

Columnist Stokes Gay-Naming Debate

By David Firestone

STAFF WRITER

In a fit of anger back in the early 1970s, Washington columnist Jack Anderson wrote that Vice President Spiro Agnew's son was gay, and afterward he immediately regretted it. Anderson says he realized the son's privacy was more important than exposing Agnew's hypocrisy in railing against homosexuals in government.

Last Friday, though, Anderson wrote another column revealing that a Washington figure is gay, and this time he has no regrets.

"It was a difficult, distasteful decision, but this column has always represented the little people, the voice of the voiceless, and we thought it was our duty," Anderson said yesterday.

The difference between the two cases, he says, is that the current figure is a prominent, high-ranking civilian official in the Department of Defense, an agency that routinely discharges members of the armed forces for being gay or lesbian. Such a double standard, Anderson believes, should be exposed.

But many of Anderson's colleagues in the press wish he had acted on his earlier decision that privacy was paramount. The Washington Post and many of his 850 other subscribers refused to run the column — Anderson doesn't know exactly how many — and most large American newspapers have not followed up on it, or on the far more detailed exposition about the official's sexuality that was published last week in the Advocate, the national gay and lesbian magazine.

The official, asked about the articles at a Pentagon briefing Tuesday, said he was paid to discuss government policy, not his personal life. He is a civilian employee, and the department's rule against homosexuals applies only to the uniformed services.

Several newspapers, magazines and broadcast outlets, including the New York Daily News, the Detroit News and the Oakland Tribune, have chosen to use the official's name and picture. But most editors continue to believe that an individual's right to privacy outweighs most other considerations, and refuse to engage in the "outing" of homosexuals.

"Someone's personal life is personal unless there are compelling reasons to make it otherwise," said

Anthony Marro, editor of Newsday and New York Newsday, which have not published the official's name. "I don't feel any need to say that an official of the State Department is heterosexual, so why should I say that someone at the Pentagon is gay? If it had become an issue — if someone had asked him to resign, or there were a debate in Congress about it — then it might be different. But there has to be a threshold of newsworthiness."

The New York Post and The New York Times also have chosen not to run the official's name in news stories, and the Times turned down an ad for the Advocate last week that featured the official's photograph. Times spokeswoman Nancy Nielsen said the situation was different from the William Kennedy Smith case, in which the Times surprised the journalism community by publishing the name of the woman who accused Smith of rape.

"We don't introduce a person's sex life unless it's relevant to the story," she said. "The Palm Beach case was a police matter involving a U.S. senator, but in this case, nothing brings it to the public arena."

The Daily News did run the official's name in Richard Johnson's gossip column on Tuesday. Johnson said that between the Anderson column, the Advocate article and a mention on WPIX / Ch. 11 last week, "I don't consider that we outed him. The whole basis for the story was that his name was coming out already."

The Village Voice decided not to run the article that eventually appeared in the Advocate, after holding a rare editorial staff meeting on the propriety of publishing it. "There was an unusual consensus among the staff — male, female, gay, straight — not to run it," said executive editor Richard Goldstein, who wanted to use the piece.

Advocate editor Richard Rouillard wrote in an essay accompanying the article that he does not support outing, but agreed to this single exposure because of the official's position. "We're talking about a man who knowingly assists in the promotion of policies designed to thoroughly undermine the community in which, part-time, he lives," Rouillard wrote. "All reports confirm that [he] has never once interceded on behalf of gay and lesbian soldiers. He remains silent. We choose not to be, and we have that right. We censure."

Gays Bitter In Division Over Outing

By Rita Giordano

STAFF WRITER

A newly published article asserting that a high-ranking civilian official in the Defense Department is gay has fueled the continuing debate over "outing," the highly controversial practice of revealing in the media that certain public figures are lesbian or gay.

The debate is a passionate one within the gay community. And now, with the mainstream media picking up on the story published in the Advocate, a respected gay journal, the debate is likely to broaden both within — and beyond — the gay community.

Among those who have been closest to the debate is Michelangelo Signorile, the journalist who wrote the recent piece and who outed other public figures in OutWeek, a recently defunct gay and lesbian publication.

"I'm really ecstatic right now," Signorile said yesterday. "I think this particular case has made changes. Outing works."

Since the Advocate article ran last week, Signorile and others have noted, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney has appeared to distance himself from the department's policies on gays — policies which have long been criticized as discriminatory and punitive.

But while some other journalists and activists have argued that the defense department is a homophobic institution that condones a high-ranking gay official but penalizes soldiers and underlings — something they see as hypocrisy worth reporting — there is no agreement on the practice of outing.

To Signorile, outing is part of the thinking of a new generation of gays. Sex, he said, is private, but the identity of gays is not.

"I think what this generation is saying is we've really had it . . . We don't have the time. We're tired of these rules," he said.

Yet, within the gay community, opponents of outing argue it is an invasion of the privacy that they have waged battles for, that it smacks of a self-loathing, mean-spiritedness, and borders on McCarthyism.

Its defenders — some, but not all, of whom are part of the more radical gay rights or anti-AIDS organizations — argue that young gay people need gay role models and that straight society needs to realize all the talented, powerful people who are gay. Being labelled as gay, they complain, stands as the last taboo. Additionally, with so many people dying of AIDS, some argue that influential gay people should be open and use their clout.

C. Carr, a Village Voice reporter who is open about being a lesbian, agrees those goals are important. However, she says outing is not the way to reach them. "Born in rage and hatred, directed exclusively at gay people, outing is gay bashing at its sickest," Carr wrote in a March issue of the Voice.

Yesterday in an interview, Carr objected to outing as a further violation of gay people's right to privacy — a right, she noted, that does not exist in numerous states and is not recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court. And while, she believes more and more gays need to "come out," she said they need the empowering experience of doing it on their own — not being forced.

But to Alan Klein, a Queer Nation founder, outing is a newer, more radical way of pushing for change. It's "just another way of exposing hypocrisy," he said.