

On the National Significance of the Stonewall Uprising

The purpose of this essay is to address the question of what constitutes the national historic significance of the Stonewall Uprising.

Perhaps it is best to begin by clearing some ground, for some persons have claimed that the Stonewall Uprising has been given more credit than it deserves for its historical importance in the movement for LGBT equality. Those who make such claims usually cite other examples of resistance before June of 1969 that involved standing up to police harassment and oppression in ways that were at least militant and sometimes involved breaking the law, resistance to police authority, and the use of violence, eg, the destroying of property in the Compton's Cafeteria clash.

Without belittling the courage of those who resisted police oppression at the pre-Uprising occurrences—including the Compton's Cafeteria event, the New Year's ball at California Hall in San Francisco, or at the Black Cat or the Patch club—the Stonewall Uprising was different from these and other similar pre-Uprising events for 6 reasons:

- (1) It was massive: several thousand people participated.
- (2) It was sustained: it lasted six days.
- (3) It was violent (while Compton's was violent, the violence was not on a scale comparable to that at the Stonewall Uprising).
- (4) Because it was massive, sustained, violent at times, and always militant, the Stonewall Uprising resulted in contesting the control of a significant section of an important neighborhood in one of the nation's largest cities.
- (5) It got into the national media and therefore changed consciousness.

(6) It transformed the LGBT civil rights movement (known as the homophile movement before Stonewall) from an extremely small movement into a mass movement by creating the gay liberation phase of the LGBT civil rights movement.

Since we have now demonstrated that the Stonewall Uprising was an event qualitatively and quantitatively different from other militant acts of resistance on the part of gay people previous to it, let us now examine its national significance.

My analysis is that Stonewall has national significance because it has meaning in two spheres vital to evaluating the impact of events of a political nature: history and symbolism.¹

The historic meaning is very easy to describe and document. The only reason that the Stonewall Uprising has any historic meaning is both simple and straightforward: it directly inspired the creation of a new phase of the ongoing organized political movement for gay civil rights, and this new phase then transformed what had been a very small movement into a mass movement, making possible most of the movement's successes since that time.² In other words, the earlier phase of the movement, known as the homophile movement, quickly went into decline with the birth of the "gay liberation

¹ All events elevated to the category of having national significance, it seems to me, would have to have historic meaning on a national level, but few are so important as to take on an iconic state, yet alone the ultimate status of being great enough to function as a national symbol.

² The pioneering activist Frank Kameny, PhD, and pioneering LGBT movement historian John D'Emilio, PhD, have supported this view. Kameny said, "By the time of Stonewall, we had fifty to sixty gay groups in the country. A year later there was at least fifteen hundred. By two years later, to the extent that a count could be made, it was twenty-five hundred. And that was the impact of Stonewall." (Source: "Stonewall National Historic Landmark Nomination," p. 19.) For D'Emilio on Stonewall, see, eg, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2nd edition, pp. 237-239, 249. D'Emilio has made a similar statement about the impact of Stonewall in his article "Kameny Always Knew He Was Sane," in the March 2012 issue of the *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*.

movement” that was inspired by Stonewall.³ The gay liberation movement grew rapidly and eventually became a mass movement. Thus the historic effect or impact of Stonewall was both direct and indirect: Stonewall directly inspired the creation of the “gay liberation movement” which then created a mass movement for “gay liberation” or “gay rights” (in the language of that era); thus the *direct* impact of the Uprising was the creation of a new phase of the movement for LGBT equality (to use today’s language) and the *indirect* effect of Stonewall was the creation of a mass movement. A historic parallel would be the fall of the Bastille, for the fall of the infamous prison was not the great historic event (the French Revolution), but the Bastille’s fall triggered the great event and thus has national significance for the French nation and her people. Similarly, the fall of the Bastille is celebrated as the French national holiday just as the Stonewall Uprising is celebrated annually with marches across the United States and around the world, and the promulgation of the Declaration of Independence, critical in setting off the American Revolution, is celebrated as an American national holiday.⁴

Of course, one could ask why the movement for LGBT civil rights having become a mass movement has national historic significance? The successes of this movement have been great, totally transforming the experiences not only of all LGBT citizens, but also changing how the rest of the population feels, thinks about, and lives their

³ Should anyone doubt that the gay liberation phase of the movement was a direct result of the Stonewall Uprising, consider that the first gay liberation organization was the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and they stated in their first public announcement, the one announcing their formation, that they had formed because of the police raid of the Stonewall Inn club. (See “Gay Revolution Comes Out,” *Rat*, August 12-16, 1969.)

⁴ In other words, we have here three events that are seen as important beginning points of major historic events but are not themselves the major historic events, but rather they are as seen as symbolic, causative, and intimately linked with (and therefore, as part and parcel of) these major historic events.

experiences of interacting with the ideas or conceptions of homosexuality, bisexuality, and a transgender identity, and, much more importantly, influencing how they interact with their fellow LGBT citizens. But to try to summarize the impact of the movement over the years since the gay liberation phase of the movement, consider the following: the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas* found that laws that declared same-sex love to be illegal were unconstitutional, whereas in 1969 homosexual acts were illegal in 48 states; the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973; the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision by the United States Supreme Court ruled that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples, whereas in 1969 no gay or lesbian couples could marry; many states, counties, and cities currently have laws forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, as do many corporations, universities, and other associations and organizations whereas none did in 1969; many religious denominations no longer consider homosexuality a sin; LGBT people can now serve openly in the military; LGBT issues are generally reported accurately, widely, and fairly in the news media; LGBT people are often included in and are commonly treated fairly and sensitively in fiction, plays, films, television, on the radio, and there are many websites that treat LGBT people and issues in an inclusive and fair manner. All of these changes in government, law, psychology, theology, the arts, the media, and public policy amount both to an enormous transformation in public consciousness regarding homosexuality, bisexuality, and the transgender but have also resulted in a great liberation for LGBT people who can generally now live full, free, and open lives.⁵

⁵ Some of the goals that have yet to be realized are federal legal protection against

To give the above historic facts, however, their necessary context, it is important to note that the homophile movement had been becoming more militant since 1961, when Frank Kameny first articulated the philosophy that the movement must see itself primarily as a civil rights movement that should accept nothing less than first-class citizenship.⁶ This is critical to understand for, without the local successes of the homophile movement in New York City in the mid-1960s (the ending of police entrapment and the progress toward legalizing gay bars), there is no doubt that the Stonewall Uprising would not have taken place.⁷ So while Stonewall has often been

discrimination against LGBT citizens, which is nonexistent (except in very rarefied circumstances), and that the history of this movement be fully integrated into the treatment of United States history, particularly in public schools.

⁶ The history of the homophile movement can be confusing for while the movement had its quiescent phase with the “research and education” approach during the Red Scare, Frank Kameny had the extremely radical view that the model for the movement should primarily be the black civil rights movement and that the movement should settle for nothing less than full equality, the approach he took in his 1961 brief to the United States Supreme Court. Soon after 1961 he took the approach that homosexuals were not mentally ill and led the charge to oppose the “sickness theory.” When he first articulated these views, there were a few people who were already militants or were ready to be radicalized, such as Kay Tobin, Barbara Gittings, Jack Nichols, Randy Wicker, and Craig Rodwell, soon to be followed by Julian Hodges and Dick Leitsch. Kameny eschewed the approach of the various Mattachine organizations. Yet, the total radicalness of his approach has often been overlooked, in part, I believe, because the organization he founded did not take the kind of name Kameny favored, a name that would have been explicitly linked to homosexual issues, but instead was named the Mattachine Society of Washington; it was so named only because Kameny was outvoted on what the name of the organization would be by the group’s first members.

⁷ This was the view of no less a figure than Craig Rodwell, a militant homophile activist who was frustrated with the homophile movement in New York City for not being militant enough for him. Everything that Rodwell says about the Stonewall Uprising must be paid careful attention because he was (1) the Stonewall Inn club’s main critic, (2) the main supporter and propagandist of the Stonewall Uprising when it occurred, and (3) the person who had the idea of celebrating the Uprising annually with a march. This also means that to see how the Uprising was viewed by LGBT activists in 1969, historians should carefully scrutinize the resolution Rodwell wrote (or cowrote) to honor the Stonewall Uprising with annual marches that was passed by the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations (ERCHO) in November of 1969 and began the

(mis)interpreted and (mis)understood as a clean and a radical break with a timid and stodgy homophile past, on the contrary the truth is that a revolution within the homophile movement had already begun, precipitated by Frank Kameny and, in fact, it was the initial successes of the militants in transforming the homophile movement that made the Uprising possible in the first place. (In the Conclusions chapter of my history of the Uprising, I list over two dozen factors that contributed to causing Stonewall, but in terms of importance I place the New York City successes of militant homophiles such as Craig Rodwell, Dick Leitsch, Frank Kameny⁸, and Randy Wicker at the top of that list.)

The symbolic meaning of Stonewall is also straightforward but is a bit more subtle and complex to describe. The symbolic and iconic meaning of Stonewall is based upon the fact that during the Stonewall Uprising, one of the country's social groups seen and treated as the most despicable and considered to be the least likely and least able to stand up for itself not only did so, but did so unexpectedly, spontaneously, with great courage, and to a large degree succeeded both morally and practically in the Uprising. In other words, homosexuals in the opinion of most of society in the late 1960s were seen as immoral, criminal, and/or mentally ill. One reason homosexuals were so despised was because they were seen as not being true to their gender roles: lesbians were perceived as inappropriately masculine and gay men as inappropriately feminine. But because of the misogyny that is the basis of homophobia, gay men were seen as the greater threat to

tradition of marches that were later most commonly called "Gay Pride" or "LGBT Pride" marches.

⁸ Kameny is included in the list of militants who had an impact on New York City homophile successes as he not only inspired the Mattachine Society of New York to overthrow its governing body which was comprised of persons who advocated the nonmilitant "research and education" approach to the homophile movement but he was also elected to the organization's new board.

society compared with lesbians and therefore occupied a greater space in the public psyche. Because Stonewall was mainly an uprising of gay men, the bottom-line message of this revolt for many people was that, contrary to common belief, gay men were capable of both moral and physical courage. And that persons we would today describe as transgender also played a leading role in the Uprising was (and is), for many, proof in spades of such courage.

These observations go far toward explaining the power of Stonewall as a symbol, but another reason that this event has such power, especially for those who witnessed it at the time, is that the event was totally unexpected. The event was unexpected in large part because the Uprising was unplanned and therefore totally spontaneous, and at the time of the Uprising there were no indications that such an event was likely or even on the horizon.

Let us briefly review a list of examples in the legal sphere alone that will have to stand for all other spheres of life as a reminder of how powerless homosexual men and women felt at the time.

In *GayLaw*, William N. Eskridge, PhD, the country's leading authority on the law and homosexuality, summarized the litany of policies oppressive of homosexuals and gender nonconformists that were in place by the 1960s: "The homosexual in 1961 was smothered by law. She or he risked arrest and possible police brutalization for dancing with someone of the same sex, cross-dressing, propositioning another adult homosexual, possessing a homophile publication, writing about homosexuality without disapproval, displaying pictures of two people of the same sex in intimate positions, operating a lesbian or gay bar, or actually having oral or anal sex with another adult homosexual. The

last was a serious felony in all states but one, and in most jurisdictions also carried with it possible indefinite incarceration as a sexual psychopath. . . . If the homosexual were not a citizen, she or he would likely be deported. If the homosexual were a professional . . . she or he could lose the certification needed to practice that profession.”

This complete assault on lesbians, gay men, and those we today would call the transgender, combined with little or no support mechanism for these minorities, explains why the self-image of homosexuals was so negative in the 1950s and 1960s. The minds of gay people had been so colonized by the heterosexual world that almost none of them could imagine a positive gay identity, let alone a positive gay culture—and thus the idea of homosexual rights as a political cause, except for the extremely rare gay person who participated in the homophile movement, would not have occurred to most gay people; indeed, it did not even occur to most homosexuals who were very politically engaged. For example, Danny Garvin, who in 1969 lived in the only gay commune in New York City, often talked with his fellow commune members about the war in Vietnam and women’s rights, but they never had a single political discussion about homosexuality.

Michael Denny had been very politically involved since the late 1950s, when he was a teenager. He had sat in at the Woolworth counter in Providence, Rhode Island, in sympathy with the sit-ins conducted to protest segregation in the South and was thrown out of his high school for starting a front organization for Women Strike for Peace. When he went to the University of Chicago, he helped edit *The Hawk and the Dove* magazine, showing that in 1964 he was among the very few Americans who publicly questioned whether the United States should be in Vietnam. Still, he had never considered his homosexuality from a political perspective, explaining that, “Homosexuality was so

heavily psychologized that the idea of looking at it through a political lens just didn't occur to me."

This explains both why an action as radical (not to mention as successful!) as Stonewall was so unexpected and thus so powerful. In Denny's recollection, when as a student at the University of Chicago, in the early summer of 1969 he picked up a New York newspaper, his eye was drawn to a headline about homosexuals, and the impact was immediate: "Stonewall came like the thunder clap."

In 1969, Ginny Apuzzo was a nun in a convent who had gone there to confront the moral meaning of her lesbianism. She had just turned twenty-nine and had already observed three years of celibacy when the news of the Uprising coming over the radio made her suddenly realize that she was not alone. "It hit me with a bolt of lightning. It was as if I had an incredible release of my own outrage at having to sequester so much of my life. To me, it was the quintessential 'enough is enough.' And for me, I'd long since waited for somebody to give me permission to say 'enough is enough.'"

When Joan Nestle heard of the rioting she went down to the Village on Saturday, June 28, and stood in the street in front of the Stonewall Inn, looking at the police barricades and the crowds that had gathered. "There is a background to what happened in that bar, a building up of rage like volcanic steam, over the years. I remember standing there and knowing that a new time had come because that rage had exploded."

In Long Binh, Vietnam, US Army Specialist 3 Henry Baird sat eating lunch in the mess hall and reading a military newspaper. As he scanned the day's news summary his eye was drawn to a short paragraph that described a riot led by homosexuals against the police in Greenwich Village. Twenty years later he recalled, "My heart was filled with

joy. I thought about what I had read frequently but had no one to discuss it with.

Secretly within myself I decided that if I should survive to come back stateside I would come out as a gay person."

On the night of June 27, 1969, Robin Souza was traveling on the New Jersey Turnpike to Philadelphia with two female heterosexual friends. As they listened to a rock and soul station, Gary and his friends were amazed when the newscast announced that gay men and the police were fighting a pitched battle on the streets of Greenwich Village. Although Souza imagined a battle waged with guns, he felt impelled to immediately turn the car around and head for the Village to witness what was happening, but his fellow passengers dissuaded him from doing so as it seemed too dangerous.

The immediate power of Stonewall's impact is seen not just in the immediate shock felt by these witnesses but also in how it inspired them to action. Michael Denny packed up his belongings and moved to New York to figure out both his gay identity and what it meant to him. His exploration eventually led to his starting, with Chuck Ortleb and several other friends, the influential literary magazine *Christopher Street*, where many of the members of the Violet Quill first published their works. Later Denny founded the nation's first gay imprint, Stonewall Inn Editions, at St. Martin's Press. Robin Souza went on to become one of the founders of the Gay Activists Alliance⁹, the organization most responsible for the spread of the gay liberation movement that emerged from the Stonewall Uprising. Joan Nestle founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and Ginny Apuzzo became the executive director of the National Gay

⁹ Robin Souza, like so many others in an era of heavy repression, used a pseudonym, Gary Dutton, for his activism, and he is usually listed under that name when the list of the 13 cofounders of the Gay Activists Alliance is given.

and Lesbian Task Force before she was an advisor to President Bill Clinton. For each of these individuals who became activists because of the impact of Stonewall, there were hundreds if not thousands more like Henry Baird whose response to Stonewall took place on a personal level: when he returned stateside he kept his promise to himself and came out.

Immanuel Kant famously wrote about the French Revolution in “The Contest of Faculties” that “The occurrence in question does not involve any of those momentous deeds or misdeeds of men which make small in their eyes what was formerly great or make great what was formerly small. . . . No, it has nothing to do with all this. We are here concerned only with the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself in public while the drama of great political changes is taking place.” In other words, the French Revolution had the tremendous impact it did not because of its effects on those who participated in it but rather upon those who witnessed it. It was the same phenomenon with Stonewall: the event derived its power from the emotional shock it created in those who heard about it.

All of the above goes far to explain the powerful symbolism of Stonewall. But why does that power endure?

I believe that the answer lies in the meaning of historic or national symbolism itself. All nations and all important movements have their moments that have a power that exceeds what can be expressed by mere rational analysis of their historic effect. This is because these moments are symbolic, because they express the deepest truths experienced by the human heart. They become emblematic of the best in us, they symbolize our hopes and dreams, our feelings and yearnings, and all that we sense is our

potential: the vision of a world as it should be or could be or as it needs to be. Thus when we learn about American history, certain stories and events and people and moments are emphasized. For example, all school children learn the story of how Francis Scott Keyes watched through the night to see if Fort McHenry would fall under the intense British bombardment to which it was being subjected, and when he saw the flag still flying in the morning, he knew that an important battle had not been lost and expressed this moment of hope and the triumph of faith in the words that became our national anthem. The stories—or the images—of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., giving his “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial, or of the American flag being raised over Iwo Jima, or of Rosa Parks refusing to move to a seat at the back of the bus are all moments and images that help define who we are, moments that exemplify our best and highest values and thus are potent symbols.

The narrative of the Stonewall Uprising is a very powerful story for a number of reasons. It seemed to come out of nowhere and was totally unexpected. It was a spontaneous event, totally unplanned and undirected. And it happened in a seedy club run by the Mafia, and the groups that first turned against the police were effeminate boys who lived on the streets, sissies rejected by their families and by society, prostitutes, a butch lesbian, and transgender men—that such a group could not only lead an effective revolt against the police but also terrify them seemed too good to be true. Yet this is what happened. And the police were astonished at the anger that they witnessed. And they were terrified. Seymour Pine, who led the raid, had written the manual used for hand-to-hand combat in World War II and been blown up by a mine in the Battle of the Bulge, yet he said he was never more afraid in World War II than he was inside that bar surrounded

by the hundreds of homosexuals who had the bar under siege. Charles Smythe, who helped lead the raid and had fought with Pine in the war, said he was still shaking an hour after the riot police rescued him. Thus Stonewall symbolizes both gay people standing up for themselves en masse for the first time—spontaneously—and winning. And this is the kind of raw material from which legends have always been fashioned.¹⁰

All who witnessed the Stonewall Uprising were transfixed by it. That is the reason that less than half a year after the Uprising much of the leadership of the homophile movement voted to celebrate the event annually. In 1970 the celebration was already a national one, including several cities beyond New York, and very soon thereafter became international. And the movement spawned by Stonewall continues to surge around the nation and the world. There was little international movement for LGBT civil rights before Stonewall, but the liberation movement inspired by the Stonewall Uprising has known no boundaries and has continued to overturn discriminatory and unjust policies in Europe, Asia, Africa, and every other part of the world. Thus the Stonewall Uprising is the most celebrated and symbolic event, both nationally and internationally, in the history

¹⁰ “Winning” here means victory in several senses: The demonstrators not only gave some of the police a terrible fright, but they were only dispersed after the city had to call in hundreds of police officers, including the riot police. Even then, the demonstrators did not follow police orders to disperse but successfully resisted the police for a period of hours on four of the Uprising’s six nights. Beyond the practical victory of mass sustained resistance to police control of what would be later characterized as “gay space,” there was the inherent moral victory of LGBT people collectively standing up for themselves.

of the LGBT movement for civil rights and equality from its earliest beginnings in Germany in the late 19th century down through the present day.

David Carter
New York City
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