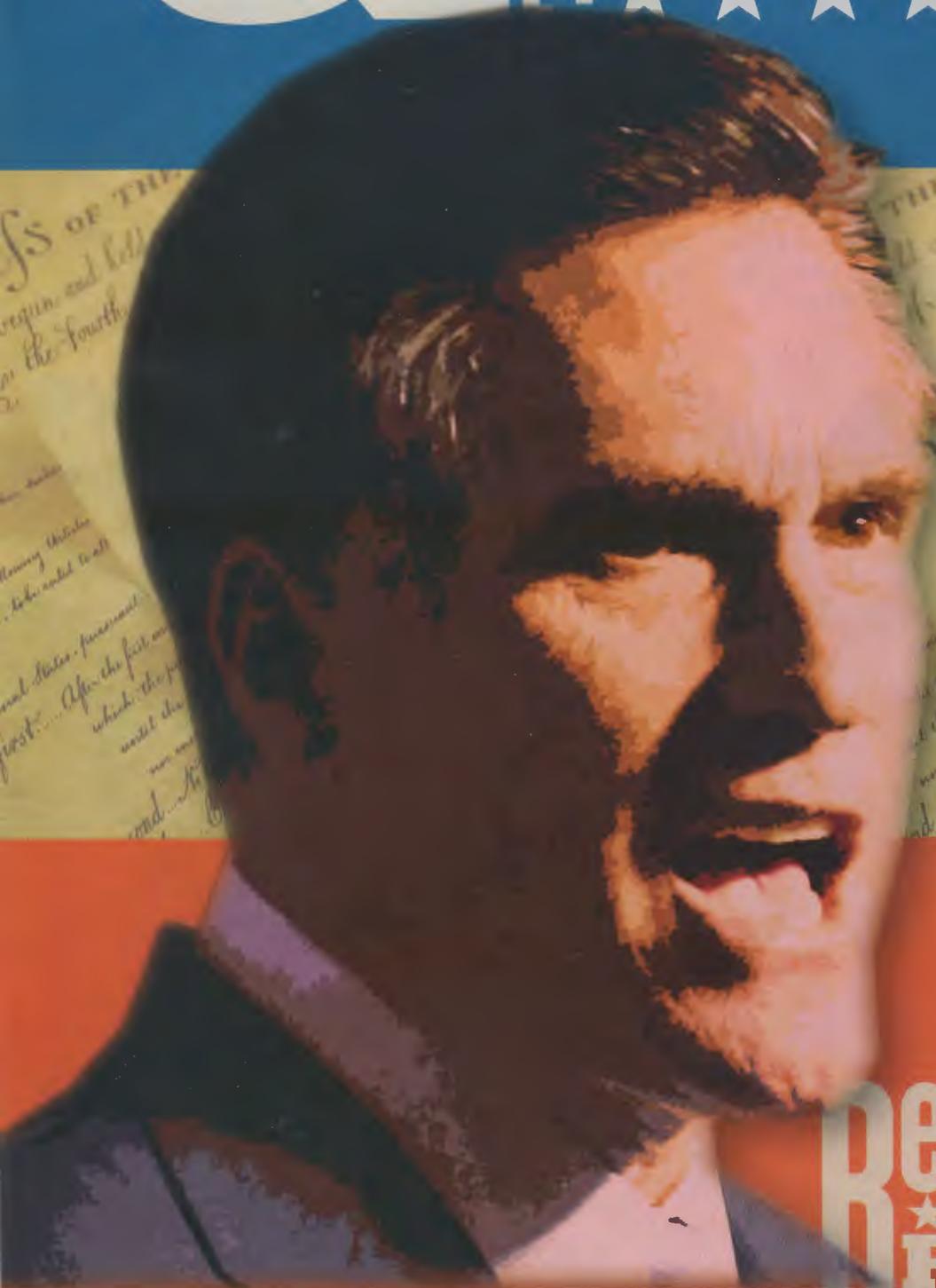


THE SOUND & THE FURY

★★★★★★



Republican
ROMNEY



IS THE TALK OF
GAY RIGHTS AT
THE EXPENSE
OF LEGISLATIVE
PROTECTION?
AHEAD OF THE
U.S. ELECTION,
TIM TEEMAN
TAKES THE
POLITICAL
TEMPERATURE



Democrat
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
DOBAMA



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O, Mitt Romney has not called time on the social conservatives driving the anti-gay bigotry in the Republican Party. And no, President Obama has not had enough of the state-by-state shilly-shallying over gay marriage and magically decreed it legal everywhere. But as the presidential election on November

6 looms closer, there is something strange, and potentially heartening, going on in American politics around gay rights.

At the time of writing there has been barely a puff of acrid homophobia in the national campaign. In 2012 one would hope that would not be cause for celebration, but in the polarised and vicious world of American politics the lack of overt homophobia, on the national stage at least, has been a relief and a surprise.

An important coda: this is written in mid-September before the campaign heats up in the swing states, where 'wedge' social issues such as gay rights can prove pivotal, and before the debates between the presidential candidates on October 3, 6 and 22, and vice-presidential candidates (Democrat Joe Biden and Republican Paul Ryan) on October 11.

Crudely, the Democrats love us and are using gay-marriage equality to fire up their 'base' support, while Republicans realise homophobia sells less and less effectively, so while banging on about 'traditional marriage' they haven't made a big deal, yet, about attacking us. Even if you disagreed with him, President

country's inconsistent embrace of gay equality: one step forward, another sideways, another back. America and gay rights is like being hugged tightly by someone, then that person suddenly withdrawing and holding you at arm's length, suddenly suspicious. You'd call it capricious if it didn't come with such overt cruelty.

The Right wing became very excited when customers turned out for a Chick-fil-A 'appreciation day' – taking it as a measure of how much they supported the company's stance against gay equality – but their celebrations were short-lived. Chick-fil-A released a statement, then a document in September, referencing the company's commitment to anti-discrimination, but also restating its commitment to funding 'marriage enrichment programmes'.

A statement on leading equality campaigning organisation the Human Rights Campaign's website summed up its frustration: 'The truth is, Chick-fil-A is still donating money to anti-LGBT groups – they are just, once again, using the language of their mission statement to deflect attention... What that language essentially means is that they will continue to support groups with rabidly anti-LGBT agendas, but they certainly would never want anyone to think that their support should be taken as an endorsement of any particular political agenda.'

So in the US now you have a fast-food chain that wants to be seen to do the right thing but won't throw off its conservative shackles; you have a President who wants to do the right thing but without the executive power to wave a magic wand and make everything right; you have activists bravely working in individual states to advance equality; and you have gays all over TV making everyone laugh and believe that everything's going the right way. It is, but legislative equality – equality signed, sealed and delivered – is not ours. Linda Hirshman's much-reviewed book, *Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution*, ignores in its streamers-and-balloons title the glaring fact that while public opinion has evolved and the

MOST AMERICANS ARE IN FAVOUR OF GAY MARRIAGE

Obama's landmark announcement in May stating his support for marriage equality emphatically shifted the tone of the debate.

The Republicans must realise they are being outpaced by the public mood. The latest polls show a majority of Americans in favour of marriage equality: according to one by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, supporters of equality number 48% for to 44% against. On mainstream network NBC this autumn one of the most hyped primetime sitcoms, *The New Normal*, from Ryan Murphy, creator of *Glee*, is about a gay couple conceiving a child by surrogate. On CBS, another sitcom focuses on the friendship between a gay man and straight man. Other gay characters and storylines pepper TV screens, out celebrities are both growing in number (Zachary Quinto) and are vocal like Ellen DeGeneres. Photographs of Neil Patrick Harris and his partner David Burtka holidaying with Elton John and David Furnish and their respective children invite 'Ahh, cute' rather than condemnation. Meanwhile, a campaign continues against fast-food company Chicken-fil-A after its chairman, Dan Cathy, told a newspaper, 'Guilty as charged' over his company's opposition to gay marriage.

The saga of Chick-fil-A became more complicated as the summer progressed, its tortuous flip-flopping an apposite symbol of the



fight for equality is now more advanced than ever thanks to the bravery and ingenuity of activists old and new, actual legal equality and legislative protection for gay men and women are far from won or assured. Sadly, it's far too early to hail 'victory'.

The parties have lots of clear water between them on marriage equality, the issue of the moment that will be voted on in four states on November 6. The Democrats support it, indeed could barely stop mentioning it at their national convention in September, where it was one of the 'planks' of the platform. That's evolution: a party once nervous to state its support for gays and lesbians, fearful of the electoral cost, now embraces them to win votes.

In her convention speech, Michelle Obama said, 'If proud Americans can be who they are and boldly stand at the altar with who they love, then surely, surely, we can give everyone in this country a fair chance at that great American dream... Barack knows the American Dream because he's lived it... and he wants everyone in this country to have that same opportunity, no matter who we are, or where we're from, or what we look like, or who we love.' Of course, there was calculation behind the hearts and flowers. The Democrats wanted to galvanise supporters but not alienate undecided voters. It was telling that the major speakers, including Mrs Obama, didn't mention gays and lesbians by name.

The Republican convention ignored, then kicked us. In his speech, Romney, instead of bashing Obama for supporting gay marriage, merely stated he would 'protect the sanctity of life' and 'honour the institution of marriage'. Everyone knows that means 'anti-abortion' and 'anti-gay marriage', but it's revealing that Romney has to moderate the expression of his prejudice to appeal to the mainstream. Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, the most influential of social conservative groups, wrote an anti-gay marriage plank

into the Republicans' platform at the convention, calling for an amendment to the US Constitution that would permanently ban same-sex marriage throughout the US.

Marriage equality is on the ballot in Maryland and Washington State, where it was passed into law earlier this year, but where anti-gay groups have mobilised enough opposition to force it to the public vote.

In Minnesota it's on the ballot because anti-gay groups are seeking to impose a statewide constitutional ban on gay marriage, and in Maine, lesbian and gay rights groups are seeking to overturn a 2009 referendum that repealed the gay marriage law that had previously been enacted by the state.

In Maryland, one lawmaker, Emmett C Burns Jr (you have to love American names), wrote to Steve Bisciotti, owner of the Baltimore Ravens who play in the National Football League (NFL), saying Bisciotti should 'inhibit' one of his players, Brendon Ayanbadejo, from supporting marriage equality. The Ravens refused. Ayanbadejo received support from other NFL players, such as Minnesota Vikings player Chris Kluwe, who sent Burns a sharp, profane letter, one section of which read, 'I can assure you that gay people getting married will have zero effect on your life. They won't come into your house and steal your children. They won't magically turn you into a lustful cockmonster. They won't even overthrow the government in an orgy of hedonistic



We Didn't Invent Christian Hate Organizations
We Just Support Them.



Opposite: the New Normal, a sitcom about a gay couple and surrogate mother. Left from top, Barack Obama, Vice-President Joe Biden and Republican candidate Mitt Romney. Below, Ellen DeGeneres. Above, Zachary Quinto and boyfriend Jonathan Groff (left). Top right, a spoof on Chick-fil-A's anti-gay stance



Gay protesters outside a branch of Chick-fil-A, which has announced its opposition to gay marriage. Inset, Sarah Palin and husband demonstrated their support for the chain by tweeting the photo

debauchery because all of a sudden they have the same legal rights as the other 90% of the population - rights like social security benefits, child care tax credits, family and medical leave to take care of loved ones and... healthcare for spouses and children. You know what having these rights will make gays? Full-fledged American citizens just like everyone else, with the freedom to pursue happiness and all that entails. Do the civil rights struggles of the past 200 years mean absolutely nothing to you?

When American football stars campaign for gay rights (if not yet come out) a changing climate can definitely be detected. Paul Schindler, editor of the brilliant New York newspaper *Gay City News*, said gay activists in all four states were confident of victory.

ARTWORK: SHAWN CRAIG PARKINSON





★ Above, media coverage of President Obama and the election campaign. Left, gay protest against Proposition 8, which bans gay marriage in California. Opposite page, the Civil Rights movement for black people in the 60s

The lack of flammable gay politicking this year, he added, was down to 'simple demographics: more and more young people get older and are much less anti-gay than those in the older age groups. Republicans see blatant homophobia as counter-productive. Now when a Republican stands up for "traditional marriage" it has to be contextualised with it being OK to have gay friends, putting on a friendly face. So you find Republicans talking about schoolchildren being "forced" to learn about gay subjects and churches "forced" to marry gay people. It's not framed as hating gay people now, but rather about other groups losing something by having something imposed upon them.'

To win their war against gay marriage, Republicans are 'conceding lots of ground', said Schindler, by accepting that lesbian and gay couples deserve legal protection and saying they are not against gays being treated fairly. 'Once you retreat, you end up losing more and more ground on your central argument,' he added.

R Clarke Cooper, president of the Log Cabin Republicans, which campaigns on gay issues within the party, conceded it was 'abysmal' for Perkins' anti-gay-marriage plank to hold sway at the convention. 'But when you look at the access and influence we have within the party compared to 1992, there has been significant progress,' he said, claiming that 31 per cent of identified gay voters in 2010 were Republican. 'I'm not saying we're anywhere near done but it's a terrain-rich environment.' Instead of praising Democrats for making gay equality central, Cooper derided them for 'political calculation' (which seems absurd as all politicians and parties engage in that) and 'playing identity politics'.

Barney Frank, the gay Democrat Congressman, said Log Cabin's 'role model was Uncle Tom', referring to the servile black character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Cooper disagreed, 'It would be worse if we weren't here. We're needed, we're able to make a credible case to fellow conservatives.' But surely, given the anti-

gay hostility, mixed with invisibility, at the convention he must have felt lonely at best. 'Not at all, I've never felt more welcome at a convention,' Cooper said brightly. So Republicans are gay-friendly? 'Definitely, yes.' Marriage equality in New York State was made possible by four Republican senators joining Democrat colleagues to vote for it; as I write they are fighting to retain their seats (one intends to retire) in Republican primaries, with their pro-equality stance being used against them.

Like Schindler, Cooper noted a 'generational shift': younger Republicans, even evangelical Christians, have 'less and less of an issue with gays'. Perkins is 'desperately trying to hold on to a last shred of influence. He's not the future.' Cooper pointed to Richard Tisei, seeking election in Massachusetts, who if victorious would be the first openly gay Republican to be elected to a term in Congress and the first Republican to win a US seat in Massachusetts for 15 years. In electoral terms, Tisei has said, 'You know what, in Massachusetts, it's a lot easier to be gay than be a Republican.'

If Log Cabin's influence is so great, why has it had so little effect on Republican policy, I asked Cooper. He said Log Cabin had the ear of the party leadership who 'all recognise where the future is going'. While heartened by 'more and more out-Republicans', Cooper admitted he 'wants to shake, it's so frustrating' those politicians who tell him 'they would love to support gay rights but are too frightened because of losing the support of voters'. How can he be Republican given how homophobic the party is publicly? 'My sexual orientation is part of me, not all of me. I'm a Christian, an army officer, a brother and son. I believe in less federal government, a strong, robust national security.' While Cooper acknowledged that Obama did 'the right thing, standing up for marriage equality, I don't think he is the right President or CEO of our country'.

Cooper added that while marriage equality was 'important', far more important would be to ratify ENDA (the Employment Non-Discrimination Act), prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and sexual identity. 'That would have a far more profound effect on gay American lives than marriage equality,' Cooper said, confident he could help mobilise Republican support for it.

In this, Cooper agrees with Jerame Davis, president of Democrat gay group the Stonewall Democrats, who noted that in 29 states 'it is absolutely legal to fire someone for being gay', and in 34 states for being transgender, adding, 'We need ENDA signed into law.'

