

Final Statement of The War Conference

Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia

February 28, 1988

Our community is facing unprecedented threats. Not only do we daily face the homophobia that has cost lesbians and gay men their jobs, their housing, the love of their families, their children, their sense of dignity and self-worth and--all too often--their lives, but we have now seen our community decimated by the scourge of AIDS.

We have seen political bigots of the far right attack us, while many politicians who profess to support us remain silent, or even acquiesce.

We have suffered at the hands of a national administration hostile to the cause of lesbian and gay rights and cruelly indifferent to the catastrophe of AIDS.

Confronted by these threats to our integrity, our humanity, and our lives, we have met this weekend with several objectives in mind--

First, to understand the nature and complexity of the threats we face.

Second, to assess the strengths and weaknesses in our movement in order to help build the strong national force we must become if we are to secure our rightful place in this society.

Finally, we have tried to consider a wide range of strategies to build our movement and defeat our enemies. Some of the strategies we have considered relate to strengthening existing organizations, some would call for creation of new organizations, and some would be independent of any organization.

We recognize the many limitations of this Conference.

We do not consider ourselves fully representative of our diverse community, nor do we purport to speak for it.

While nearly one-third of us are women we should be satisfied only when our conferences reflect their true strength in our community.

And our group is woefully underrepresented by people of color, and we are poorer for it.

In order to ensure full participation of all the members of our diverse community, we must commit to gender parity, and to inclusion of at least twenty-five percent people of color in all aspects of our organizing and political work. Future conferences of this kind should also reflect this level of representation.

We must be particularly sensitive to the needs of the physically challenged and make sure that all of our programs and facilities are fully accessible in order that they may participate in all our activities.

In addition, we are not as geographically representative as we should be, and any future conference should reach out to those cities and states across the entire country which have not been represented here.

But we do span the continent, and we are here from Portland, Maine to Miami, from Los Angeles to Seattle, from Chicago, Tennessee, Arizona, Missouri and many, many other places.

As we have looked at our movement we have seen many strengths--our diversity perhaps most of all. We truly are everywhere.

We have seen a movement of caring for each other, a movement of compassion, of talent, intelligence, passion and commitment.

And we have seen remarkable strength in our community organizations, both national and local. This year we will raise more money, to support more organizations, in more places than ever before in our history.

But we are not without major internal problems in our movement.

We are raising more money to support our institutions than ever before, but it is not enough, not nearly enough. Each of us must accept the responsibility to multiply the funding of all our organizations. Without adequate support we can never expect our institutions to meet the enormous responsibilities we place on them.

We recognize that lesbian and gay activists--those of us at the Conference and the many more who are not--are but a tiny minority of our community. We must do a better job of attracting leaders to our movement,

of training them, and of supporting them and each other. We can not let burnout hinder our movement or our own lives.

We are gratified that there are more community organizations now than at any time in our history, but we are concerned that many cities still lack an organized gay and lesbian presence, and that many of our existing grass-roots organizations are isolated, poorly funded, and have major organizational problems. We recognize that this movement must be a truly national one, and take steps to ensure that. We must help organize new institutions in those cities not now organized, and help build our institutions that are struggling. Those of us in thriving organizations must accept our responsibility to help those who need it. Our movement is truly only as strong as our weakest link.

We are concerned that no present effective system exists to link our organizations to provide effective response in a crisis. We must develop a better means of communicating with each other.

We are mindful of the invisibility of our community. As long as the overwhelming majority of our community remains closeted we will continue to be dismissed. We must do a better job of encouraging people to begin the process of coming out, and to support them when they do. We all know the exhilarating liberation of the process. We must convey that to others. The closet means invisibility, impotence, crippling and even death.

We recognize our failures to adequately deal with the media. We must fight for accurate and affirming treatment of lesbians and gay men in the press, on television, on radio, and in the movies, and not settle for anything less.

We recognize our failures to adequately reach out and build coalitions with other social movements in our society. We, as individual gay men and lesbians, have an obligation to involve ourselves in the struggles of others, in order that we can expect others to involve themselves in ours.

We must recognize that our movement must be an empowering one; we cannot expect to build the national force we so desperately need to become unless we make the involvement of everyone a true and complete participation. An empowering experience builds, it commits, it energizes, and it inspires.

We must acknowledge the extraordinary successes of our community-based AIDS efforts, while recognizing how woefully inadequate they are in

the face of our twin threats: the disease itself, and the callous and criminal response of our governments to it. We must immediately prepare a plan of action to demand of our new national administration, and to support and extend our present efforts.

We must acknowledge the desperate need to build the political consciousness and effectiveness of our community. We must better reward our friends and punish our enemies. And we must work to recruit more openly gay and lesbian candidates and to support them fully. And above all, we must get our community registered to vote and we must make sure they do vote.

We recognize and deplore the rising level of violence directed at members of our community. Harassment of lesbians and gay men is at an all-time high in this country, and the resulting injuries and deaths are an ugly stain on our society. We must pressure law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to provide better protection to our community, and to prosecute and punish the perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law.

We must recognize our special obligation to gay and lesbian youth. Adolescence is a trying time for everyone, but it is much more difficult for lesbians and gays. And their problems are even greater in the age of AIDS. We should support our youth programs and work to devise better ways of reaching this isolated segment of our community.

To make our movement what it should be, and to advance our cause in this society, we recommend the following four steps as matters of highest priority:

First, we recommend a nation-wide media campaign to promote a positive image of gays and lesbians. Every organization--national, state, and local--must accept the responsibility. We must consider the media in every project we undertake. We must, in addition, take every advantage we can to include public service announcements and paid advertisements, and to cultivate reporters and editors of newspapers, radio, and television. To help facilitate this we need national media workshops to train our leaders. And we must encourage our gay and lesbian press to increase coverage of the national political process. Our media efforts are fundamental to the full acceptance of us in American life. But they are also a way for us to increase the funding of our movement. A media campaign costs money, but ultimately it may be one of our most successful fund-raising devices.

Second, we need to establish a national emergency response network that will link all organization--local, state and national--to provide the means for quickly generating the calls, telegrams, letters and mailgrams we need to pressure elected officials. We must use our existing organizations and community groups, with the technical assistance of groups like ACTUP to help build the system we need. In addition to providing an emergency response in times of crisis, the system can be used to communicate on routine matters.

Third, we must have an annual conference of gay and lesbian activists, open to all. Such a conference will be held to help set and modify our national agenda, to provide an opportunity for groups to meet and exchange information, and to support ourselves. We must establish a gay and lesbian umbrella project to organize and conduct the conference, and realize that cohesiveness and cooperation will be vital.

Finally, we must have a national coming-out day, or week, to be held in the fall. We recognize that coming out is a process, not a single event. On the coming-out event we can encourage everyone in our community to take the next step--it may be coming out to a friend, to a sister or a brother, to parents, to co-workers, or even in the media. Or it might be to join a gay organization, to become an activist, or to engage in civil disobedience. We must move to the next stage, no matter where on the spectrum we presently are.

These are not the only initiatives we need. Many other useful and worthwhile projects have been discussed and most of them are clearly needed. We particularly want to recognize the continuing work of gay and lesbian activists who are personally placing their physical safety on the line in acts of civil disobedience. They are truly on the front lines of our movement.

But we must set our priorities, and these four projects rank at the top of our agenda.

These, then are our recommendations. We offer them not as the definitive agenda for our community, for we fully recognize our inability to speak for our vast and diverse movement. But they are the consensus judgment of nearly 200 of us who have come and tried, with good will and good cheer and a sense of compassion and love, to help this movement to which we are all dedicated.