

STONEWALL ESSAY FOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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Title: Making Peace with Stonewall

It's time for me to make peace with Stonewall. For the past three decades I've done battle with the Stonewall riots (uprising, rebellion...) and I'm worn out. The fight began in the summer of 1988 when I first discovered that Stonewall didn't mark the beginning of what was then called the gay civil rights movement. I was shocked to learn that the conflict between bar patrons and the New York City police that began after a raid in the early morning hours of June 28-29, 1969, on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village came nineteen years after the founding of the Mattachine Society, the first of the "homophile" organizations. It wasn't even the first time that "gay people fought back" against police repression. Or the second. Or even the third!

These revelations only came to me when I started work on my book about the movement. The book wasn't my idea. In 1988 I was a twenty-nine-year-old journalist working at CBS News when I got a call from an editor at Harper & Row (now HarperCollins) who asked if I'd consider writing an oral history of the gay civil rights movement—a book like Studs Terkel's *Working*. "I'm not a historian or an academic," I protested. But the editor liked how I'd written dialogue in my first book, *The Male Couple's Guide*, and based on what he'd read he thought I could write for a general audience. Besides, he told me, he wanted someone who was fresh to the subject, someone who came to it without preconceptions.

I was definitely fresh to the subject because I knew almost nothing about my history beyond what I'd picked up from attending hearings at New York City Hall for an ill-fated gay rights bill in the early 1980s and standing on the sidelines at a handful of Pride marches in San Francisco and New York. Still, I was intrigued by the idea and as an out gay man at CBS News I was already keenly aware of the limits on how far I could advance there. So I decided to take on this new challenge.

Once I started my research it took about five minutes for my one key preconception—that it all began at Stonewall—to be upended. That’s when the rage and sense of betrayal kicked in. Why didn’t I know this history? Why was it kept from me? Who was to blame? I should have blamed my education—or lack of education—but instead I blamed Stonewall. Stonewall was like the guy at the party who sucks the air out of the room. Everything starts with him and there’s no space for anyone else to get a word in edgewise.

As I began conducting interviews with some of the earliest, pre-Stonewall activists my anger only grew stronger. I found myself channeling the rage and hurt that so many of the people I interviewed experienced over having seen their accomplishments diminished or ignored every time they heard or read that Stonewall marked the beginning of “the modern gay rights movement.” I had the privilege to record the stories of people who founded the earliest organizations, mounted the first public protests, and brought the first legal cases in a world that was hostile to LGBTQ folks in ways that we can hardly imagine today—people who stood up and said, “We’re not sick, we’re not sinful, we’re just as good and moral as anyone else and we demand our rights.” They did this at a time when speaking out could cost you your job, your family, and even your home. Almost no one listened, but they persisted.

My battle plan quickly came into view. I’d put Stonewall in its rightful place in history as I came to see it through my conversations with the people who had lived that history. Stonewall would be a historical pivot point, but given how much play it had already gotten, I wouldn’t give it undue attention. My focus would be on what came before and after. Of course it hadn’t occurred to me at the time that in choosing how much (or little) “play” to give Stonewall that I was seeing Stonewall through my own lens. Like anyone writing about history, I brought my own subjectivity to the page.

Over the past three decades I’ve written essays about Stonewall, moderated panel discussions, advised on a documentary, and written more than a few letters to the editors of the *New York Times*—all in an effort to set the record straight about Stonewall and to challenge some of the

more persistent and, to my mind, glaring myths about what happened and didn't happen, who was there and who wasn't, who did what, and what Stonewall has come to represent.

Over that time, I like to think I've gained a clearer perspective on what Stonewall was. The image that comes to my mind is that of an open flame and a can of gasoline. The open flame was a volatile mix of rage and yearning—the rage of an oppressed people who yearned to live without fear of being hounded by the police, fired from their jobs, scorned by their loved ones, demonized by the church, and diagnosed and tortured by psychiatrists. That open flame burned in every major city in the country during an era when large-scale confrontations with the police—over the Vietnam War and civil rights—were already commonplace.

It was in that context that the police raided the Stonewall Inn on the night of June 28-29, 1969, unwittingly providing the fuel that ultimately blew the movement wide open. But the explosive growth that followed wasn't an accident. As I came to understand, it took the efforts of people who, because of their previous organizing experience and determination, recognized the opportunity to harness the raw energy released at Stonewall, had the knowledge and skill to channel it, and the experience and political savvy to use the existing movement infrastructure to build the foundations of a newly supercharged national movement. Of course many others came fresh to the movement after Stonewall. So the riot may have been spontaneous, but I continue to believe that what came in the aftermath would have been impossible without the groundwork laid with the blood and sweat of the earlier activists.

Even as I've fought to convey that view—my view—of Stonewall, I've had to accept that my perspective isn't the only one. I've also had to accept that people grow attached to myths, even when those myths unnecessarily embellish the already compelling facts. Take the legendary kick line of high-heeled drag queens on Christopher Street outside the Stonewall challenging a phalanx of policemen in riot gear and chanting "We are the Stonewall girls, we wear our hair in curls..." The kick line and chant were real, but the high-heeled drag queens were actually street kids, mostly teenagers, "flames" in various degrees of "scare drag," not dresses and wigs, and definitely not wearing high heels. The street kids knew better. As Martin

Boyce, who was at Stonewall the night of the riot explained to me, you can't run from the police in heels. But the idea and image of high-kicking, high-heeled rioters in full drag makes for a better, and more cinematic, story.

There are things that we'll never agree on about Stonewall, whether we're so-called scholars, self-identified "gay history geeks," inquisitive high school students, or simply veterans of the movement. Just get a group of interested people in a room and ask who threw the first rock or cocktail glass if you want to test my assertion. But I like to think that we can still find plenty of common ground: that Stonewall was a pivotal event in the LGBTQ civil rights movement, that it was an opportunity seized upon by activists who recognized its potential as both a catalyst and a symbol, and that they had the creativity and foresight to enshrine Stonewall as a symbol by tying it to an annual celebration (protest or pride march or festival or picnic or fun run or...).

What I don't think anyone in 1969 could have imagined was that Stonewall would grow to become an international symbol strong enough that it could be what each of us needs Stonewall to be—whether that's a symbol of freedom, of an oppressed people fighting back, a symbol of hope, an inspiring rallying cry, or all of the above.

As I leave the Stonewall battlefield and look ahead to the 50th anniversary of the uprising, I'm happy to let the people who were closest to the events at Stonewall in 1969 be the ones to tell the story of what happened—through their recorded oral histories or printed testimony. And if you're looking for the definitive fact-based account of what happened, David Carter's book, *Stonewall* is it.

But while I still care deeply about the facts, what I'm more interested in now is how people experience the idea of Stonewall, what it means to them, and how it inspires them in their lives today. Just don't try to suggest that Stonewall was the "start of the modern gay rights movement," or "where pride began." I still have some fight left in me.

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