

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT AT HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN DINNER

Walter E. Convention Center
Washington, D.C.

8:10 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, everybody. Please, you're making me blush. (Laughter.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We love you, Barack!

THE PRESIDENT: I love you back. (Applause.)

To Joe Solmonese, who's doing an outstanding job on behalf of HRC. (Applause.) To my great friend and supporter, Terry Bean, co-founder of HRC. (Applause.) Representative Patrick Kennedy. (Applause.) David Huebner, the Ambassador-designee to New Zealand and Samoa. (Applause.) John Berry, our Director of OPM, who's doing a great job. (Applause.) Nancy Sutley, Chairman of Council on Environmental Quality. (Applause.) Fred Hochberg, Chairman of Export-Import Bank. (Applause.) And my dear friend, Tipper Gore, who's in the house. (Applause.)

Thank you so much, all of you. It is a privilege to be here tonight to open for Lady GaGa. (Applause.) I've made it. (Laughter.) I want to thank the Human Rights Campaign for inviting me to speak and for the work you do every day in pursuit of equality on behalf of the millions of people in this country who work hard in their jobs and care deeply about their families -- and who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. (Applause.)

For nearly 30 years, you've advocated on behalf of those without a voice. That's not easy. For despite the real gains that we've made, there's still laws to change and there's still hearts to open. There are still fellow citizens, perhaps neighbors, even loved ones -- good and decent people -- who hold fast to outworn arguments and old attitudes; who fail to see your families like their families; who would deny you the rights most Americans take for granted. And that's painful and it's heartbreaking. (Applause.) And yet you continue, leading by the force of the arguments you make, and by the power of the example that you set in your own lives -- as parents and friends, as PTA members and church members, as advocates and leaders in your communities. And you're making a difference.

That's the story of the movement for fairness and equality, and not just for those who are gay, but for all those in our history who've been denied the rights and responsibilities of citizenship -- (applause) -- for all who've been told that the full blessings and opportunities of this country were closed to them. It's the story of progress sought by those with little influence or power; by men and women who brought about change through quiet, personal acts of compassion -- and defiance -- wherever and whenever they could.

It's the story of the Stonewall protests, when a group of citizens -- (applause) -- when a group of citizens with few options, and fewer supporters stood up against discrimination and helped to inspire a movement. It's the story of an epidemic that decimated a community -- and the gay men and women who came to support one another and save one another; who continue to fight this scourge; and who have demonstrated before the world that different kinds of families can show the same compassion in a time of need. (Applause.) And it's the story of the Human Rights Campaign and the fights you've fought for nearly 30 years: helping to elect candidates who share your values; standing against those who would enshrine discrimination into our Constitution; advocating on behalf of those living with HIV/AIDS; and fighting for progress in our capital and across America. (Applause.)

This story, this fight continue now. And I'm here with a simple message: I'm here with you in that fight. (Applause.) For even as we face extraordinary challenges as a nation, we cannot -- and we will not -- put aside issues of basic equality. I greatly appreciate the support I've received from many in this room. I also appreciate that many of you don't believe progress has come fast enough. I want to be honest about that, because it's important to be honest among friends.

Now, I've said this before, I'll repeat it again -- it's not for me to tell you to be patient, any more than it was for others to counsel patience to African Americans petitioning for equal rights half a century ago. (Applause.) But I will say this: We have made progress and we will make more. And I think it's important to remember that there is not a single issue that my administration deals with on a daily basis that does not touch on the lives of the LGBT community. (Applause.) We all have a stake in reviving this economy. We all have a stake in putting people back to work. We all have a stake in improving our schools and achieving quality, affordable health care. We all have a stake in meeting the difficult challenges we face in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Applause.)

For while some may wish to define you solely by your sexual orientation or gender identity alone, you know -- and I know -- that none of us wants to be defined by just one part of what makes us whole. (Applause.) You're also parents worried about your children's futures. You're spouses who fear that you or the person you love will lose a job. You're workers worried about the rising cost of health insurance. You're soldiers. You are neighbors. You are friends. And, most importantly, you are Americans who care deeply about this country and its future. (Applause.)

So I know you want me working on jobs and the economy and all the other issues that we're dealing with. But my commitment to you is unwavering even as we wrestle with these enormous problems. And while progress may be taking longer than you'd like as a result of all that we face -- and that's the truth -- do not doubt the direction we are heading and the destination we will reach. (Applause.)

My expectation is that when you look back on these years, you will see a time in which we put a stop to discrimination against gays and lesbians -- whether in the office or on the battlefield. (Applause.) You will see a time in which we as a nation finally recognize relationships between two men or two women as just as real and admirable as relationships between a man and a woman. (Applause.) You will see a nation that's valuing and cherishing these families as we build a more perfect union -- a union in which gay Americans are an important part. I am committed to these goals. And my administration will continue fighting to achieve them.

And there's no more poignant or painful reminder of how important it is that we do so than the loss experienced by Dennis and Judy Shepard, whose son Matthew was stolen in a terrible act of violence 11 years ago. In May, I met with Judy -- who's here tonight with her husband -- I met her in the Oval Office, and I promised her that we were going to pass an inclusive hate crimes bill -- a bill named for her son. (Applause.)

This struggle has been long. Time and again we faced opposition. Time and again, the measure was defeated or delayed. But the Shepards never gave up. (Applause.) They turned tragedy into an unshakeable commitment. (Applause.) Countless activists and organizers never gave up. You held vigils, you spoke out, year after year, Congress after Congress. The House passed the bill again this week. (Applause.) And I can announce that after more than a decade, this bill is set to pass and I will sign it into law. (Applause.)

It's a testament to the decade-long struggle of Judy and Dennis, who tonight will receive a tribute named for somebody who inspired so many of us -- named for Senator Ted Kennedy, who fought tirelessly for this legislation. (Applause.) And it's a testament to the Human Rights Campaign and those who organized and advocated. And it's a testament to Matthew and to others who've been the victims of attacks not just meant to break bones, but to break spirits -- not meant just to inflict harm, but to instill fear. Together, we will have moved closer to that day when no one has to be afraid to be gay in America. (Applause.) When no one has to fear walking down the street holding the hand of the person they love. (Applause.)

But we know there's far more work to do. We're pushing hard to pass an inclusive employee non-discrimination bill. (Applause.) For the first time ever, an administration official testified in Congress in favor of this law. Nobody in America should be fired because they're gay, despite doing a great job and meeting their responsibilities. It's not fair. It's not right. We're going to put a stop to it. (Applause.) And it's for this reason that if any of my nominees are attacked not for what they believe but for who they are, I will not waver in my support, because I will not waver in my commitment to ending discrimination in all its forms. (Applause.)

We are reinvigorating our response to HIV/AIDS here at home and around the world. (Applause.) We're working closely with the Congress to renew the Ryan White program and I look forward to signing it into law in the very near future. (Applause.) We are rescinding the discriminatory ban on entry to the United States based on HIV status. (Applause.) The regulatory process to enact this important change is already underway. And we also know that HIV/AIDS continues to be a public health threat in many communities, including right here in the District of Columbia. Jeffrey Crowley, the Director of the Office of National AIDS Policy, recently held a forum in Washington, D.C., and is holding forums across the country, to seek input as we craft a national strategy to address this crisis.

We are moving ahead on Don't Ask Don't Tell. (Applause.) We should not be punishing patriotic Americans who have stepped forward to serve this country. We should be celebrating their willingness to show such courage and selflessness on behalf of their fellow citizens, especially when we're fighting two wars. (Applause.)

We cannot afford to cut from our ranks people with the critical skills we need to fight any more than we can afford -- for our military's integrity -- to force those willing to do so into careers encumbered and compromised by having to live a lie. So I'm working with the Pentagon, its leadership, and the members of the House and Senate on ending this policy. Legislation has been introduced in the House to make this happen. I will end Don't Ask, Don't Tell. That's my commitment to you. (Applause.)

It is no secret that issues of great concern to gays and lesbians are ones that raise a great deal of emotion in this country. And it's no secret that progress has been incredibly difficult -- we can see that with the time and dedication it took to pass hate crimes legislation. But these issues also go to the heart of who we are as a people. Are we a nation that can transcend old attitudes and worn divides? Can we embrace our differences and look to the hopes and dreams that we share? Will we uphold the ideals on which this nation was founded: that all of us are equal, that all of us deserve the same opportunity to live our lives freely and pursue our chance at happiness? I believe we can; I believe we will. (Applause.)

And that is why -- that's why I support ensuring that committed gay couples have the same rights and responsibilities afforded to any married couple in this country. (Applause.) I believe strongly in stopping laws designed to take rights away and passing laws that extend equal rights to gay couples. I've required all agencies in the federal government to extend as many federal benefits as possible to LGBT families as the current law allows. And I've called on Congress to repeal the so-called Defense of Marriage Act and to pass the Domestic Partners Benefits and Obligations Act. (Applause.) And we must all stand together against divisive and deceptive efforts to feed people's lingering fears for political and ideological gain.

For the struggle waged by the Human Rights Campaign is about more than any policy we can enshrine into law. It's about our capacity to love and commit to one another. It's about whether or not we value as a society that love and commitment. It's about our common humanity and our willingness to walk in someone else's shoes: to imagine losing a job not because of your performance at work but because of your relationship at home; to imagine worrying about a spouse in the hospital, with the added fear that you'll have to produce a legal document just to comfort the person you love -- (applause) -- to imagine the pain of losing a partner of decades and then discovering that the law treats you like a stranger. (Applause.)

If we are honest with ourselves we'll admit that there are too many who do not yet know in their lives or feel in their hearts the urgency of this struggle. That's why I continue to speak about the importance of equality for LGBT families -- and not just in front of gay audiences. That's why Michelle and I have invited LGBT families to the White House to participate in events like the Easter Egg Roll -- because we want to send a message. (Applause.) And that's why it's so important that you continue to speak out, that you

continue to set an example, that you continue to pressure leaders -- including me -- and to make the case all across America. (Applause.)

So, tonight I'm hopeful -- because of the activism I see in this room, because of the compassion I've seen all across America, and because of the progress we have made throughout our history, including the history of the movement for LGBT equality.

Soon after the protests at Stonewall 40 years ago, the phone rang in the home of a soft-spoken elementary school teacher named Jeanne Manford. It was 1:00 in the morning, and it was the police. Now, her son, Morty, had been at the Stonewall the night of the raids. Ever since, he had felt within him a new sense of purpose. So when the officer told Jeanne that her son had been arrested, which was happening often to gay protesters, she was not entirely caught off guard. And then the officer added one more thing, "And you know, he's homosexual." (Laughter.) Well, that police officer sure was surprised when Jeanne responded, "Yes, I know. Why are you bothering him?" (Applause.)

And not long after, Jeanne would be marching side-by-side with her son through the streets of New York. She carried a sign that stated her support. People cheered. Young men and women ran up to her, kissed her, and asked her to talk to their parents. And this gave Jeanne and Morty an idea.

And so, after that march on the anniversary of the Stonewall protests, amidst the violence and the vitriol of a difficult time for our nation, Jeanne and her husband Jules -- two parents who loved their son deeply -- formed a group to support other parents and, in turn, to support their children, as well. At the first meeting Jeanne held, in 1973, about 20 people showed up. But slowly, interest grew. Morty's life, tragically, was cut short by AIDS. But the cause endured. Today, the organization they founded for parents, families, and friends of lesbians and gays -- (applause) -- has more than 200,000 members and supporters, and has made a difference for countless families across America. And Jeanne would later say, "I considered myself such a traditional person. I didn't even cross the street against the light." (Laughter.) "But I wasn't going to let anybody walk over Morty." (Applause.)

That's the story of America: of ordinary citizens organizing, agitating and advocating for change; of hope stronger than hate; of love more powerful than any insult or injury; of Americans fighting to build for themselves and their families a nation in which no one is a second-class citizen, in which no one is denied their basic rights, in which all of us are free to live and love as we see fit. (Applause.)

Tonight, somewhere in America, a young person, let's say a young man, will struggle to fall to sleep, wrestling alone with a secret he's held as long as he can remember. Soon, perhaps, he will decide it's time to let that secret out. What happens next depends on him, his family, as well as his friends and his teachers and his community. But it also depends on us -- on the kind of society we engender, the kind of future we build.

I believe the future is bright for that young person. For while there will be setbacks and bumps along the road, the truth is that our common ideals are a force far stronger than any division that some might sow. These ideals, when voiced by generations of citizens, are what made it possible for me to stand here today. (Applause.) These ideals are what made it possible for the people in this room to live freely and openly when for most of history that would have been inconceivable. That's the promise of America, HRC. That's the promise we're called to fulfill. (Applause.) Day by day, law by law, changing mind by mind, that is the promise we are fulfilling.

Thank you for the work you're doing. God bless you. God bless America. (Applause.)

END 8:35 P.M. EDT