

Anti-gay Reverend Jerry Falwell dies

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By Bob Roehr

The Reverend Jerry Falwell died Tuesday, May 15 in Lynchburg, Virginia after being found unconscious in his office at Liberty University. He was 73.

The cause of death has not been determined, but it was reported that Falwell had a history of heart problems.

Falwell came to prominence through the Moral Majority, a conservative religious-political group that he founded in 1979. Opposition to gays and lesbians was a cornerstone of the group's activities. The Moral Majority was disbanded in 1989.

He was perhaps the single person most responsible for making religious conservatives the political force that they are today. The Moral Majority represented a shift among fundamentalists from an inner direction to active engagement in the political process. It is difficult to recall that, given the ubiquitous involvement of conservative religious groups in politics today.

Falwell referred to gays as "deviants" and "sodomites," and played a leading role in the backlash against the first wave of gay rights legislation. He joined Anita Bryant in 1977 to repeal an equal rights law in Dade County, Florida, and participated in a similar effort in California the following year.

Over the course of his public life, Falwell devolved from the effective political power who had played a significant role in the election of Ronald Reagan as president, to the absurdity of his 1999 warning to parents that the Teletubby Tinky Winky was a subversive part of the homosexual agenda. "He is purple – the gay pride color, and his antenna is shaped like a triangle – the gay pride symbol," said Falwell.

The Reverend Mel White worked as a ghostwriter for Falwell before coming to terms with his own homosexuality and confronting Falwell on his homophobia through the organization Soulforce. White said, "It breaks my heart to think that Jerry died without ever discovering the truth about God's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children. I sincerely hope that one day his school and his church will have a change of heart."

National Stonewall Democrats also took the high road. Executive Director Jo Wyrick said, "We extend to Reverend Falwell the simple dignity and deference that our own families seek as part of the American family. ... As we understand that each American should be treated equally under the law, we recognize that each neighbor should receive our respect."

While expressing condolences to the family, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman said, "Unfortunately, we will always remember him as a founder and leader of America's anti-gay industry, someone who exacerbated the nation's appalling response to the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic, someone who demonized and vilified us for political gain, and someone who used religion to divide rather than unite our nation."

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation advised the media of Falwell's "history of denigrative comments" on gays and urged it to "reflect on the outdated attitudes and beliefs he embodied."

Much of the mainstream media paid scant attention to the suggestion, glossing over the fact that much of Falwell's success was built upon anti-gay demagoguery.

Many of the rank and file within the LGBT community responded to Falwell's death by circulating online the acerbic comment of Bette Davis on learning of the death of her cinematic rival Joan Crawford: "You should never say bad things about the dead, you should only say good Joan Crawford is dead. Good!"

The popular blog Wonkette, the D.C. gossip, was positively vitriolic, writing, "At a time like this, people deserve sympathy and good wishes ... except for Falwell, who was an evil sonofabitch. Over his long career as a vile televangelist building an empire of bigotry from the donations of poor people, Falwell has supported South African apartheid, called AIDS an invention of Jesus to punish gays, attacked Martin Luther King and U.S. civil rights, and blamed 9/11 on feminists and homosexuals."