

ter amendment (usually called Issue 3). This voter initiative, passed in 1993, prohibits the enactment or enforcement of any laws on behalf of gay citizens. Patrick lost, resoundingly. (He says it is still possible that the division will enter the case if it gets to the Supreme Court. But Beatrice Dohrn, legal director of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, discounts the possibility, saying, "This is where the key battle is being fought right now, and this is where the civil rights division has declined to act.") Clinton waffled, of course, in his initial support of gay rights, and this may be another example. The White House has assigned two of its lawyers to monitor the Justice Department, one to scrutinize the civil rights division's affirmative action cases and another to keep watch over Reno's social-worker tendencies. Presumably these influences outweighed Patrick's plea in Solicitor General Drew Days's final decision not to file a brief.

Another indicator that White House support for civil rights perspectives may not be dependable involves the pending decision about whether to enter the suit against Proposition 187, California's anti-immigrant initiative, which Patrick has publicly called an "abomination." While Clinton too has spoken out on several occasions against the measure, his aides worked feverishly to keep the Summit of the Americas last month from officially repudiating it. The civil rights division may be hamstrung on this issue by the President's increasingly pusillanimous stance on social issues.

Patrick is ready, he says, "to take some body blows" so that the "wonderfully talented and committed professionals in the division who understand that our work is on behalf of some of the most vulnerable citizens, and who want a fair shake for those citizens, can keep going." But he also needs the freedom to use his job as a bully pulpit, as he promised to do and has been doing since his appointment. He's a persistent optimist who believes in "a deep reservoir of good will in this country" that must be tapped by more constructive debate about civil rights, a discourse that will enable people to "imagine the connection between their own sense of dignity and that of another," and thus make progress possible. If too many of his initiatives are nipped in the bud by more cautious influences from the White House or his Justice Department colleagues, his articulate support of a more inclusive society will be lost to those who might be moved by it. Other battles in the mean seasons ahead will probably attract bolder headlines, but none will be more important to our future as a decent society. □

■ GAY POLITICS IN THE HEARTLAND

With the Lesbian Avengers in Idaho

SARA PURSLEY

Northern Idaho, fall 1994: a right-wing land in a right-wing time. Once the home of hundreds of radical Wobblies (and some of the country's bloodiest labor suppressions), the region is currently infamous for housing the national headquarters of Aryan Nations. While it usually votes Democratic, its social conservatism is deeply entrenched and seems to be expanding. It is also one of the most rural areas in the country, with hundreds of logging, mining and farming towns scattered on small highways and dirt roads throughout ten counties. Enter Proposition One. Put forth on last November's ballot by a Christian right group called the Idaho Citizens' Alliance, Proposition One was a multipronged attack on lesbian and gay lives modeled after, but more extensive than, Colorado's Amendment 2. The initiative, which was narrowly defeated on November 8, would have prohibited sexual orientation from being added to any antidiscrimination ordinances in the state, banned teachers and counselors from talking about homosexuality as "healthy" or "acceptable" and created adults-only sections in libraries for literature that "addresses" homosexuality. Among these mountain lakes and rolling wheat fields, it was an attack vicious enough to spark a lesbian and gay movement.

Dykes and fags fight back: In Moscow, a town of 18,000 set amid the wheat fields of the Palouse region, thirty-five lesbians and gay men gather at the Latah County fair for a Lesbian and Gay Freedom Picnic and hand out Hershey's kisses with a card that says on the front, "How about a kiss instead?" and on the reverse side, "For the last twelve years, lesbians and gay men have been threatened, harassed and beaten at the Latah County Fair. STOP THE VIOLENCE. STOP THE HATE." A month later, forty queers descend on Xenon, a traditionally homophobic and violent nightclub, for a Dance-In to take back the night. In Lewiston, a working-class timber town of 28,000, five lesbians and gay men hold a town forum to speak about living and growing up queer in Lewiston—the first time that lesbians and gay men in this town have ever gotten together publicly to come out. In Sandpoint, population 5,000, high school students dress up as their favorite lesbian and gay books for a street theater demonstration. In Genesee, a tiny farming town of 725, a lesbian distributes door to door a statement she has written about her life as the townspeople's "lesbian neighbor."

These are just a few of the grass-roots, pro-lesbian and pro-gay efforts that the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing

Sara Pursley, a fourth-generation Idahoan recently transplanted to New York, is a founding member of the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing Project.

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

MOVING?

Send both your old mailing label and your new address to:

THE NATION
P.O. Box 10763
Des Moines IA 50340-0763

Please allow 4-6 weeks for processing.

PROBLEMS?

If you have any problems or questions regarding your subscription, please write to us at the address to the left, or call:

1 (800) 333-8536
Monday to Friday
7:00 am to 11:00 pm CST
Saturday & Sunday
8:00 am to 6:00 pm CST

Project (LACROP) supported in northern Idaho in response to Proposition One. LACROP, a working group of the New York Lesbian Avengers, was formed to support lesbian and gay activists in communities under siege by the Christian right. In 1993 the group sent three full-time activists to Lewiston, Maine, to battle a Christian right initiative to repeal the town's antidiscrimination ordinance. The initiative passed by an alarming majority, but low-income, Catholic, socially conservative areas targeted by LACROP and local activists turned in some of the highest percentages of "no" votes in town. Last August LACROP was invited to Idaho by the newly formed Palouse Lesbian Avengers, and sent eight full-time and eight part-time lesbian organizers to work in the state through November.

LACROP set up shop in Moscow, and, according to Palouse Avenger Natalie Shapiro, "their little purple house on Jefferson Street became a de facto community center." The group worked with the Palouse Lesbian Avengers, whose membership grew from four to twenty-five during LACROP's stay, and organized direct actions focused on lesbian visibility and survival. They started the weekly *Lesbian Avengers Radio Show*, held fundraisers and organized the Freedom Picnic and the Dance-In at Xenon. LACROP also helped Voices for Human Rights in Moscow to coordinate grass-roots campaign efforts with a ragtag collection of lesbians, gay men and straight people outraged by Proposition One. These efforts included a door-to-door canvassing effort in which lesbians and gay men talked openly about their lives, a United in Diversity town rally, and the production of multi-message support signs for businesses and individuals (people could choose from a collection of messages, including "No Banned Books. No on One." and "No Lesbian Bashing. No on One").

From Moscow, LACROP spread out through the small



mining, timber and farming towns of northern Idaho, adding new meaning to the Avengers' motto "We Recruit." The lack of a cohesive lesbian and gay community in most of the region forced some creative approaches. LACROP organizers attended labor and human rights meetings, wandered through food co-ops, interrupted high school theater rehearsals, visited Native American reservations and asked every dyke they met for more names and phone numbers. It was a challenging job in an area that had almost no infrastructure for progressive organizing of any kind (the entire 250-mile region houses only one domestic violence center and no abortion services).

On one recruiting trip to Lewiston, Chanelle Mathews and Michele Kelley of LACROP were hanging out in a straight bar (the only kind there is in northern Idaho) when their gaydar suddenly went off. After quick introductions and a traditional pickup line ("Do you know of a quieter bar?"), Chanelle and Michele were escorted by Anne Erslund and Ty Delacruz to a local dive, where they discussed lesbian life in Lewiston well into the night. One week later, Anne and Ty were helping other local lesbians and gay men plan a townwide literature drop of a brochure that talked openly about lesbian and gay lives, and a letter (negotiated by LACROP) from the Central Labor Council, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. affiliate in this overwhelmingly union town, urging voters to "join Labor" in opposing "discrimination against lesbians and gay men in Idaho."

Out of this effort, Lewiston's first lesbian and gay organization was formed. It was a motley crew of dykes and fags recruited off the streets, from the high schools and out of the bars, who named themselves the Lewiston Lesbian and Gay Society and organized a town forum at which Anne, Ty and three others would come out. After the defeat of Proposition One, the group erected a gigantic 120-foot pink triangle on Lewiston Hill, which towers over the town, and subsequently organized a "cotillion" that attracted dozens of local lesbians and gay men in what was undoubtedly the beginning of a community. Anne says of these experiences, "I was just totally amazed to find out that there are people who really care about other lesbian and gay people. I feel like I'm alive, like I'm more real than I ever have been in my entire life."

One reason LACROP is so successful in motivating lesbians and gay men is that it steadfastly avoids the volunteerist, one-message, highly centralized model of traditional political campaigns. In Idaho, that model was adopted by the No on 1 Coalition, formed by a predominantly lesbian and gay group in Boise that had been successfully organizing a network of loosely connected groups throughout the state since January 1993 (when the Idaho Citizens' Alliance announced its petition drive). Last August, however, the Boise group hired a full-time staff and formulated a centralized campaign plan with technical and financial assistance (as well as full-time staff members) from the Human Rights Campaign Fund, Gay and Lesbian Americans and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The shift toward centralization and "message control" had many implications for people working on the Proposition One campaign. To become a volunteer in the Boise office of No on 1, for example, the applicant would have to sign a form stating that she would not talk to the press, write

articles or send in letters to the editor about Proposition One without approval from the executive committee. These rules were intended to "control the message," and effectively precluded volunteers from promoting lesbian and gay visibility in the press. In rural areas, No on 1 tried to convince all local groups to give up their campaign PACs (which would mean they could not legally produce campaign literature) and send all their money to the Boise office.

LACROP organizers believe that this centralization and control of decision-making caused feelings of disempowerment and apathy among many rural lesbians and gay men. As Eileen Clancy explains, "People don't 'volunteer' to save their own lives. Successful, long-term political movements are not formed by gathering a thousand recruits to lick postage stamps. LACROP's strategy is to bring lesbians and gay men into the movement to share their ideas about what direction that movement should take." At a time when most national gay organizations provide assistance only to centralized, hierarchical anti-initiative campaigns, LACROP provides invaluable resources to lesbian and gay people on a grass-roots level. While one of No on 1's primary functions was to control the message, Elizabeth Meister of LACROP explains that "there were piles of literature all over our house, some we produced, like 'Tips for Canvassing,' or others we reproduced, like legal definitions of 'minority status.' Our goal was to produce information collectively, with input from the people whose lives were most affected." A decentralized and grass-roots approach is not the only difference LACROP has with traditional campaigns. The group requires that lesbian and gay visibility be integral to every local action and campaign project it works on. This requirement became extremely important in Idaho, where No on 1 television ads never mentioned the words "lesbian," "gay" or even "homosexuality."

The primary No on 1 messages were "No Government Intervention in Private Lives" and "Proposition One: It's Expensive." Christina McKnight of LACROP says, "People get really intimidated by polls and by self-proclaimed campaign 'professionals.' Polls always show that most straight people don't like queers, which we know anyway, but what polls don't recognize is the fact that the Christian right is talking about lesbian and gay people during the campaign. And whenever the Christian right is the only group talking about us, we are in trouble."

Out-and-proud organizing in northern Idaho isn't easy. LACROP members and local activists faced many slammed doors, as well as harassment and angry threats during canvassing efforts. Several local lesbians and gay men working with LACROP had their cars vandalized with graffiti, rotten eggs and threatening notes. And for every dyke recruited, a dozen others would decline out of fear—of losing their jobs and homes, of rejection by their families, of being harassed, of being killed. Yet activists received astonishingly little hassling at the most explicitly visible actions, such as the Latah County Freedom Picnic and the Xenon Dance-In, probably due to the large numbers of people involved. Lesbians and gay men who stayed in the closet may have been more vulnerable than those who came out. The worst known attack during the Proposition One campaign was the attempted firebombing of the

The Nation.

Teachers and Professors!

Bringing national and global events to life in the classroom isn't easy. Textbooks are out of date. Mainstream periodicals supply only the conventional wisdom.

So how can you interest your students in current events and get them debating the topics of the day?

Use The Nation in your classroom.

Your students will read provocative, award-winning articles covering the latest in politics and the arts, and they'll be exposed to the kind of alternative news and opinion that will get them talking

For more information, write:
Classroom Education Program,
The Nation,
72 Fifth Avenue,
New York, NY 10011
or call
Peter Rothberg at
(212) 242-8400

Our Classroom Education Program offers semester-length bulk subscriptions at special student rates and materials to help you use *The Nation* with your class

AUDIO TAPES NOW AVAILABLE

HOLLYWOOD & HISTORY: THE DEBATE OVER JFK

A Town Meeting sponsored by
The Nation Institute
and

The Center for American Culture Studies,
Columbia University, in association with
Writers Guild, East
with panelists

OLIVER STONE, NORMAN MAILER,
NORA EPHRON, EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN
and

Christopher Hitchens, Max Holland,
Bill Schaap, Leon Friedman

Moderated by
Victor Navasky and Jack Salzman

Recorded March 3, 1992, at
The Town Hall, New York City

Each two-tape set is \$20.

To order, send check or money order payable to The Nation Institute to: "Hollywood & History," The Nation Institute, 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011.

home of a closeted lesbian couple following a daylong series of death-threat phone calls (the bomb misfired before reaching the house). The story was confined to the gay grapevine because of the couple's closeted status.

LACROP also faced the suspicion of activists worried about outsiders taking over their two-year-old campaign. Michele Kelley says, "We always take local people's concerns about outsiders very seriously. Our whole project is based on providing resources to local activists, which became clear to most of the people we were working with. But there's another side to this. After the first week or two, the issue was almost always brought up by people hundreds of miles away from our activity, people who wanted to centralize the campaign. Members of the Human Rights Campaign Fund and Gay and Lesbian Americans were also in Idaho, but they hardly ever got criticized for being outsiders. Throwing around the word 'outsider' is a lot easier than dealing with political differences. . . . It's a pretty transparent way to deny the existence, not to mention the strategies, of the local activists we worked with."

Voting results on Proposition One indicate that LACROP's support of unapologetic strategies in northern Idaho worked at the ballot box as well as in the community. Ada County (in the southwest), which has the largest population and includes the state capital of Boise, barely defeated Proposition One with a 51 percent "no" vote. The rest of southwestern Idaho surrounding Boise, however, overwhelmingly voted "yes." Proposition One was defeated only because of significant "no" votes in two areas: the northern counties targeted by LACROP and most of the predominantly Mormon counties in the southeast. These two regions are rural and socially conservative. What happened? In the southeast, the central campaign's "No Big Government" messages probably had an effect. The biggest factor, however, was most likely the Christian right's Mormon-bashing. Shortly before the election, Idaho newspapers reported that some Christian right groups actively involved in pushing Proposition One had shown *Joseph Smith and the Temple of Doom* and other anti-Mormon videos in their churches.

In the north, the three counties that LACROP targeted with lesbian and gay visibility actions and grass-roots campaign efforts defeated Proposition One by considerably higher percentages than the average Idaho vote (statewide, 50.4 percent voted "no" versus 49.6 percent "yes"). LACROP's targeted counties are very different from one another. Latah is traditionally more progressive than the rest of northern Idaho, but unpredictably so—the county elected conservative Republicans to almost every town and county office this year. Latah delivered a 61 percent "no" vote, the second highest in the state. Bonner and Nez Perce counties are socially very conservative. Nez Perce is a predominantly working-class logging and manufacturing county that voted overwhelmingly for Republican gubernatorial candidate Phil Batt. Bonner is very rural and has a strong right-wing presence—neo-Nazis wearing swastikas routinely show up at Human Rights Task Force meetings. Both of these counties turned in an unexpected 54 percent "no" vote on Proposition One, significantly higher than both Ada County and Kootenai County (the north's largest county, and the only one to have its own No on 1 office).

The entire state of Idaho (population 1 million) defeated Proposition One by 3,000 votes. The three counties targeted by LACROP (total population, 85,000) defeated it by almost 5,000 votes. As Chanelle Mathews says, "The work done in these counties proves that it is possible to win the initiative and do the right thing at the same time."

LACROP left northern Idaho on November 23, but the legacy of its work remains in the form of two Lesbian Avengers chapters (one in Moscow and a brand-new group in Coeur d'Alene), the Lewiston Lesbian and Gay Society, a Lesbian and Gay Rural Organizing Project, a pro-lesbian and pro-gay youth group at Sandpoint High School, and the seeds of an antiviolence project. The tremendous amount of energy and local expertise in these groups, combined with the crucial need for them in this region, gives them a good chance of survival.

And what about 1995? LACROP's Maxine Wolfe says, "We're watching the Christian right and we'll go wherever our support is needed to wage an out battle alongside lesbians and gay men in their own communities." And look for LACROP's "Out Against the Right" handbook, to be produced in early 1995, which will document the group's experiences and offer strategies for grass-roots organizing against the Christian right. □

■ GULF WAR SYNDROME (CONT.)

A Lingering Sickness

LAURA FLANDERS

During the Gulf War, Maj. Gen. Ronald Blanck was director of professional services in the office of the Army's Surgeon General. He was in charge of formulating the Army's "medical operations" policy, he says. Now he is commander of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, one of two specialized care centers that on December 13 were granted up to \$20 million between them for new research into "Gulf War Syndrome."

"Of paramount concern to us is the safety of our patients," Blanck said. He said the same thing about the soldiers under his care during the war. Back then he approved the use of pyridostigmine bromide, an experimental drug issued to soldiers as a "pretreatment" against the effects of a possible nerve gas attack. "We had plenty of studies on pyridostigmine dating back to 1955," Blanck said. "We knew we had an agent that would protect us." But on December 7, Jay Rockefeller, outgoing chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, listed pyridostigmine as one of three medications that may have caused the mysterious illness that is affecting tens of thousands of Gulf War personnel.

Unapproved for general use, the drug was acquired by the Department of Defense under a special waiver from the Food

Laura Flanders is working on a book about Gulf War Syndrome.

Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.