

The Big Picture

PATRICK GOLDSTEIN ON THE COLLISION OF ENTERTAINMENT, MEDIA AND POP CULTURE

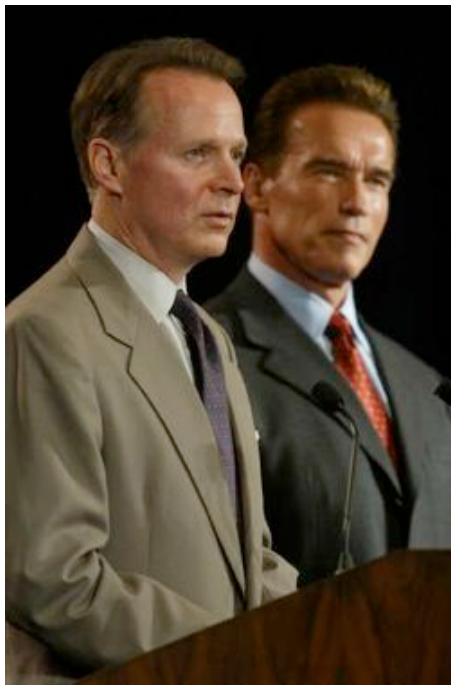
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'Outrage': Kirby Dick kicks open Washington's closet door

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Would a host of key members of the Washington political establishment be less hostile to gay rights if they came out of the closet and acknowledged being gay themselves?

That's the question at the heart of "Outrage," Kirby Dick's rabble-rousing new documentary that debuts tonight at New York's Tribeca Film Festival. (It opens May 8 in L.A. and four other cities, including Washington.) Clearly pulling no punches, the film investigates the secret lives of closeted gay politicians, some of whom have spent years in office with only the skimpiest of scrutiny from the mainstream media. If nothing else, "Outrage" establishes Dick as a formidable force in the investigative documentary field, especially coming on the heels of his last doc, "This Film Is Not Yet Rated," which bashed the MPAA's impenetrable and often irrational film rating system.



I know what you're thinking. If you've seen the film, spill it already. So who does he out? Dick's targets include Florida's current governor, Charlie Crist, who was viewed for a time as a front-runner to be John McCain's vice-presidential pick; David Dreier (R-San Dimas), who was once a leading candidate for the House majority leader post when the Republicans still controlled Congress; Ken Mehlman, George Bush's campaign manager during the 2004 election and former Republican National Committee chairman; former New York City mayor Ed Koch; the now-retired Idaho Sen. Larry Craig; Jim McCrery (R-La.), a ranking member on the House Ways and Means Committee who retired last year; Ed Schrock (R-Va.), who retired in 2004; and -- gasp -- the prominent Fox News anchor Shepard Smith.

It is pretty obvious from this list of names that the film's real issue is hypocrisy. With the exception of Koch, the outed politicians are all conservative Republicans who have repeatedly voted against gay rights legislation that would allow gay marriage, gay adoption or include gays among those protected in hate crimes laws. (Though he wasn't an elected official, Mehlman is included because he ran the Bush re-election campaign of 2004, which was propelled by a push for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, which was seen by many as a cynical effort to lure evangelical conservatives to the voting booths.)

Dick's world view is best expressed in the film by Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), one of the few gay congressmen who has voluntarily come out of the closet, who says: "There is a right to privacy, there's

congressmen who has voluntarily come out of the closet, who says, "There is a right to privacy, there's no right to hypocrisy." Dick makes a strong case that closeted gays are often the most enthusiastic opponents of gay rights legislation, in part to establish their bona fides in the straight world. He gives a wealth of screen time to Michael Rogers, a blogger who has been a leader in outing closeted gay politicians, using his wealth of contacts among gay congressional staffers and Washington journalists.

Like Jon Stewart on "The Daily Show," Dick has a wonderful eye for capturing telling moments of political sanctimony and posturing. He shows clips of Craig, on the Senate floor, extolling his wife's virtues on Valentine's Day, not long after he plays us an audio tape of Craig being interviewed by an undercover agent whom Craig had played footsie with in an airport men's room. After airing reports that Dreier had a longtime relationship with his male chief of staff -- a story first reported in 2004 by the L.A. Weekly -- Dick shows photos of various exotic vacation locales around the world that were visited by Dreier, noting that each time, Dreier's chief of staff would arrive at the same getaway spot a day later.

Dick is especially hard on the mainstream media, who he clearly believes have turned a blind eye to the hypocrisy issue, perhaps out of old-fashioned respect for privacy, perhaps -- as former RIAA Washington lobbyist Hilary Rosen contends in the film -- because straight journalists are squeamish about dealing with gay issues. To prove the point, Dick shows Bill Maher's original Nov. 8, 2006 interview with CNN's Larry King, where Maher refers to Ken Mehlman as a closeted gay man -- and then shows how CNN edited out the remark from later editions of the program. (Mehlman, who isn't interviewed in the doc, has publicly denied that he's gay.)

My only issue with the film is that in its fervor to open up every closet door, it doesn't always offer us the full story -- or ample justification for the outing process. The mainstream media has clearly been behind the curve in terms of reporting about closeted gay politicians and their anti-gay voting records. When Dreier, for example, lost a bid to join the GOP congressional leadership, it was widely reported by the mainstream media that his defeat came because he was viewed as being too moderate -- while many insiders actually believed he lost because the GOP thought giving the post to a closeted gay man was a potential political disaster. In the film, asked if he believed Dreier was passed over for being too moderate, Barney Frank quips: "Yes, in the sense that I marched in the moderate pride parade last summer and went to a moderate bar." The GOP clearly seemed more attuned to its potential PR debacles than the Washington media: The day after Maher outed Mehlman on CNN, Mehlman resigned as party chairman. Was that really just a coincidence?

Still, I wish Dick had made time to interview some establishment Washington journalists so we could hear their justifications for remaining so silent on the issue. I'm also not entirely convinced that he has any good reason to out Fox News' Smith -- even if he works for a conservative news network whose commentators have often been critical of gay rights, he's a news anchor, not a strident opinionator, like Sean Hannity or Bill O'Reilly. But Dick doesn't pretend to be objective. He has a case to make and he makes it well, reminding us that it was closeted gay political figures who were usually the last ones to join the fight against AIDS or lend support to any gay anti-discrimination efforts. When the closet door is securely shut, it's awfully dark inside.

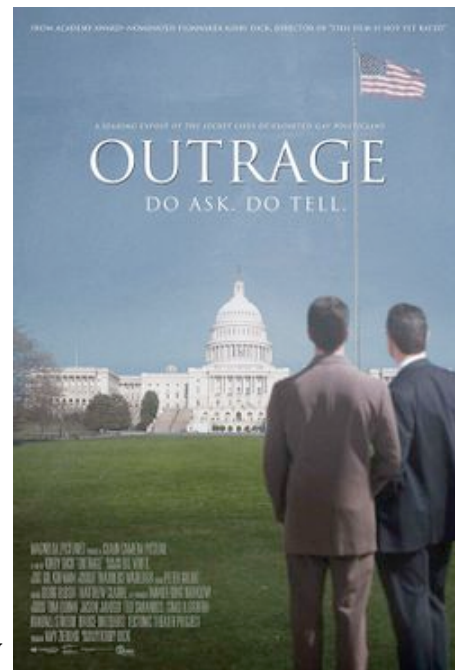


Photo of Congressman David Dreier, left, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger by Brian Vander Brug / Los Angeles Times

