



Obama era begins

'All are equal, all are free,' new president tells massive inaugural crowd

By LOU CHIBBARO JR. | Jan 21, 2009

Gays from across the country joined more than a million people Tuesday at the U.S. Capitol and on the National Mall to witness Barack Obama take the oath of office as the 44th president and become, in the minds of many activists, the nation's most gay-supportive president.

In his inaugural address, Obama called on the country to strive for equal rights and justice for all, but did not specifically mention his longstanding support for gay civil rights as he did in many campaign speeches.

The omission of gays and other constituency groups from the inaugural address did not appear to bother gay activists who braved the frigid weather to attend the inauguration.

For many activists, especially black gays, Obama's precedent-setting role as the nation's first African-American president — along with his strong support for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Americans — elicited deep, personal feelings about their outlook on the country.

"I think that at this moment, I am more proud to be an American than I have ever been," said Michael Crawford, a black gay activist and Obama campaign volunteer.

"And when I say that, I don't mean to say that I have ever not been proud to be an American," Crawford said. "But watching Barack Obama be sworn into the presidency as the first African American ever, and not only watching him but seeing the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people of all races, all sexual orientations, all ages, all economic classes together celebrating that fact was absolutely amazing."

Crawford and other activists noted that while Obama did not mention gays in his inaugural address, his new administration acted quickly to include gays in its first White House actions.

Seconds after Chief Justice John Roberts administered the oath of office to Obama, a detailed narrative describing Obama's support for gay rights legislation popped up on the White House web site, www.whitehouse.gov.

On the site's "Civil Rights" page, which includes the official White House logo, Obama's support for a gay and trans-inclusive hate crimes prevention bill, an employment non-discrimination bill covering gays and transgender people, overturning "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," among other gay-related issues, are discussed under a section titled "Support for the LGBT Community."

The section also mentions Obama's call for the repeal of the anti-gay Defense of Marriage Act and his support for new legislation that would provide full marriage-related rights and benefits for same-sex couples joined in civil unions or domestic partnerships.

While praised by gay groups, the web site's changes were quickly denounced by the anti-gay Liberty Alliance, which called the changes a signal that Obama has adopted the "homosexual agenda."

'All are equal, all are free'

In his inaugural address, Obama discussed themes of national unity at home and improved relations with the global community.

"The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit, to choose our better history, to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness," he said.

In a reference to his foreign policy initiatives, Obama noted that "America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more."

The night he won the presidency, Obama told a crowd in Chicago that his victory was an answer to the question of whether America remained a place "where all things are possible."

"It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled, Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states," he said. "We are, and always will be, the United States of America."

During a pre-inaugural concert on Sunday at the Lincoln Memorial, Obama made a similar call for unity by listing the same groups, including "gay and straight," in a speech on the memorial's steps.

The Lincoln Memorial event drew criticism from some gay activists when the opening prayer delivered by gay Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson was omitted from the televised coverage of the concert.

Many activists considered Obama's decision to invite the openly gay Robinson to participate in the Lincoln Memorial event as a way of offsetting Obama's earlier decision to invite Rev. Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Church in California and an opponent of gay rights, to deliver the invocation at the inauguration ceremony at the Capitol.

Warren's remarks at the inauguration included a recitation of the Lord's Prayer and were conciliatory in tone. He made no mention of his support for Proposition 8, the ballot measure that repealed California's same-sex marriage law.

"Help us, O God, to remember that we are Americans, united not by race, or religion, or blood, but to our commitment to freedom and justice for all," he said.

H. Alexander Robinson, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, a gay advocacy group, said he saw a large number of people turn their backs on the inaugural stage when Warren spoke. He said he was standing in a section of the Mall closest to the Capitol.

"I thought it was interesting that all around me there were individuals who turned their backs on Rev. Warren during his prayer," Robinson said. "That was noticed by the people around us. It went fairly un commented on, but there were dozens of people in the area that I was in that quietly registered our protest."

Obama said earlier that he decided to invite Warren to participate in his inaugural ceremony as a gesture of conciliation between his new administration and socially conservative religious leaders. Obama noted in responding to criticism over his selection of Warren that he disagrees with Warren's positions on a number of issues, including gay rights and abortion.

Robinson cautioned against gays dwelling on the Warren selection and the perception that Robinson's exclusion from the televised broadcast of the Lincoln Memorial event might have been deliberate.

"If we look for reasons and ways in which we might be overlooked or slighted, we'll always be able to find them," Robinson said. "But I think that Obama's message was clearly an inclusive one."

He added, "Whatever happened with Bishop Robinson, we should move on, because we have serious work to get done. And so we should focus our people on achieving both the objectives for the LGBT community and for our nation as a whole."

'Dawn of a new political era'

Officials with other national gay advocacy groups appeared to agree with Robinson.

"It is our hope this truly marks the dawn of a new political era of engagement in the life of our country," said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, in commenting on Obama's inauguration.

"As President Obama assumes the role of America's foremost leader, we call upon him to fulfill the promise of a nation where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are recognized and valued as part of the country's strength, spirit and solution.

"The fact that the official White House web site was updated [Tuesday] with a list of commitments to LGBT rights is already enormous positive change," she said.

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay rights group, said Obama's inauguration represented a "paradigm shift" for the nation.

"The pendulum has swung away from the anti-gay force and toward a new president and vice president who acknowledge our equality," Solmonese said.

"For the past eight years, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was out of reach and out of touch," he said. "We salute President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden on this historic day in our nation's capital and look forward to working with them in the months and years ahead."

But the changes were not welcomed by all. Matt Barber, director of cultural affairs with the social conservative groups Liberty Alliance and Liberty Counsel, called the Obama administration's addition of a gay-rights section to the White House web site an ominous sign of things to come.

"I suspect the immediate, stark and 'in your face' changes made to the White House web site are a metaphor for what we can expect, in terms of policy, from his administration," Barber said in a statement. "The gravity of this situation cannot be overstated. Right out of the shoot, Obama has told the world that he is signing off, without exception, on every demand of the extremist homosexual and transsexual lobbies."