes had to use firm tactics with them!

Meanwhile, in the course of that summer, once we got started, New York Mattachine got interested, and there was a group in Philadelphia, so people began to come in for these demonstrations. The one in Philadelphia was particularly well attended. It was much handier to New York. All the New York people came. There was a whole group of Philadelphia gay activists right there. We came up from Washington.

Meanwhile, in the course of that summer, Mattachine Midwest in Chicago had gotten organized, and they wanted to participate. So, we scheduled a final White House picketing demonstration for October. And a whole group came in from Chicago, and that was the one where we actually got up to 65 people, which for us was a huge demonstration. And that finished the picketing season for that year. The following year, in '66, on Armed Services Day in May, there were some demonstrations coordinated against military policy in Los Angeles, New York, Washington, and some other cities. Here we picketed at the White House. We had a permit to march—it's a long walk—from the White House, across the Mall, over the bridge, and to the Pentagon. And then we picketed there. And except, then, for the subsequent ones in Philadelphia on Fourth of July '66, '67, '68, and '69, that was pretty much it.

Now, the '69 one, of course, came a bare couple of days after Stonewall. And the following year, as we began to think about it, people felt, quite reasonably, that we had been sort of superseded, as they were planning a commemorative march in New York for the Stonewall Riots, which would have been at that same time. So, we decided, fine, no more of our demonstrations in Philadelphia. I went up to New York for that one and for the next two or three years. But that ended the picketing demonstrations that we sponsored.

AG: Civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph had suggested earlier that people should march in Washington. Did this influence your decision to picket the White House?
FK: Certainly not in any conscious way for me. It was simply that we were momentarily fired up by this thing in Cuba. And we were activists in general. I mean, we'd been sending out news releases, pushing the government in a variety of ways through letters and court cases—there were a lot more of them later on—and that sort of thing. I don't know whether I or somebody else made the suggestion that we picket at the White House. It may well not have been me. And we debated it and discussed it and eventually decided to go ahead and do it. And then we began to organize it. We had lengthy, evening-long meetings. Every sign—it was not like many demonstrations now where people bring their own signs. We voted on the slogan for each and every sign and then had sign preparation parties. We brought all the poster boards and the sticks to hold them and prepared our signs, organized everything to a tee, and then went.
AG: Were your tactics influenced by earlier demonstrations in Washington?
FK: There was the big [Civil Rights] march of 1963. I was there, as some of us were. I held a gay rights sign.

AG: How was that received?
FK: It was a Mattachine sign, which you had to be a little bit in the know to understand—or read it very carefully. It wasn't all that overt. But I was there. A number of other people that I know were there, scattered in the crowd. I can tell you exactly where on the Mall I was.

AG: Was the idea to follow the model of the 1963 march on a much smaller scale?
FK: It was the energizing concept, the psychologically energizing factor. I'm not going to quibble about exact dates in the 50's, but I think things were being pushed in an activist direction even before, bit by bit, after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which was in '54. Things were accelerating, particularly in the South. You saw these horrible scenes on television—Bull Connor and his police dogs and fire hoses and things like that. So, that sort of activism, which was historically unique in this country, was very much going on then. The idea of going out on the streets, actually getting into the streets was becoming internalized.

AG: Some years later, mass demonstrations for gay rights were staged in Washington with hundreds of thousands of GLBT participants. What do you think of this model?
FK: I think there were some problems in retrospect with the way the last one [in 2000] was handled. But in general I think the idea was superb. It was a demonstration where it was absolutely unavoidable that gay people were there in vast numbers. And you had all these contingents that couldn't be overlooked: gay service members, gay parents, and so on. It began—or continued, depending on how you choose to look at it—the process of forcing us into the public eye so that we couldn't be overlooked. I remember, probably in '93, Mayor Dinkins of New York was there. I remember speaking to him briefly. I was one of the people that asked him to march with the lead-off group right in front.

AG: Do you think the model of a march on Washington still has the same utility today?
FK: It's a very good question. Probably not nearly as much now. But if it was thought through, and if it was felt that we could get enough people to participate—I'm speaking purely hypothetically now—specifically on the issue of same-sex marriage, yes, I think it could be enormously helpful.

AG: Its utility then would be a function of focusing on a specific issue like gay marriage?
FK: Or focusing on the hot and heavy issues of the time. It happens to be gay marriage at the moment. It could be something else a few years from now. [The issues] were much more generalized in the past. I think there has been so much progress beyond what anybody would have reasonably anticipated, so much progress since those earlier marches. It's like, are you going to have a march nowadays against slavery?

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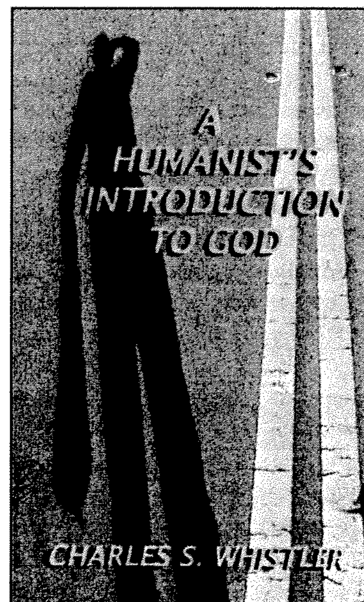

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AG: Has the issue of gay rights passed?
FK: The issue of a mass demonstration for a broad, fuzzy, undefined, unspecified, non-explicit gay rights agenda may well have passed.

AG: Why do you think numbers matter so much at these marches?
FK: Oh, because there's an extremely strong and vigorous opposition to us as a minority. And they endlessly use everything that they can to disparage us. I do my best in an unsystematic way to monitor the far right, particularly what I call the nutty fundamentalists. They will always use low figures for the estimated percentages of gay people in the population. I originated the ten percent figure for my Supreme Court brief in 1961. And we used that endlessly. That may be high. It was the best data we had in good faith, based on the Kinsey Report, which was the only thing we had back then.

AG: I thought it was four percent from Kinsey.
FK: I don't disparage Kinsey. I think he's very much a hero. He was a trailblazer, and blazed trails, by definition, going into unknown territory. And the ultimate trail doesn't always exactly follow the blazed trail. He went entirely by self-reported experience and behavior. But particularly in a deeply repressed context like homosexuality, it's much more a question of tendency or desire. To put it in a heterosexual context, the hetero Catholic priest who's true to his vows of celibacy is not one whit less heterosexual than his parishioner who's married with five children. By Kinsey's standards and techniques, one would be very heterosexual, the other wouldn't register at all. You lose out on a whole category there.

Kinsey's four percent were those who were exclusively homosexual. If you had one heterosexual experience in your entire life, you were moved over into his next category; you were out of the four percent. I justified that [figure] in my Supreme Court brief, my petition for writ of certiorari, which was to the best of my knowledge the first explicitly gay rights brief ever filed in any court. I was making the point for gays as a minority group with the court. If you're going to do that, you have to make some presentation as to how many people are involved.

And so, I had quite a lengthy section in which I relied on the Kinsey Report and its interpretation to justify that about ten percent of the population was homosexual. That may, from the viewpoint of forty years later, be somewhat high. I suspect it's probably five to eight percent. The far right repeatedly makes it one or two percent. They always tend to lower it as much as possible, unless they're talking about something negative—then they raise it as high as possible. So turnout at one of these marches is crucial because if you can say that you had half a million people, just to pull a figure out of midair, physically present at a march in Washington, this implies vastly more than that in the general populace.

AG: The recent success of the gay and lesbian rights movement has led to greater acceptance and assimilation into mainstream American culture. This trend goes against the idea of a strong gay identity and the whole model of a GLBT "struggle" for equal rights or whatever. What are your thoughts on this debate?
FK: Well, first of all, you have to go back to the very beginning. You have to go back to the creation of a minority identity. And that is triggered, if you will, by those outside of that identity whose reaction to it is negative. People with blue eyes do not have an identity because nobody reacts negatively to them. People with a black skin, which is simply another color of another part of your anatomy, do have an identity because there has been a history of negative reaction to them. And one could go on with that. For gay people, this negative reaction has sprung from a number of sources, whether it was from those who said we were immoral and sinners, those who said we were illegal and criminal, or those who said we were sick and perverted.

The need for a counter-response to this negative reaction is why I coined [the slogan] "Gay is good." We had to have somebody identifying us *and* saying something good about us. When the negative reaction begins to cease—as for Irish and Italian Americans, to take two classic minorities in our own culture—you find that the identity itself begins to fade. I see that eventually happening with gays, but it has a long way to go—particularly if the fundamentalists keep pounding away. It's a bit too soon to know exactly where this marriage issue will go. That has really fired them up. A law in our culture carries an enormous amount of weight. For example, attitudes on integration changed enormously in the 60's once there were laws that prohibited discrimination. And if we get same-sex marriage, if we get a sizable number of more states with anti-gay discrimination laws, you will find these negative attitudes tempering and softening. You will find those gradually fading.

AG: What advice would you give to a future march on Washington organizing committee?
FK: Well, step number one, find out if there is going to be enough support from the community in the whole country for the march. There's no point in having even a superbly and perfectly organized march if nobody's going to come. And make absolutely sure there's going to be enough enthusiasm. Point number two, have a very specific, clear-cut rationale. You have to have some sort of overarching agenda for the march before you can fine-tune the specific items that you're marching for. Three, you give plenty of advance notice. This is, I know, one of the problems that the people had in the forty-year commemoration of the 1963 march this summer. It was done on almost zero notice. Out of nowhere, two or three weeks in advance, we were hearing about this great big commemorative event. So, they got very low attendance. Then, of course, what you really need to do is get the weather to cooperate and make sure it's not raining on the day of the march!

AG: How would you describe the essential goal of the gay rights movement?
FK: I think it can be subsumed under one word: equality. What that means is a precise, absolute, total, unswerving, unconditional equality in every aspect of societal life, bar none.