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The San Francisco “White Night” Riots of 1979

Bruce Martinez

The morning of November 27, 1978 was a quiet one in San Francisco. The quiet was soon shattered as a devastating story broke throughout the city. There had been a double murder in city hall, and both the mayor and a supervisor had been assassinated. The police soon announced the suspect was Dan White, a former supervisor, police officer and fireman. Mayor George Moscone and supervisor Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected to public office in the United States, were the victims.¹

White was soon apprehended, and the city entered a difficult trial period that in many ways tore the city in two. Milk and Moscone represented liberal San Francisco; Milk was the most prominent gay leader in the city, and Moscone had time and again sided with liberal causes.² White represented the conservative forces within the city, specifically the police department and members of the working class.³

White’s defense centered on psychological and moral argument and ultimately it was argued that he was of a diminished capacity at the time of the murders. In addition to this, White was portrayed as an honest decent man who was incapable of cold blooded first degree murder. This is best seen in Douglas Schmidt’s opening arguments: “Good people, fine people, with fine backgrounds, simply don’t kill people in cold blood.”⁴

¹Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street, The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 263-267.

²Richard DeLeon, *Left Coast City, Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 48-51.

³Mike Weiss, *Double Play, The San Francisco City Hall Killings* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1984), 91-101.

⁴Shilts, 310.

Schmidt's combination of psychological and moral arguments led the jury to a verdict of double manslaughter instead of the much anticipated double first degree murder. White was sentenced to eight years in prison.⁵

The night the verdict was read there was a large scale riot within the gay community. By the late 1970s the gay population in San Francisco was estimated at close to 150,000. This community historically had been large in San Francisco because the city had become a dumping point for men rejected from the armed services for homosexuality in World War Two. A march on city hall turned violent with over one hundred injuries reported, twelve police cars burned, and nearly one million dollars in damage done to city hall and the largely gay Castro neighborhood.⁶

The perceived absurdity of the verdict triggered the riots, but there were several other factors that also lead to the disturbance. Conventional wisdom, which states that the largely peaceful gay community had a spontaneous evening of anger, misses the multiple reasons behind the riot. There were major political and social forces that came to a boiling point that evening. The writings on the murders, the trial, and on Milk and Moscone largely gloss over the complex reasons for the riots, seemingly ignoring the historical evidence that suggests a deeper reason for what happened.

The riots on the evening of May 21, 1979 occurred both as a reaction to the verdict in the Dan White double homicide case and also because the murder of mayor George Moscone changed the balance of power within the city's police force. Earlier gay rights marches and vigils had been held without police intervention and violence. What made this night different were three things: Police Chief Charles Gain had lost control of his rank and file officers following Moscone's death, there had been an upswing in violence

⁵Shilts, 325.

⁶Maitland Zane, "Battle's Debris At Civic Center," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 February 1979, sec. A, final edition.

and harassment against the gay community in the time since the city hall murders, and Harvey Milk was not available to keep the peace within the gay community as he had during earlier marches.

One reason for the violence during the riot was the beleaguered San Francisco police department. There is ample evidence to suggest that some members of the police department were sympathetic to Dan White. After he was arrested on the day of the murder's, several police officers came up to him while he sat in custody and nodded their approval, some went as far as to pat him on the back.⁷ While there is no historical evidence to support the widespread rumor that the police and fire departments raised \$100,000 for White's defense, the mere proliferation of such a rumor suggests a certain support for White among law enforcement. This support was cemented when the eventual verdict was read over the police radio band and several officers began to sing "Danny Boy," a popular Irish song, in celebration of White only being convicted of manslaughter.⁸

Police Chief Gain was also hugely unpopular with the rank and file police force. He had been appointed by Moscone in early 1975 to clean up and unify the department. Some of his first moves were to ban any drinking of alcohol while officers were on duty, to take down a large American flag in the hall of justice that he felt could alienate the city's international population, and order squad cars painted a modest sky blue and white instead of the traditional black and white. These largely symbolic changes still irked the general police force. Gain's most notorious change was to stop the enforcement of small infractions against minority communities.⁹

For the gay community this meant not being arrested and harassed for infractions such as blocking a sidewalk. Harvey Milk commented on this in an unpublished manuscript for a political speech in 1974: "When the Geary Theater empties the sidewalks

⁷Weiss, 273.

⁸Shilts, 326, Weiss, 405.

⁹Shilts, 120.

are impossible to pass. When the Police Athletic League circus empties the sidewalks are chaos. These cases are fine. Yet when the gays leave the bars at the 2 a.m. closing time, we find that some of our police object to it and make arrests for blocking the sidewalks.”¹⁰

Harassing the gay community had been a near tradition within the SFPD, who were largely conservative Catholics with a built-in sense of homophobia.¹¹ While Gain’s easing up on minor infractions gave the gay community a new sense of freedom, his stance on homosexual officers gave them a new ally. When asked by a gay newspaper what he would do if an officer came out, Gain responded, “If I had a gay policeman who came out I would support him one hundred percent.”¹²

This statement was confirmed to the *San Francisco Examiner* in a story appearing on April 18, 1976. In reference to a closeted gay police officer coming out, Gain said, “It will be hard for them, I know that, but they’ll have the full support of the police chief.”¹³ Soon graffiti saying “Gain is a Fruit” began appearing in station houses and in the Hall of Justice. As early as July 1977, the leadership within the police officer’s association were calling for Gain’s removal from his post.¹⁴ The opposition against him within the department was so strong that there were some officers who may have conspired to murder him while he was off duty. An officer with the nickname Joe the Pig had said to Margo St. James, a famous prostitution union organizer that a plot was in the works,

¹⁰Harvey Milk, 1974. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center in the San Francisco Public Library.

¹¹For more a more in depth report on police brutality against gays see Shilts, pgs 49, 57-59 and 91-93.

¹²Shilts, 120.

¹³Raul Ramirez, “Gain to Cops: Come out of the closet,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 18 April 1976, sec A, final edition.

¹⁴Michael Taylor, “POA Leader Wants Chief Gain Out,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 July 1977, sec A, final edition.

"It would be easy...Gain leads an active social life, remains unarmed when he was off duty, and does not keep a bodyguard."¹⁵

Gain was protected from being removed from office despite the dissent from officers below him because he had the unwavering support of Moscone, who had appointed him and was committed to the liberal causes Gain was espousing. Moscone wanted the police force integrated and had the political support of San Francisco gays, who treasured the calm within their community during Gain's tenure. Wayne Friday, in a column in the *Bay Area Reporter*, captures the support held by Gain: "Would one reader in the gay community tell me when the gay community has had a better friend as the top cop in town?"¹⁶

Moscone, who had received near unanimous support from the gay community during his 1975 election, was not about to remove Gain from his post.¹⁷ Upon Moscone's death Gain became the ultimate lame duck. The new mayor, Dianne Feinstein, had repeatedly criticized him during his time as chief from her position of president of the Board of Supervisors.¹⁸ Even though Feinstein pledged to keep Gain through what would have been the rest of Moscone's time in office, the writing was on the wall for Gain and the police department.¹⁹

Without Moscone behind him, Gain lacked the political power to hold his officers in line. Assuming that Gain was on his way out, the rank and file officers took this as an invitation to revert back to previous tactics used against the gay community. The old guard within the police department would be able to operate as they had before the new rules had been implemented.

¹⁵Shilts, 201.

¹⁶Wayne Friday, "Political Poker," *Bay Area Reporter*, 20 January 1977. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center in the San Francisco Public Library.

¹⁷Shilts, 109.

¹⁸Shilts, 278.

¹⁹Shilts, 292-293.

Quickly reports of violence against the gay community began to surface again. Gay journalist Bruce Pettit commented on this in a column for the *Bay Area Reporter* which attempted to explain the reasons behind the riots: “Almost immediately after the murders, there was an upsurge of increased police harassment and street attacks on gays, which bred anger within gays.”²⁰

Further evidence of this upswing in enforcement of petty laws is found in the March 21, 1979 *San Francisco Chronicle*. An article describes Gain being booed at a meeting of the Golden Gate Business Association because the police recently attempted to close six gay bookstores and theaters. The owners of the establishments were charged with operating public nuisances.²¹ Events like these tore at the fabric of the gay community; they hindered gays in their pursuit of happiness and gave them a reason to be angry with the police department. Within the Castro, the center of gay politics and culture, there was considerable outcry against the actions of the police.²²

The problem was further exacerbated when the police raided a lesbian bar called Peg’s Place. Ten police officers, some on duty, some off duty, ran into the bar and shouted, “Let’s get the dykes.” They began to beat the bars owner and several patrons with their nightsticks. There were no arrests and the officers had covered their badge numbers which made prosecuting them difficult. Gay newspapers heavily reported the incident while the two city dailies ignored it. A news article that ran in the *Sentinel* in May 1979 reported, “Michael Kelly is accused of physically assaulting the

²⁰Bruce Pettit, Column, *Bay Area Reporter*, 24 May 1977. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center in the San Francisco Public Library.

²¹Steve Rubenstein, “S.F. Gay Businessmen Boo Gain in Meeting,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 March 1979.

²²Gayle Rubin, *The Miracle Mile*, ed. James Brook et al. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 258.

bar's owner, Erlinda Symers by wrestling her to the floor with a headlock."²³

This incident of violence was among the first that saw members of the gay community begin to fight back against the police: "A melee broke out between the men and women patrons who rushed to the bar employee's defense, beating the intruders with pool cues."²⁴ Previous to this night, gays had almost always docilely submitted to police instructions and violence.²⁵ The pre-riot move towards active resistance undercuts the argument that the gay response during the riot was surprising in its violence. Gays had already begun to oppose police intimidation tactics violently, and there is ample evidence of growing resentment within the gay community.

The best example of this bitterness was the afternoon of May 12, 1979, nine days before the riots. A gay man was hanging fliers on telephone poles outside of a gay bar in the Castro. A beat officer approached him and stated that tacking up posters violated a city ordinance. He handcuffed the man and called for the paddy wagon. Within minutes a mob of gay men had pored out of the bars and stores and surrounded the officer. The officer who was being taunted and jeered radioed for backup and soon a half dozen police cars had arrived. By this time the mob had grown to three thousand people who were throwing change at the police and chanting, "Dan White was a cop." The paddy wagon arrived and inched its way through the crowd, and as it did some individuals slashed at its tires. The police quickly vacated the scene, leaving the throng with no one to shout at.²⁶

²³"Battle at Peg's Place," *The Sentinel*, 4 May 1979. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center in the San Francisco Public Library.

²⁴Shilts, 306.

²⁵Shilts, 57.

²⁶Shilts, 320-321; *The Sentinel* 18 May 1979. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center in the San Francisco Public Library; "Castro Street gays confront cops," *San Francisco Examiner*, 13 May 1979, final edition.

This second instance of gay resistance to the police suggests the speed with which the gay community could move out of the bars and shops and onto the streets to respond in anger. The chanting of “Dan White was a cop” demonstrates the angry association made between the police force and the man who murdered the unofficial mayor of Castro Street.

After an earlier increase in police violence and persecution against gays that followed the double murder, the gay community was now beginning to find its will to fight back. The incident described above would certainly discourage any one officer from enforcing minor violations of the law in an unfair manner. In the weeks leading up to the riots the gay community reached a critical mass of anger and belligerence. What was lacking was any kind of leadership to direct the growing anger. This became most apparent the night of the riot.

Gays had marched on city hall during other crises in the late 1970s. These marches had always ended in a peaceful way. The most striking example of a gay march that could have ended in violence was the Orange Tuesday march on June 7, 1977. After Dade County Florida had repealed a gay rights law by a two to one margin, a large crowd of gays estimated at over five thousand gathered on Castro street and began to chant militant slogans calling for gay rights nationwide.²⁷ The police, shocked over the sudden appearance of so many homosexuals feared a riot and called upon Milk to calm the crowd. He led them on a lengthy march which ended in a peaceful sit down in the middle of the Castro and Market Street intersection. The gay community had turned out in force but had remained peaceful due to Milk’s leadership.²⁸

If the gay community was ever to have a violent riot it would have been on this night. The Dade county gay rights referendum

²⁷Shilts, 158.

²⁸Steve Rubenstein, “Defiant Gays March in S.F.” *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 June 1977, sec A, final edition.

was being watched around the country and its defeat was a real blow to gay rights organizers and their followers.²⁹ Milk was able to steward the marchers through the city and provide peaceful leadership. He was even able to portray the march as a completely peaceful one to the newspapers when in reality it was on the brink of turning violent. He stated to the *San Francisco Examiner*: “What’s happening is an out pouring of love and warmth for all gay people.”³⁰ This account differs from the one given in Randy Shilts’s *The Mayor of Castro Street*, which implies a much greater threat of violence: “For three hours, Harvey led the crowd over a five-mile course, worried that any pause might see that first rock hurled through a window or at a cop.”³¹

Milk had managed to bolster the gay community in the newspaper and to also lead it through the crisis during the march. His leadership was seen in similar marches up until his death. The night of the riots there was not a capable gay leader to step forward and keep the night peaceful. Milk’s successor to the Board of Supervisors, Harry Britt, attempted to quell the violent crowd which gathered at city hall after the verdict had been read. He shouted “Harvey, remember Harvey Milk. He’d be ashamed of us.”³² Britt was soon shouted down and the riot commenced.

The moment the gay community began the assault on city hall was captured in the next day’s *San Francisco Chronicle*. “‘We are not Dan White! No violence tonight!’ somebody cried through a bullhorn. ‘Bullshit!’ came the response, then the sound of glass breaking, and a cheer went up from the crowd.”³³

After city hall had been heavily damaged, the rioters eventually moved to Castro Street where police officers descended on the

²⁹Shilts, 159.

³⁰Steve Rubenstein, “Defiant Gays March in S.F.” *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 June 1977, sec A, final edition.

³¹Shilts, 159.

³²Shilts, 330.

³³Katy Butler, “Anatomy of a Gay Riot,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 May 1979, sec. A, final edition.

gay bars in the late night hours. As they then began arriving they were greeted with thrown bottles and more jeers. The night ended only after the police had raided the Elephant Walk, a bisexual bar on Castro and 18th Streets. While there they brutally beat patrons and “won” a figurative battle. Warren Hinckle wrote in the *Chronicle* the day after the riots, “In the corner of my eye I could see cops chasing gays with sticks. Captain Jeffries put on a firm jaw: ‘We lost the battle at city hall. We aren’t going to lose this one.’”³⁴ The price of winning the battle was steep for some members of the Castro who suffered brutal beatings at the hands of the officers who were not following any standard protocol. “The police swooped into the bar, swinging and beating people. They were down there to crack a few heads open,” bar patron Donald Sagim said. Sagim had his right ear and chin split open, suffered five broken ribs, and a partially collapsed lung.³⁵

The violence at city hall and on Castro Street occurred both as a spontaneous angry reaction to the perceived injustice of the White verdict but also for other deeper reasons. Gays had become used to a relative amount of calm in their social lives after Gain had been appointed police chief by mayor Moscone. The random police violence had almost stopped. Within a period of six months, from November 1978 to May 1979, the gay community’s most prominent leader had been assassinated, police had stepped up persecution and violence to near unprecedented levels, and no one stepped into the leadership vacuum left by Milk. There was much to be angry about.

If Gain had been able to maintain control of his police force and the violent attacks and persecution had not immediately

³⁴Warren Hinckle, “How Cops Waded Into Castro Street,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 May 1979, sec. A, final edition.

³⁵Bill Soiffer, “The Sorry Saga at Elephant Walk Bar,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 May 1979, sec. A, final edition; also “The Times of Harvey Milk,” produced by Robert Epstein, 88 Minutes. Black Sand Productions, 1984, 1 videocassette.

restarted after the assassinations, the violence of the White Night Riots would have been mitigated. If a real leader had stepped forward to lead the community, there may have been a peaceful march instead of a violent protest. These forces all played together to bring the gay community to a critical level of anger that boiled over against both the police force and city hall, the very essence of San Francisco.