

Contrary on Mary

By Bill Berkowitz

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After more than two decades of unremitting gay-bashing, using gays and lesbians as fund-raising fodder for right wing organizations and candidates, demonizing gays at every turn and, in this election cycle, calling for a constitutional amendment that would deny gays and lesbians the right to marry, conservatives have finally found the outrage. You'll remember that in 1996, the Republican Party's Presidential candidate, Senator Bob Dole, spent much of his time during the campaign looking for the "outrage." Outraged by Hollywood's immorality, and outraged by the failure of the nation's voters to stand behind the GOP's effort to dump President Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair, Sen. Dole trucked around the country and demanded to know: "Where's the outrage?"

It may have taken eight years, but the outrage has finally been outed.

On every cable television news network, in every newspaper, and for all I know, on every street corner in the battleground states, Team Bush's spokespersons and surrogates are hammering home its message that they are outraged that during the final debate with President George W. Bush, Senator John Kerry dared mention that Mary Cheney – the daughter of vice president Dick and his wife Lynne – is a lesbian.

When debate moderator, Bob Schieffer of CBS, asked the president whether he thought homosexuality was a matter of choice, he responded by saying that he wasn't sure. In his answer Kerry said, "I think if you were to talk to Dick Cheney's daughter, who is a lesbian, she would tell you that she's being who she was, she's being who she was born as."

Was Kerry outing Mary Cheney? Was he bashing her for being gay? Was he denigrating the Cheney family? Were his comments too nuanced to be easily understood? Or was he in fact trying to make the common sense and simple point that being gay is not a choice, and that all parents should be proud of who their children are regardless of their sexual orientation?

The Cheney family was livid: Both Dick – who acknowledged that his daughter is a lesbian several times in the past – and his wife Lynne, the author of a hot lesbian romance novel several years ago, was outraged. At a post-debate rally in Coraopolis, Pa., she said "I did have a chance to assess John Kerry once more. And the only thing I could conclude is this is not a good man. This is not a good man. And, of course, I am speaking as a mom and

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a pretty indignant mom. This is not a good man. What a cheap and tawdry political trick.”

But the Cheney’s collective outrage doesn’t seem to square with the facts. “In fact,” the New York Times reported, “on Aug. 24, as Republicans were drafting their party platform and calling for a constitutional amendment that ‘fully protects’ the institution of marriage between man and woman, Cheney expressed his affection for his daughter at a rally in Davenport, Iowa, telling a forum that people should be free to enter ‘into any kind of relationship they want to.’”

Matthew Dowd, spokesman for the Bush-Cheney campaign, said in a CNN interview that Kerry’s remarks were “outrageous.”

However, a few weeks ago, when Alan Keyes, the GOP’s African American candidate running against Democrat Barack Obama for the Illinois Senate seat, called Mary Cheney a “selfish hedonist,” there wasn’t any outrage from Dick and Lynne Cheney. In late August, Keyes said that since gay couples were unable to have children other than through adoption or insemination, homosexuality was based “on the premise of selfish hedonism.” Asked if the “selfish hedonist” label would apply to Mary Cheney, Keyes said “of course” it does. “That goes by definition. Of course she is [a selfish hedonist].”

(Interestingly enough, it appears that the family-values spouting Keyes might have a gay daughter. According to Southern Voice columnist Jennifer Vanasco, strangely enough, Keyes’ daughter, Maya, “deferred her admission to Brown University so she can help her father’s campaign. After some initial publicity, the [web log]... where she ruminated about her girlfriend has been stripped of most lesbian references. And she has maintained a public silence.)

Fox News contributor Mort Kondracke reacted to Kerry’s remarks by saying: “I think it was totally underhanded – the outing of Dick Cheney’s lesbian daughter.... And it struck me as a low blow designed to weaken the Bush-Cheney team with right-wingers who might not know that Dick Cheney has a lesbian daughter.”

Long-time conservative activist Gary Bauer sees Kerry’s comments as a political maneuver aimed at keeping Christian voters at home: “I think it is part of a strategy to suppress traditional-values voters, to knock 1 or 2 percent off in some rural areas by causing people to turn on the president,” Bauer said.

In National Review Online, Cesar V. Conda, who was Vice President Dick Cheney’s assistant for domestic policy, concurred with Bauer: “In a desperate attempt to win the White House, John Kerry and John Edwards have sunk to practicing the lowest form of politics – using the personal lives of the other candidates and their family members for political gain. Both John Kerry’s and John Edwards’s specific mention of the sexual orientation of Vice President Dick Cheney’s daughter during the debates was a deliberate

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and calculated political attempt to suppress religious conservative voters from turning out to the polls for President George W. Bush.”

Andrew Sullivan, a longtime gay and mostly conservative activist who has broken with the GOP over its advocacy of an anti-same-sex marriage constitutional amendment, pointed out on his web log that Bauer’s response is an example of the GOP’s bigotry and hypocrisy on gay issues: “Bauer believes that his core supporters would be likely to ‘turn’ on the president just because the vice-president’s daughter is a lesbian. Notice that there’s no indication of homosexual ‘acts’, just a revulsion at Mary Cheney’s simple identity as a lesbian. This is their base. This is why they’re worried.”

Speculating about Kerry’s motivation, Sullivan adds: “Some of the subtler arguments I’ve heard overnight say the following: it’s not that homosexuality is wrong; it’s just that many people believe that and Kerry therefore exploited their homophobia to gain a point. I don’t buy it, but let’s assume the worst in Kerry’s motives for the sake of argument. What these emailers are saying is that Kerry should hedge what he says in order to cater to the homophobia of Bush’s base. Why on earth should he? The truth here is obvious: Bush and Cheney are closet tolerants. They have no problem with gay people personally; but they use hostility to gay people for political purposes, even if it means attacking members of their own families. What they are currently objecting to is the fact that their hypocrisy has been exposed. To which the only answer is: if you don’t want to be exposed as a hypocrite, don’t be one.”

Let’s give Marshall Wittman, another longtime conservative activist who worked with Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition, the final word. Wittman sent Sullivan an e-mail that put the “outrage” episode in perspective: “As the former legislative director of the Christian Coalition, I find it hilarious, ironic and shameless that those who have long employed gay bashing as a political tool are feigning their outrage over Kerry’s sensitive notation of Cheney’s daughter’s sexual orientation. This is truly a moment of desperation for the Bushies. On the one hand they are sending out gay bashing mail and on the other hand they are sounding like charter members of the Human Rights Campaign. You’ve got to laugh!”