



Why Gene Robinson is too little, too late

By Nancy Goldstein
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Finally: Nearly four weeks and tons of negative press since Barack Obama announced his choice of the popular -- and notoriously homophobic and anti-Semitic -- evangelical pastor Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at the presidential inauguration, Team Obama has gone into damage control mode. Monday morning they announced that Obama has also invited the Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, who was elected the Episcopal Church's first openly gay bishop in 2003, to deliver the invocation for Sunday's kickoff inaugural event on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

All better, right? A story in Tuesday's U.S. News & World Report features fawning quotations from Joe Solmonese, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, who says the Robinson invitation shows that, "ultimately, Barack Obama is a friend to the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] community," and **Darlene Nipper, deputy executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, who called the Robinson invitation "an important step for knowing that this is someone who believes in the inclusivity of all Americans."**

USA Today faithfully repeats the new administration's talking points about how Obama was always going to invite Robinson and this isn't a response to the Warren flap, blah, blah, blah. Much is made about the fact that a lesbian couple is among the families accompanying the Obamas on a train trip and that there are several openly gay appointees in the works (none of them at the Cabinet level).

In short, enough lipstick is being applied to this pig to empty MAC cosmetics shelves. Yes, it's nice that Robinson will headline an ancillary inaugural event. But it took literally 27 days of outright uproar on queer and progressive blogs for Team Obama to issue the invitation. The turning point appears to have come only when Obama apologists like Melissa Etheridge failed to quell the storm (by relaying her story of the really nice hug Warren gave her), while Frank Rich gained the ear of straight America with an unflattering, spot-on New York Times column.

There's already plenty of evidence that Obama already knows better than to consider inclusiveness a "one from column A, one from column B" proposition. For all of Obama's talk in a press conference the day after the Warren announcement about how important it is for America to come together even though we may have disagreements on certain social issues, John Aravosis of Americablog was quick to note that he doesn't call for people of color to sit down at the table with openly declared racists. The same goes for women and Jews, I would add. You won't see Obama inviting Ann Coulter to headline a key event, then balancing her with an invite to Patricia J. Williams. Ditto for Holocaust denier David Irving and Elie Weisel, or David Duke and Henry Louis Gates.

Warren doesn't just disagree with Robinson's being gay; he actively works to ensure that Robinson and other members of the LGBT community never enjoy full human rights, most recently by calling on his large and well-organized constituency to pass Proposition 8 in California, which successfully repealed the right of California's same-sex couples to marry. When reached for comment, Pam Spaulding of Pam's House Blend, one of the leaders in reporting the Warren story, noted: "You don't have to reach out to people who are diametrically opposed to the equality you've claimed to promote all through your campaign. Inviting Gene Robinson is not an

equivalent salve to the open wound Obama created by inviting Warren. His announcement of Robinson late in the game rings hollow.

Finally, Obama's choice of Warren, followed by Robinson weeks later, is egregious because it's part of an emerging pattern: Obama's been here before with the LGBT community, caused a similar uproar, and settled for a similarly weak compromise.

In October of 2007, Pam's House Blend reported that presidential hopeful Obama, then locked in battle for South Carolina's black votes with Hillary Clinton, decided to connect with people of faith by going on an "Embrace the Change" concert tour. Gospel artists on the tour included known homophobe and recloseted homosexual Donnie McClurkin, who believes one can pray away the gay and argues that homosexuality is simply a lifestyle choice. Then as now, Obama faced weeks of bad press from the queer and progressive blogosphere, but relinquished only after the NYT's Caucus blog reported the story. The compromise? Team Obama brought on board white gay pastor Andy Sidden to open the concerts with a brief prayer before a mostly black audience -- after having rejected two openly gay black pastors and two gay-affirming ones, including Michael Eric Dyson, a professor of theology at Georgetown University named by Ebony magazine as one of the hundred most influential black Americans.

So one can hardly say that Team Obama had never dealt with a similar situation before. I'm going to bet that whether we ever deal with it again depends largely on whether we give Obama a pass -- yet again -- for playing the inclusivity card, but only when it comes to LGBT people having to tolerate virulent homophobes, or give him hell. I vote for giving him hell.

Politics always makes strange bedfellows and involves tricky calculations. My beef with Obama isn't that he's involved in some interesting ménages, or that he does his math -- only that he seems to think the LGBT community is such an easy lay and comes so cheap.