

Brutal bigotry

From the Editors in the [November 4, 1998](#) issue

Matthew Shepard was a cautious individual, but not, as it turned out, cautious enough. According to Laramie police, on the evening of October 6 the 21-year-old University of Wyoming student was befriended by two high school dropouts--Russell Henderson, 21, and Aaron McKinney, 22--at an off-campus hangout. Claiming that they were fellow gays, the two men lured Shepard into joining them for a ride. Shortly thereafter they started taking turns beating Shepard on the head with a revolver. They then drove him to the outskirts of town, tied him to a wooden ranch fence and proceeded to beat and torture him into a comatose state, finally abandoning him to the cold. The two cyclists who found the slightly built Shepard 18 hours later at first thought he was a scarecrow. He died October 12, never having regained consciousness.

Kristen Leann Price, McKinney's girlfriend, claimed that "it wasn't meant to be a hate crime; they just wanted to rob him." The two men did take Shepard's wallet and shoes, but a need for cash can hardly have been the sole motive for such a vicious killing. An acquaintance of McKinney's describes him as "a total redneck" given to saying "crazy, stupid stuff about black people and gay people."

A climate of fierce hostility toward gays was palpable in the days after the assault. While Shepard lay dying in a Fort Collins, Colorado, hospital, a college homecoming parade that passed near the hospital included a float that carried a scarecrow on which were painted the words, "I'm gay." Antigay picketers turned out for Shepard's funeral, led by Kansas minister Fred Phelps. They held posters saying, "Matt in Hell" and "No Tears for Queers," and several picketers, including Phelps, carried signs that said, "AIDS Cures Fags." (Shepard did not, however, have AIDS.)

This kind of treatment of gays has not been confined to cowboy country. Assaults on gays have been on the rise throughout the nation, even in presumably safe places like New York City's Greenwich Village and Chicago's North Halsted area. Antigay assaults are up 81 percent in New York City this year, and they more than doubled in Chicago from 1996 to 1997. Shepard is not the only gay person who has been killed

simply for being who he is.

The antigay climate has surely been heightened by the rhetoric and activities of the Religious Right, evident in Wyoming and elsewhere. A coalition of Religious Right groups recently sponsored full-page newspaper ads across the country claiming that gays can change their sexual orientation and suggesting that they are lost souls if they don't. Ironically, although Shepard's death served to refuel the debate in Congress over the pending Hate Crimes Prevention Act and prompted the gay community to push harder for it, the focusing of attention on the bill's sexual-orientation category also reenergized the opposition of the Religious Right and its congressional allies--and made passage of the bill less likely.

Religious Right leaders deny, of course, that they condone violence toward gays, insisting that they hate the sin, not the sinner. But such a distinction is dubious given the inflamed rhetoric often used by those on the Religious Right to condemn homosexuality--some talk of "waging war" against homosexuality, for example, or refer to gays as "sodomites"--and given the personal danger that homosexuals face. Those who delight in assailing homosexuality in vituperative terms are not entirely innocent when others take delight in assailing homosexuals with physical violence.

In this situation, to quote Episcopal Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, we have a "particular responsibility to stand with gays and lesbians, to decry all forms of violence against them--from verbal to physical--and to encourage dialogue that can, with God's help, lead to a new appreciation for their presence in the life of our church and the broader community."