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Late in the '80s, it was in. Within a decade, it was out. Now, outing - the practice of exposing public figures as **gay** or lesbian against their will - is back, and back with a vengeance.

In the past year, left-leaning Web sites, **gay** activists and a host of accomplices have targeted everyone from legislators on down. Congressional aides working for those deemed public enemies of **gay** men and lesbians have found themselves staring uncomfortably into the spotlight, as have Republican Party leaders and, in recent weeks, the granddaughter of a politician with a long record of voting against **gay** rights.

But the reaction in the **gay** community is very different than when activists began outing powerful **gay** leaders they thought were failing to act in the face of AIDS, among other issues. Whereas outing once inspired anguished and rancorous debate, **gays** and lesbians see themselves in a kind of war and are more likely now to agree that it is acceptable to out policy-makers they believe are attacking their rights.

Supporters argue that outing is a reasonable tactic because it can be effective but doesn't necessarily end careers and lives, as it used to. The practice is unstoppable anyway, they said, because the Internet and the country's culture of disclosure have turned privacy into a quaint anachronism.

But several major **gay** organizations still roundly condemn outing, and even among supporters there is disagreement about who deserves to be publicly yanked out of the closet and what tactics are legitimate.

"I've always been a staunch opponent of outing, and my feelings are now really in transition, and that surprises me. ... I am less horrified than I was 12 years ago," said Eric Rofes, a professor at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif., a longtime activist and a **gay** man. "What's changed is the marriage issue, which is seen by many people as the apex of our movement's efforts. If ever we needed to pull out all the strategies and tactics and make good use of them, this is the time."

In the November election, voters in 11 states approved constitutional amendments that ban same-sex marriage.

The Federal Marriage Amendment, which would likewise change the U.S. Constitution to ban same-sex marriage, is still viable, especially after the GOP gains two weeks ago.

The National **Gay** and Lesbian Task Force doesn't engage in outing, but "there's consensus within the organization that outing is appropriate for people who are **gay** or lesbian and are in public office and vote against the interest of the **gay** community," said Matthew Foreman, executive director of the D.C.-based advocacy organization.

Outing people viewed as hypocrites is more palatable now in part because the consequences aren't as grave, said Caryn Neumann, a doctoral student in history at Ohio State University and the author of an entry about outing in an online **gay**, lesbian, bisexual and transgender encyclopedia.

"People don't commit suicide over outing anymore," she said. "You don't lose your job or career anymore." Even **gay** politicians ousted after outings can easily slide into other jobs and second or third careers, she said.

The Columbus Dispatch in Ohio recently published an open secret - that the chair of the Franklin County Republican Committee is **gay**. "It has had absolutely no impact," Neumann said.

The courts apparently concur: Earlier this year, a federal judge ruled that stating that someone is **gay** doesn't constitute slander or libel. U.S. District Judge Nancy Gertner threw out a lawsuit filed by a former bodyguard and boyfriend of Madonna, who had claimed that a published photograph was defamatory because it misidentified him as a **gay** man.

But some **gays** and lesbians say that outing can be devastating to individuals and their families.

"Outing uses sexual orientation as a weapon, which is everything we try to fight against," said Mark Shields, a spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, one of several **gay** organizations officially opposed to outing.

Rofes, the Humboldt State University professor, decried some of the tactics activists are using, citing the Edward Schrock case. In September, tapes purportedly of the Virginia congressman soliciting sex from other men surfaced on the Web site www.blogactive.com. Schrock, a married, two-term Republican and backer of the Federal Marriage Amendment, denied the allegations but subsequently announced he wouldn't run for re-election.

If a person like Schrock resigns, he asked, couldn't a politician even more hostile to **gay** rights take his place?

Michael Rogers, 41, the typing fingers behind BlogActive - based in his Washington, D.C., home - has little patience for that attitude. Rogers said giving **gay** closet cases a pass in the hopes that they'll come around and pitch in for **gay** rights is misguided.

"This is about the future of our country," he said. "It's not so much for me but for the lesbian and **gay** kids 100 years from now."

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