

JOE SOLMONESE



Human Rights Campaign – The Tipping Point

Joe Solmonese

As president of the Human Rights Campaign, Joe Solmonese has demonstrated that he has the political, strategic and communications skills to make the organization a powerhouse both in Washington and around the country. Under his leadership, the National Journal has rated the organization the second most successful interest group in all of Washington during the 2006 election.

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Our movement for acceptance and equality has come significantly far in 30 years. The Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village in 1969, was more than a cultural event; it marked a turning point when transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual New Yorkers, tired of government harassment and persecution, said, “Enough. No more.” It was perhaps the defining moment that launched the gay rights movement.

This month, as we celebrate our LGBT pride, our community is at some sort of tipping point. You can feel it in the air. Within weeks, Maine, Vermont and Iowa legalized marriage equality for same-sex couples while New York and New Hampshire are on the cusp. And In Washington, D.C., the City Council voted to recognize same-sex marriages performed out of state.

It’s becoming crystal clear that those who continue to use our community as a wedge issue are out of touch with the American public. For example, over the past decade, public acceptance of marriage equality for same-sex couples has changed dramatically. For the first time, more Americans say they support gay marriage (49%) than oppose it (46%), according to the latest Washington Post/ABC poll released in late April. The bottom line: it’s happening, steadily and irrevocably, and more Americans, from all walks of life are supporting the constant quest of our country’s history: equality for all.

With the election of President Barack Obama, we have the possibility of real and lasting change. Under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the State Department formally endorsed of a U.N. statement calling for the worldwide decriminalization of homosexuality, a measure that former President Bush had refused to sign. And unlike President Bush, Obama has pushed for the swift passage of a federal hate crimes law that includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

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The Matthew Shepard Act – named after the 21-year-old college student who was attacked, tortured and killed for being gay in 1998 – would provide resources to state and local governments and to local law enforcement for the investigation and prosecution of bias-motivated, violent crimes based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender and disability. It recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives and is currently working its way through the U.S. Senate.

Believing in the politics of the possible – without ever losing sight of the fundamental goals of the entire movement – is the cornerstone of our work at the Human Rights Campaign. While we know we must work in elective politics to elect more fair-minded leaders, and advocate for needed reforms at the state and federal level, we must also reach Americans where they live everyday – at work, at school and in houses of worship.

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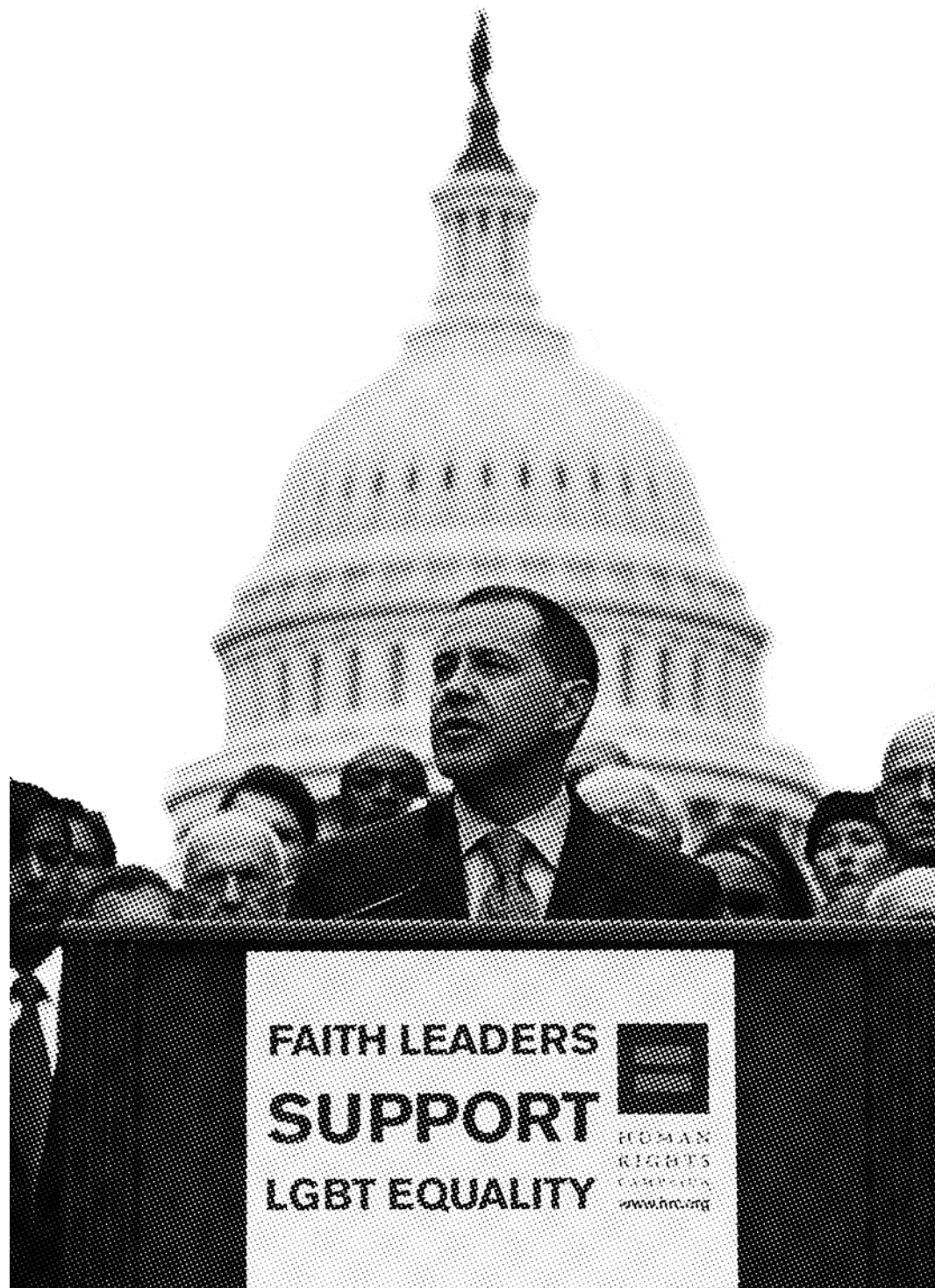
For example, HRC's Corporate Equality Index, looks at Fortune 100 and 500 corporations and provides a ranking based on the companies inclusive policies

and practices toward LGBT employees. A record 260 major U.S. employers scored a perfect 100 percent this year, a vast improvement over the first CEI rankings in 2002 when it was just 13. Today, more than nine-million people work for companies scoring 100 percent on the Corporate Equality Index.

HRC is doing the same for hospitals. In May, we released the Healthcare Equality Index with the goal of improving the rights and access of LGBT patients. The report inventoried the policies and practices of nearly 170 hospitals and clinics in dozens of states. It showed 73 percent of the hospitals provide equal rights based on sexual orientation and just seven percent on gender identity.

While those numbers may initially seem promising, hundreds of hospitals neglected to participate. And what does that mean? It tells us that it is easier to get to the bedside of our loved one by lying and saying we are the brother or sister, than to say we need access to the emergency room because our partner of 10 or 20 years needs us. No other families face that level of added stress in moments of critical care.

And finally, the "Clergy Call for Justice," a national conference by HRC's Religion and Faith Program, brought more than 300 clergy members this spring from all 50 states to lobby Congress on LGBT equality. Their visits to members of Congress were very often the first time lawmakers had ever heard religious leaders advocating for LGBT equality instead of railing against it.



It is critically important that people know and understand that LGBT people are also people of faith. HRC recently announced a strategic partnership with California Faith for Equality (CFE), a statewide group established to educate, support and mobilize California's faith communities on LGBT equality. The partnership joins CFE and its 6,000 supporting faith leaders with both HRC's Religion and Faith Program expertise as well as support from the National Field Department to broaden, diversify and deepen religious support for marriage equality in California.

This, of course, comes on the heels of our community's devastating loss in California where voters narrowly approved Proposition 8 which stripped away the right of same-sex couples to marry. Religion has too often been used as a weapon against us. At HRC, we understand the important work that needs to happen in churches and places of worship to achieve full equality.

When I look at all that HRC is doing – across the full spectrum that embraces how we all – LGBT or not – congregate, communicate and shape the world around us – I see change and promise everywhere I look. I see it on the factory floor and in Sunday services; in neighborhoods and school yards; and in the steady progress we're making on marriage equality, even in heartland states like Iowa and Maine.

Is the journey over? Far from it.

Patriotic men and women who serve this country must still struggle under a discriminatory military policy that denies them the right to simply be who they are. The poorly named Defense of Marriage Act stands in the way of legally married same-sex couples getting more than 1,100 federal rights and benefits every other married couple receives. HIV status in this country is still a stigma and issues surrounding health care access deny too many the care and support they need. The Family Medical Leave Act does not include our families, and we must close the economic gap by eliminating burdens like the tax couples pay for domestic partner benefits.

Our job at the Human Rights Campaign is not simple, it is not monolithic but it is ever challenging and game-changing. Yes, we must elect more fair minded people to higher office, win overdue protections and erase undue burdens legislatively, and help broaden and strengthen the loving net of marriage equality.

But along the way, whether in public schools or the workplace or neighborhoods and health care settings, we must also move hearts and minds. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all.

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN IS...

MISSION STATEMENT

➔ The Human Rights Campaign is America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality. By inspiring and engaging all Americans, HRC strives to end discrimination against LGBT citizens and realize a nation that achieves fundamental fairness and equality for all. HRC seeks to improve the lives of LGBT Americans by advocating for equal rights and benefits in the workplace, ensuring families are treated equally under the law and increasing public support among all Americans through innovative advocacy, education and outreach programs. HRC works to secure equal rights for LGBT individuals and families at the federal and state levels by lobbying elected officials, mobilizing grassroots supporters, educating Americans, investing strategically to elect fair-minded officials and partnering with other LGBT organizations.

THE ISSUES – MARRIAGE EQUALITY

➔ Five states have recognized marriage for same-sex couples under state law: Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont (effective September 1, 2009), and Maine (effective September, 2009, pending a possible referendum). Same-sex couples do not receive federal rights and benefits in any state. Currently in the United States, same-sex couples in long-term, committed relationships pay higher taxes and are denied basic protections and rights granted to married straight couples.

➔ **Hospital visitation:** Married couples have the automatic right to visit each other in the hospital and make medical decisions. Same-sex couples can be denied the right to visit a sick or injured loved one in the hospital.

➔ **Immigration:** Americans in bi-national relationships are not permitted to petition for their same-sex partners to immigrate. As a result, they are often forced to separate or move to another country.

➔ **Social Security benefits:** Married people receive Social Security payments upon the death of a spouse. Despite paying payroll taxes, gay and lesbian partners receive no Social Security survivor benefits — resulting in an average annual income loss of \$5,528 upon the death of a partner.

➔ **Health insurance:** Many public and private employers provide medical coverage to the spouses of their employees, but most employers do not provide coverage to the life partners of gay and lesbian employees. Gay and lesbian employees who do receive health coverage for their partners must pay federal income taxes on the value of the insurance.

➔ **Family leave:** Married workers are legally entitled to unpaid leave from their jobs to care for an ill spouse. Gay and lesbian workers are not entitled to family leave to care for their partners.

➔ **Estate taxes:** A married person automatically inherits all the property of his or her deceased spouse without paying estate taxes. A gay or lesbian taxpayer is forced to pay estate taxes on property inherited from a deceased partner.

➔ **Nursing homes:** Married couples have a legal right to live together in nursing homes. The rights of elderly gay or lesbian couples are an uneven patchwork of state laws. Home protection. Laws protect married seniors from being forced to sell their homes to pay high nursing home bills; gay and lesbian seniors have no such protection.

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➔ **Pensions:** After the death of a worker, most pension plans pay survivor benefits only to a legal spouse of the participant. Gay and lesbian partners are excluded from such pension benefits.