

Gay Rights

The rights revolution also encompassed the gay and lesbian subcultures that existed in the shadows of mainstream society until the 1960s. Unlike blacks, women, and other minority groups, gay Americans did not have a long history of organizing to defend their rights. Heterosexual Americans uniformly disparaged gays as deviant and morally reprehensible. The American Psychiatric Association categorized homosexuality as a “mental disorder,” a position they did not jettison until 1973. Taking the psychological stereotyping a step further, *Time* magazine viewed homosexuality as “a pernicious sickness.” “If you were gay and you accepted those societal norms, then you were at war with yourself,” recalled one college student of his own private struggle to come to terms with his homosexuality. Within this social climate exposure as a homosexual or lesbian meant losing everything—job, spouse, friends, and social position.

In the sixties the black Civil Rights Movement and the hippie counterculture assault on sexual taboos inspired some gay people to “come out of the closet” and challenge the ways that American society ostracized them. The true awakening of the gay rights movement came during the Stonewall riot on June 28, 1969, when patrons frequenting the

Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village male gay bar, fought back during a New York City police raid. This image of open defiance electrified the gay community, and the next morning a huge crowd gathered outside the Stonewall Inn, chanting “Gay Power,” a modification of the “Black Power” slogan that black militants embraced (see Chapter 27). Energized homosexuals and lesbians founded the radical Gay Liberation Front in response to Stonewall, while hundreds of smaller gay rights groups sprouted up throughout the country. Collectively these organizations formed gay support groups on university campuses, lobbied for antidiscrimination laws, marched openly in Gay Pride parades, and followed the “sit-in” model of the Civil Rights Movement by staging “kiss-ins” in restaurants. “We should have the same right to express our affection publicly as heterosexuals have,” asserted lesbian activist Barbara Gittings.

The increased visibility of the gay rights movement soon provoked a conservative response. In 1977 the deeply religious pop singer Anita Bryant, known to most Americans for her television commercials singing the praises of Florida orange juice, spearheaded a successful campaign to overturn a newly enacted gay rights law in Dade County, Florida. Her victory galvanized forces across the country on both sides of the gay rights debate.

28.10 AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1987

The panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt portrayed the disease's victims as sons, brothers, and lovers with strong ties to their families and communities to challenge stereotypes of homosexuals as diseased pariahs.



How similar were the Gay Rights and Civil Rights Movements?

Fundamentalist churches geared up to oppose any legislation granting gays legitimacy, lobbying particularly strongly for laws that prevented homosexuals from teaching in public schools. Gay rights groups ridiculed the notion that male homosexuals, because they preferred men over women as sexual partners, were pedophiles. A new, more insidious challenge loomed ahead, however.

In 1981 the mainstream press began printing stories of a mysterious ailment sweeping through the sexually charged homosexual communities in New York and San Francisco. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), a virus transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids, ravaged the immune system of its victims. Acquiring AIDS was a virtual death sentence in the 1980s; the disease killed over 100,000 Americans by 1990. Because in the United States AIDS disproportionately struck homosexuals, the nation viewed the epidemic as more than a public health crisis.

The raging political debate over the status of homosexuals in American society colored the competing visions about AIDS. Extreme religious conservatives viewed AIDS as God's retribution against the "morally degenerate," ignoring evidence that AIDS could strike the heterosexual population as well. Having just recently repudiated the notion that gay people were mentally ill, homosexuals now confronted widespread fears that they were all diseased. AIDS patients told heartbreaking stories of losing their jobs, being turned away from hospital emergency rooms, and facing eviction from apartment buildings by landlords who feared contamination. The gay community lobbied vigorously for increased federal funds to find a medical cure for the disease. Still, having fought so long to escape police harassment and end legal penalties for consensual homosexual acts, many gay activists were initially leery about urging homosexual men to modify their sexual behaviors. Larry Kramer chastised gay activists who "took the position that sexual promiscuity was the one freedom we had and that we had to fight to maintain it—even if it killed us. And it did kill us, a lot of us." Kramer instead worked to popularize the "safe sex" message that eventually gained currency in the gay community.

The two images shown here illustrate the competing visions within the gay community over how to best draw media attention to the mounting AIDS death toll. In 1987 the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the brainchild of San Francisco AIDS activist Cleve Jones, began touring the country after an inaugural



28.11 ACT-UP Protestors Stage a Funeral Demonstration in Wall Street
Militant gay activists used civil disobedience to protest high prices and slow federal approval of life-saving anti-AIDS drugs.

unfurling on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The nation's largest-ever public art endeavor, the quilt (**28.10**) made the individual stories of AIDS visible by allowing family and friends to create a square for a loved one, homosexual or heterosexual, lost to the disease. Squares were the size of a human grave and the stories they contained varied considerably, portraying a mixture of embroidered personal remembrances and treasured possessions like jewelry.

Radical activists adopted a less poignant and more militant tone. Embracing the slogan "silence = death," the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) staged its first "funeral" demonstration in 1987 to demand better medical treatment. Protesters lay prone on a busy Wall Street intersection until police carried them away (**28.11**), employing the same civil disobedience tactics used successfully by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. ACT-UP also conducted phone "zaps" that barraged local, state, and federal officials with calls on AIDS-related issues, and barricaded the doors to the Food and Drug Administration to protest delays in approving AIDS-fighting drugs. A *New York Times* headline called ACT-UP, "rude, rash, effective." By 1996 a drug "cocktail" became available that dramatically reduced AIDS-related deaths. A relentless safe-sex campaign and screening of donated blood lowered the infection rate as well.