



# **Harvey Milk**

and the  
**Gay Liberation Movement**

“All men are created equal.  
No matter how hard you try,  
you can never erase those words.”

—Harvey Milk

## **Essential Questions**

- What are some similarities and differences between the Gay Liberation movement and other liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s?
- How have ideas about homosexuals changed over the last century?
- Which do you think is a more effective method of achieving social goals: direct action (protests, boycotts, etc.) or political involvement?

## Protest Movements of the 1960s



Inspired by the African American civil rights movement, other minorities began to protest for their rights as well during the 1960s. Many African Americans rejected nonviolence and passive resistance, which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had championed during the civil rights movement. Instead, they followed Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and the Black Panther Party, who preached “Black Power,” which appealed to racial pride and community development and promised increased political power. Mexican Americans (or “Chicanos,” as they preferred to be called at the time) joined with other Hispanic people (particularly in the southwestern United States) to protest against discrimination in education and jobs. Migrant farm workers, who made up a large contingent of the Hispanic population, undertook boycotts of lettuce and grapes to support their emerging union. Native Americans demonstrated against the years of treaties broken by the U.S. government and demanded more control over their lands and resources. Women also marched and protested, demanding equal pay, equal opportunities in jobs and education, and changes in laws regarding credit, sexual violence, and reproductive issues. The LGBT community, which comprises gay men, gay women (lesbians), bisexuals, and transgender individuals, also began to stand up for fairer treatment.

### Picture sources:

- Chicano Power: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chicano\\_power\\_flag\\_of\\_aztlan.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chicano_power_flag_of_aztlan.jpg)

## San Francisco New Communities Emerge



The Castro District became the center of gay life in San Francisco



Thousands of hippies gathered in San Francisco for the Summer of Love in 1967

San Francisco's gay community took root following World War II, when many gay men who had served in the armed forces stayed or moved there upon being discharged from the service. As white residents moved out of the city to the suburbs in Marin County, they left behind many old Victorian houses, which could be rented cheaply by the many hippies who moved to the city in the late 1960s. A nearby neighborhood, The Castro, also had many empty, old houses, and gay men moved into them and upgraded the neighborhood by restoring them. They also opened businesses that helped revitalize the area.



- 1966—Transgender men caused a riot when police tried to arrest them at the Compton Cafeteria in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco for violating the law against men dressing in women's clothes
- 1969—Gay men fought back when police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City, and tried to make arrests.
- These events marked the beginnings of the Gay Liberation Movement.

Two important instances in the fight for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people took place in the 1960s: the Compton Cafeteria riot in San Francisco and the Stonewall riots in New York City. It was a time when it was dangerous to be publicly identified as gay. For decades, cities and states had laws that made any kind of homosexual behavior a criminal act. These laws included cross dressing (one sex dressing like the other), soliciting sex from others of the same gender, or “lewd behavior,” which included such acts as dancing with or public displays of affection between members of the same sex. Police periodically raided places such as bars and nightclubs where LGBT people congregated and arrested them for violating these laws. Conviction on such charges often required registration as a sex offender for the rest of the arrestees lives. Newspapers often printed names and photographs in their reports of such raids and people could find themselves fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, and estranged from friends and family members because of this. In some states, such crimes carried prison sentences.

- 1970s—Many states repealed anti-sodomy laws
- 1972—San Francisco became the first city to pass a gay rights law
- 1973—The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders
- 1975—U. S. Civil Service Commission repealed exclusion of LGBT persons from government employment



Gay Pride Parade in New York

Gay people began to campaign for their rights on many fronts. Many advocated that homosexuals “come out of the closet” —that is, that they no longer hide their sexual orientation but make it known so that people would see that the stereotypes about gay people were wrong. They argued that since LGBT people existed in every walk of life, and with numbers estimating that one out of every ten people were gay, almost everyone would realize that they knew someone who was gay.

Another area of the fight was to decriminalize homosexual behavior between consenting adults. In 1986, the Supreme Court ruled in *Bowers v. Harwick* that state laws against homosexual acts were constitutional. This was a setback for the movement, but by then, several states had done away with their anti-sodomy laws anyway. This decision was overturned in 2003 in the case of *Lawrence v. Texas*.

Discrimination against LGBT people in housing and jobs was widespread, but few cities or states saw this as a problem that needed attention. In order to change laws, gays needed a voice in city and state governments. In 1974, Kathy Kozachenko became the first openly gay person elected to any public office when she was voted in as a city councilperson in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In 1975, Elaine Noble, a lesbian, became a representative to the Massachusetts state legislature. That same year, the U. S. Civil Service Commission, reversing a long-standing policy, opened government employment to LGBT people.

One of the targets of the movement was the American Psychiatric Association. For many years, homosexuality was seen as a mental disorder. Many gay people spent years in psychoanalysis trying unsuccessfully to change their sexual orientation. Sometimes families committed them to mental hospitals in an effort to stop their homosexual behavior. In 1973, however, based on empirical evidence from many studies, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses, noting that homosexuals as a group did not suffer from more psychological disturbance than their heterosexual counterparts. In many statements since, the Association has also come out against therapies designed to change homosexuals’ sexual orientation.



Harvey Milk



Anita Bryant

- 1969—Harvey Milk moved to San Francisco from New York
- 1977—Conservative Christians founded the anti-gay rights organization Save Our Children, led by singer Anita Bryant
- 1977—Milk elected to San Francisco Board of Supervisors and gained national recognition as the first openly gay man elected to public office

Harvey Milk worked as a teacher and an accountant in New York before moving to San Francisco in 1969, where he opened a camera store and became involved in local politics. San Francisco was a city split between an older conservative Italian and Irish Catholic working class and the more liberal young professionals and gay community. In 1976, political progressive George Moscone was elected mayor, replacing conservative incumbent Joseph Alioto. As a state legislator, Moscone had supported repealing California's law against homosexual behavior, and Milk worked hard to help him get elected. In 1977, after three tries, Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. He was the first openly gay man to be elected to public office.

At the same time that Milk was running for office in San Francisco, gay activists in Dade County, Florida, pushed through an ordinance that outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation. Gay people began to campaign for their rights on many fronts. Many advocated that homosexuals "come out of the closet"—that is, that they no longer hide their sexual orientation but make it known so that people would see that the stereotypes about gay people were wrong. They argued that since LGBT people existed in every walk of life, and with numbers estimating that one out of every ten people were gay, almost everyone would realize that they knew someone who was gay.

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The response was the creation of Save the Children, an organization dedicated to overturning the ordinance. Anita Bryant headed the organization. She had gained fame as a singer and was a devout Christian fundamentalist. Bryant and her organization collected signatures to place the issue on the ballot for voters to decide. With strong financial backing, Save our Children ran television commercials that portrayed gay men as pedophiles. Gay activists campaigned in support of the measure, but the ordinance was repealed by a 70% vote.

Inspired by the victory in Florida, California State Senator John Briggs put forth Proposition 6, a bill that would prohibit gay men and lesbians from teaching in the state's public schools. As the campaign for the initiative heated up, violence against gays increased in Milk's district around Castro Street, which culminated in the stabbing death of one young man.

Milk helped organize a statewide grassroots movement to oppose the initiative and traveled around the state debating with Briggs. Although early public opinion polls showed a lot of support for Proposition 6, or the Briggs Initiative as it became known, when election day came California voters rejected the bill 58% to 42%.

1978—Milk sponsored a civil rights bill that outlawed any type of discrimination based on sexual orientation



Harvey Milk at work as Supervisor

Milk's first act as a supervisor was to sponsor a civil rights bill that outlawed discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations because of sexual orientation. The *New York Times* called the bill the "most stringent and encompassing in the nation." The *Times* went on to say that the passage of the bill showed the "growing political power of homosexuals."





San Francisco Supervisor  
Dan White



Mayor George Moscone

Only one supervisor out of the 11 on the Board opposed the ordinance: Dan White, a former policeman and fireman who represented a working-class district of the city. White gave his resignation to Mayor George Moscone soon after the bill was passed.

Dan White, the only supervisor to vote against the ordinance proposed by Milk, was born and raised in San Francisco. He served in the Vietnam War and worked as a policeman and a fireman before being elected to the Board of Supervisors. He represented a district of predominantly conservative working-class people and was increasingly apprehensive about the growing political power of both moderates and homosexuals in the city government. Although at first he got along with Milk, their relationship declined after Milk voted for several measures with which White disagreed. An aide said later that White felt that Milk and Mayor Moscone represented all that was wrong with the world. White felt marginalized by the vote on Milk's bill and resigned soon after it passed, claiming that he found himself unable to support his family on a supervisor's salary (\$9600 per year). Almost immediately, political supporters urged him to reconsider, and he approached Mayor Moscone about getting his job back. Moscone, however, was urged by Milk and other supervisors not to allow White to return and Moscone agreed to appoint someone else in his place.



- Nov. 27th, 1978—White shoots and kills Milk and Moscone
- May 21st, 1979—White convicted of voluntary manslaughter instead of premeditated murder based on “diminished capacity”
- Outrage at the outcome of the trial leads to riots in San Francisco

On Nov. 27th, 1978, Dan White went to City Hall with a loaded gun. He went first to Mayor Moscone’s office, where the two men argued about Moscone not allowing White to retake his seat on the Board of Supervisors. White then shot the mayor four times, killing him. He next proceeded down the corridor, where he approached Harvey Milk in his office and shot him five times. He left City Hall and turned himself in to the police at the station where he used to work. Some reports claimed that the police cheered him when he walked in.

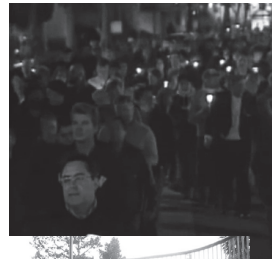
The people of San Francisco were shocked and grieved. White’s trial illustrated the divide between the city’s growing liberal population and the conservative working-class residents. The police came mostly from the city’s blue-collar Irish community, who had long shown hostility to the city’s gay population. White was treated well by the police and showed no remorse for his actions.

The jury pool for White’s trial excluded those who were gay or from one of the city’s ethnic minorities. The all -white jury was mostly Catholic and showed sympathy for White during the trial. White’s attorney presented a defense based on “diminished capacity”—that White was not responsible for the killings because of stress and depression brought on by his treatment by those at City Hall, especially Milk and Moscone. He further argued that White had binged on junk food the night before the killings, eating nothing but doughnuts, Twinkies, and Coca-Cola, a big change from the healthy diet he usually followed. This “Twinkie defense,” as it became known, resulted in White being convicted only of voluntary manslaughter instead of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to a maximum of seven years and eight months in prison.

Milk’s constituents felt that if Moscone had been the only one killed, White would have been convicted of premeditated murder and possibly been sentenced to death. They argued that because Milk was gay, the jury had devalued his life. Although Acting Mayor Dianne Feinstein and other city officials condemned the verdict, demonstrations of grief turned violent, as people from the Castro District descended on City Hall chanting, “He got away with murder” and ended up vandalizing the building and setting fire to police cars. Police later responded by randomly beating people in the Castro district. The White Night Riots, as they came to be called, went on for several hours. By morning, over 150 people had been hospitalized for injuries, including 60 policemen. Damages to city property and a bar in the Castro District were estimated at over \$1,000,000.

In response to the verdict, California eliminated diminished capacity as a legal defense, although judges and juries could still take it into account when deciding on a sentence.

- Milk's death is remembered with memorials and vigils
- Parks, community centers, and schools have been named in his honor
- At the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, K–5 students celebrate diversity and study tolerance and nonviolence



Milk is considered by many as a martyr to the cause of gay rights. The city of San Francisco established Harvey Milk Plaza at the intersection of Market and Castro Streets in honor of him, as well as the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, where elementary students focus on studying diversity, nonviolence, and tolerance. New York City opened a Harvey Milk High School to provide a safe educational setting for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students who faced harassment because of their sexuality. Randy Shilts wrote a biography of Milk called *The Mayor of Castro Street*. A documentary film based on the book *The Times of Harvey Milk* won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. In 2008, the film *Milk* was released, directed by Gus Van Sant and starring Sean Penn, who won the Academy Award as Best Actor for his portrayal of Harvey Milk.

Other tributes followed Milk's death. *Time* magazine named him one of its "100 Heroes and Icons of the 20th Century" for being "a symbol of what gays can accomplish and the dangers they face in doing so." In August 2009, President Barack Obama awarded Milk the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously and California governor designated May 22 as "Harvey Milk Day." That same year, Milk's nephew Stuart started the Harvey Milk Foundation, which is dedicated to promoting equal rights for all people and building coalitions worldwide to work toward that goal.

**Picture source:**

- Harvey Milk Plaza: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harvey\\_Milk\\_Plaza\\_2008.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harvey_Milk_Plaza_2008.jpg)