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Of Medals and Myths

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New Labor Forum, Volume 19, Number 1, Winter 2010, pp. 113-116 (Review)

Published by The Murphy Institute/City University of New York



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Of Medals and Myths

Milk

Directed by Gus Van Sant

FOCUS FEATURES, 2008

Reviewed by Patrick McCreery

On July 30, 2009, the White House announced that President Barack Obama would award a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom to Harvey Milk, the gay rights activist and San Francisco politician who was assassinated in 1978. Milk was one of sixteen individuals whom Obama announced he would honor with the annual award. Others included physicist Stephen Hawking; former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor; tennis star Billie Jean King; singer Chita Rivera; civil rights pioneer Joseph Lowery; and Joseph Medicine Crow, a historian of the Crow Tribal Nation. In a statement, Obama said that "These outstanding men and women represent an incredible diversity of backgrounds . . . Yet they share one overarching trait: each has been an agent of change."¹

We can only surmise what the slain activist, most recently memorialized in Gus Van Sant's uplifting *Milk*, would have thought of the gesture. On one hand, as the film makes clear, Milk loved the limelight and surely would have lapped up the attention Obama paid him as the first openly gay elected official of

a major U.S. city. After all, this was the man who, when the circus visited San Francisco, donned a clown suit, jumped on a trolley car and told bemused passengers that "I pass laws! I run this city!"²

On the other hand, it is easy to imagine Milk the militant activist using the award as an opportunity to take Obama to task for not pressuring Congress to pass the proposed Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would protect workers from discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.³ One could also envision Milk throwing in a few choice words about the president's lackadaisical approach to repealing the odious "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military employment policy, which prevents openly gay men and women from serving in the armed forces.

Milk was a complex person, morphing over the course of a decade from closeted Goldwater Republican to pony-tailed, pot-loving hippie to outspoken gay rights activist. He lost three races in San Francisco before being elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1977, only to be murdered a year later by a disgruntled former colleague. Milk's short political career corroborated Tip O'Neill's assertion that "All politics is local." He finally won office through careful cultivation of important community factions: seniors, organized labor, and—most importantly—the tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men who moved to San Francisco in the early and mid-1970s in search of sexual freedom.⁴

Van Sant, while taking some liberties with Milk's actual history, does a solid job of explaining the activist's political evolution and historical significance. The film relies heavily on Randy Shilts's 1982 biography, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, and Rob Epstein's Academy Award-winning 1985 documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*. It is a fair guess that many viewers will be unfamiliar with those earlier works, however. And for those drawn in solely by *Milk*'s A-list director (Van Sant also made *My Own*

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Private Idaho and *Good Will Hunting*) or star (Sean Penn, who seamlessly captures Milk's charm and moral gravity, and who fittingly won an Academy Award for his portrayal), the story will be a revelation.

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Readers of this journal may be especially intrigued to learn that unions—and stereotypically macho unions, at that—were among Milk's strongest supporters. That gay-labor alliance began in 1973, when Milk's help was enlisted by Allan Baird, a Teamster official who was leading a strike against six beer distributors who were balking at a new contract with the truck drivers' local in San Francisco. Baird had already convinced federations of Arab-American and Chinese-American grocers not to accept deliveries from scab drivers, but that was not enough to force a settlement with the distributors. He needed Milk's help to convince the owners of gay bars to join the boycott. Milk readily gave it, asking only that the Teamsters find jobs for openly gay drivers. Baird agreed, bar owners joined the boycott, and five of the six beer distributors soon capitulated. Only Coors Brewing Company held out, and Milk made good on his promise that Coors beer would not be served in San Francisco's gay bars.⁵ Having proven his support of organized labor, Milk won the backing of the firefighters and construction trades unions as well.⁶

Milk relays this history quickly and clearly, and Van Sant even gives Baird, a lifelong resident of San Francisco's Castro district, a cameo. Especially effective is a scene in which Milk speaks to a group of

doubtful Teamsters. Milk tells them he "left his high-heel shoes at home" and—after getting a big laugh at the remark—launches into a fiery speech about the need for local politicians to support the city's working-class families. By the end, the burly union members are cheering.

That scene dramatizes Milk's ability to engage stereotypes and then play against them. Milk was a proponent of what later came to be called identity politics and, once elected, he was quick to build coalitions with leaders of other minority groups. (He almost certainly would have approved of Obama's carefully inclusive list of medal honorees—gay men, lesbians, the elderly, African-Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and people with disabilities.) Although always a pragmatic vote-counter, Milk was at heart a progressive who often found himself at odds with San Francisco's real estate interests (eagerly represented on the Board of Supervisors by Dianne Feinstein) and law-and-order types, embodied by Dan White, the troubled cop-turned-supervisor who ended up shooting both Milk and Mayor George Moscone in City Hall.

For Milk, who had experienced bigotry firsthand as both a Jew and a homosexual, the idea of a comprehensive local law to protect lesbians and gay men from discrimination in housing and employment was a natural. The San Francisco gay rights ordinance that Milk crafted and shepherded to passage in 1978 was a major accomplishment, even though the film pays it only passing attention. Van Sant instead focuses on Milk's role in the struggle later that year over Proposition 6, a state-wide voter's initiative that would have forced the firing of public school teachers who came out as homosexual or who advocated for gay rights. Popularly known as the Briggs Amendment after its sponsor, California

state senator John Briggs, Proposition 6 came in the wake of singer Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign in Dade County, Florida, in 1977, which overturned a gay rights law there—and the subsequent repeal of gay rights measures in other U.S. cities.⁷ The political movement now known as the Christian Right was rapidly coalescing then, and Milk and other gay leaders understood its threat.

A scene [in which Milk speaks to a group of doubtful Teamsters] dramatizes Milk's ability to engage stereotypes and then play against them.

Milk was the chief spokesman against Proposition 6, and he and Briggs debated each other across the state. In appointing himself to that role, Milk once again annoyed more established and moderate gay leaders, who feared that public debates would incite social conservatives who otherwise might not vote. (In *Milk*, the character of David Goodstein, publisher of the gay news magazine the *Advocate*, serves as something of an archetype of the cautious gay politico. In truth, many established gay leaders loathed Milk, viewing him as a reckless interloper.) Moderates wanted to conduct a publicity campaign focused on claims to human rights. Milk, knowing such a campaign had failed in Dade County, sought instead to humanize the homosexual figure through stories about his own life and the lives of gay teenagers he claimed would face despair if the initiative passed. Ultimately, a multi-faceted campaign against the measure overwhelmed Briggs's own weak organization. Residents voted down the initiative by a three-to-two margin.

Less than three weeks later, Milk was dead. In *The Mayor of Castro Street*, Shilts dwelled on what probably were mere casual musings by Milk about his own mortality. In *Milk*, Van Sant wisely eschews any similar mystical mumbo-jumbo. However, his film opens with a scene of Milk sitting alone at a table. It is November 1977, the activist has just been elected to office, and he is dictating a political testament to be made public if he is ever assassinated. "I have never considered myself a candidate," he intones. "I have always considered myself part of a movement, part of a *candidacy*. I've considered the movement the candidate. I think there's a delineation between those who use the movement and those who are part of the movement."⁸

Milk actually made such a tape, which his closest aides played only three hours after his death. However, Milk seems to have made it not because he had some special insight into his future, but simply because he was a thoughtful and careful politician. He had already received death threats, he wanted to preserve the culture of gay radicalism in San Francisco he had helped create, and he was concerned about how history would portray him. Milk surely realized that assassination was a possibility, though unlikely, and that *not* to have made such a statement would have been an abandonment of his beliefs. It is the message that Milk put onto the tape—his absolute concern for his movement—and not the fact that he made the tape in the first place that is worth noting. Indeed, it is messages like that one, as well as Milk's symbolic value as a pioneer and his very public death, that have rightly caused him to be mythologized within progressive politics.

1. "President Obama Names Medal of Freedom Recipients," White House press release, available at www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/president-obama-names-medal-of-freedom-recipients (accessed August 22, 2009).

2. Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 220-21.

3. For more on ENDA, see Chai Feldblum, "The Federal Gay Rights Bill: From Bella to ENDA," in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy and Civil Rights*, ed., John D'Emilio et al. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 149-87; and Patrick McCreery, "Beyond Gay: 'Deviant' Sex and the Politics of the ENDA Workplace," in *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*, eds., Patrick McCreery and Kitty Krupat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 31-51.

4. For scholarly studies of San Francisco's emergence as a gay urban center, see Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great

Gay Migration," *GLQ* 2, no. 3 (1995): 253-277. For a popular treatment of the subject, see Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996).

5. Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 81-84.

6. Milk was not a knee-jerk supporter of unions, however. He pointedly refused to endorse a march by the United Farm Workers because Cesar Chavez had refused to endorse gay rights initiatives. See Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 104.

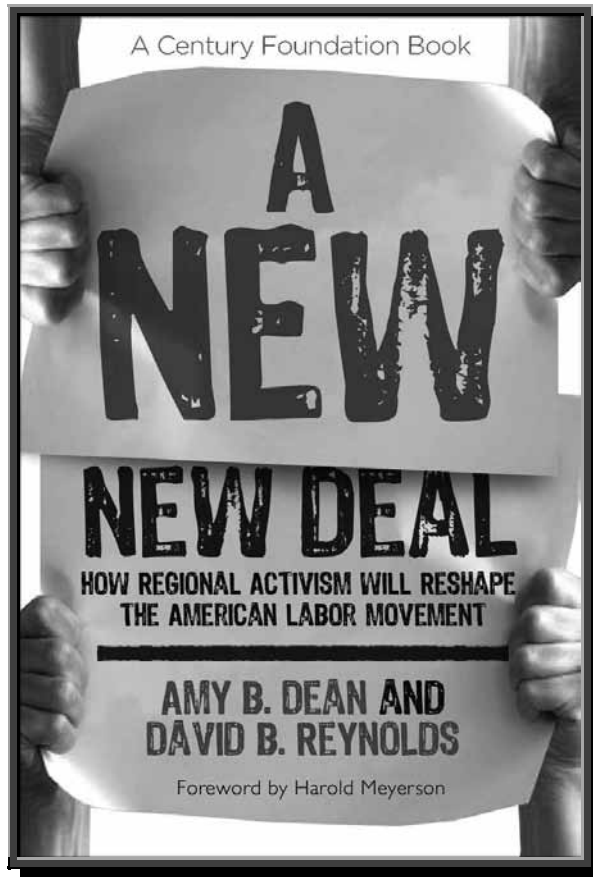
7. For more on Bryant and Briggs, see: Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, chapters 10 and 14; and Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

8. Milk made three audiocassette tapes from a general outline, and the tapes have slight variations. Shilts provides a complete transcript of one tape in *The Mayor of Castro Street*, and this quote comes from that transcript. Van Sant quoted small portions of a tape in his film. See Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 372-75.

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Published by Cornell University Press/A Century Foundation Book