

Reality Check:

Santorum Flap and Gallup Tract: Survey Says "Gay Rights - Nobody Cares"

By Mike Fitzpatrick

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Now that American forces have helped to liberate the Iraqi people from their repressive leadership, not to mention most of their priceless antiquities and zoo animals from safekeeping as well, national attention is returning to meditate on the navel we love best: our own. Unable to trot out a single smoking weapon of mass destruction for the cameras, Republican higher-ups are wisely focusing on the urgent most problem facing our country.

So what's the glaring issue galvanizing the GOP? 6% unemployment in a sour economy riddled by corporate leadership's personal greed? Nah, the stock market's up. Tax cuts anyone?

Perhaps it's the nearly 1 in 5 uninsured Americans unable to survive the financial bunker buster of a three day hospital visit? Pish posh! To nearly every enfeebled hand, the poor poll Democrat. Besides, who even gets to stay a hospital three consecutive days anymore? And those new HIPPA privacy rules make sure no one ever finds that out.

If Senator Rick Santorum is to be believed, the most pressing issue on the American agenda is homosexual conduct. Santorum's comments in a recent news interview - plagiarized nearly verbatim from a February "friend of the court" brief filed by Bush federal court judicial nominee Bill Pryor on the Supreme Court sodomy case (Santorum skipped equating queers with necrophiliacs) - and the subsequent media fallout led to an indirect, unofficial White House anointing of the Senator's stance as "inclusive" of the current American mindset.

Two weeks following his clearly calculated comments, Santorum appears secure in his party's leadership, unlike Trent Lott who was all but physically ejected for his oft-repeated, but still off-the-cuff racist remarks. The reason is simple. In terms of political electricity, race remains a third rail while gay issues have the spark of a 9-Volt smoke alarm battery. As a whole, Americans simply don't care.

Unlike Senator Santorum, I'll attribute my source: the Gallup Organization. Lost last September, amidst the media breast-beating over the first anniversary of 9-11 and the reportage of the rancorous Republican regime change rhetoric on Iraq at the UN, was the news about the release of a report about the comprehensive survey conducted by those prestigious poll-takers on American attitudes toward homosexuality. The report revealed a quarter century of general change for the better, but also pointed out that "the overall sense of urgency to change laws or policies surrounding homosexuality is not strong from either direction."

There's plenty of evidence that suggests the Gallup research is on target. At the federal level ENDA continues to languish, with neither side feeling confident about the political consequences of a win by their side to put the issue to rest with an actual on-the record-vote. In Wisconsin, power appears to remain divided enough to forestall any protracted battle on same-sex domestic partnership and marriage ban issues, lest the debates spill over into the election cycle. In both the above cases, it's the silence of the mainstream majority on the gay rights issues that politicians fear.

Despite our vested interest in full equality, the attitudes of the majority of the gay community mirror the mainstream mindset. Gay circuit parties routinely outdraw issues-oriented conferences. Gay Days at Disney World routinely draws tens of thousands annually to Orlando, while the NGLTF's Creating Change is ecstatic to have a couple of thou in attendance.

Last April here in Wisconsin Positive Voice's elaborately planned and widely promoted Appleton appearance by national gay Scouting hero James Dale pulled in about 75 people. Many in the audience were straight allies, not card-carrying queers. That same night The Argonauts stopped counting admissions to their "Daddy/Daddy's Boy" contest at a nearby Green Bay bar when the total topped 200.

Both of those events featured good looking men in uniform. Yet the Dale appearance, promoted with widespread regional mainstream media coverage and front page photos and feature interviews in Wisconsin's two most widely-read LGBT publications, couldn't compete with bar promotion publicized with a homemade mix of few photocopied flyers and an email message or two. Even taking into account the timing, admission cost and educational vs. recreational nature of the two events, the ease of pulling a crowd to the leather show still says a lot about our priorities.

Even more disturbing is the "post gay" attitude becoming more prevalent almost daily in the next generation of homosexual Americans. For those of you with little contact with young folks, "post gay" refers to the current attitude that being gay doesn't matter any more. Sexual orientation is no big deal. Just be yourself and have fun, a lot of queer kids say.

In some ways, it warms aging activists' hearts both to see homosexual orientation treated equivalently with handedness, eye color or national origin and gay youth developing an understanding of their sexuality concurrently with their straight peers. However, the loss of a strenuous "coming out" process for gay youth has its drawbacks. The lack of struggle fails to shape a gay identity that transforms into the political will to forge change. That does not bode well for activist leaders recruiting their replacements.

So if Gallup is right and no one, including queers, really gives a hoot about gay rights, why did Santorum spout off two weeks ago? With their legislative focus and love of news making confrontation, most pundits, straight and gay, both missed the senator's point and the source of his invective. Future progress on gay equality will probably depend on the judiciary not the legislature.

Simply put, Santorum sees the historical precedent. Lawrence & Garner vs. Texas is not merely a Supreme Court review of the 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick sodomy ruling. The arguments that have been presented in front of the court and the questioning by the justices both have reflected much more closely the arguments presented at 1954's Brown vs. Board of Education, which ended in an equal-protection ruling for African Americans. Exactly one decade later The Civil Rights Act of 1954 made racial equality the law of the land.

Santorum's remarks were actually a calculated attempt to refocus media's and possibly the Supreme Court's attention away from the equal protection arguments. In the process he raised both the far right's canard of "no constitutional right to privacy" that so agitated mainstream opinion makers and the evangelicals' "love the sinner, hate the sin" rhetoric that so inflamed the gay pundits.

In many ways 2003 America feel a lot like the 1954 version. Republicans largely control the federal government. Iraqi war opposition is branded "un-American" by the heirs to Joseph McCarthy such as Rush Limbaugh and Dennis Hastert. WalMart and corporate America self-censors the programming and distribution of any entertainment less than "family friendly" due to pressure from the modern successors to the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency like James Dobson's Focus on the Family or Donald Wildmon's American Family Association. Average Americans are as preoccupied with the latest computer and electronic gewgaws as their 50's counterparts were enamored of color television and car design. Politically we are now as asleep at the wheel on gay rights issues as 50's Americans were to the Negro Problem.

It took the courts to wake America up back then. Santorum knows and fears a repeat of the political fallout that saw the end of Eisenhower laissez faire Fifties with the Kennedy-Johnson liberal Great Society Sixties, a decade that ended with the Stonewall and the energizing of the gay community. The last thing Santorum wants is for his to be the watch during which we finish what we started.