

BY **LIBBY ELLIS**

THE RENEGADE

Gavin Newsom didn't waste any time. Just 34 days after taking office in 2004, the new Democratic Mayor legalized same-sex marriage in San Francisco. In his opinion, it wasn't soon enough.

"One could ask why it took so long. For me, the tipping point was going to the State of the Union speech. President George Bush made it clear he was going to advance his support publicly on the constitutional amendment [banning same-sex marriage]. We came back and did it." Doing it turned out to be the easy part. Newsom held some closed-door meetings, altered a few words on the official license and legalized same-sex marriage in San Francisco.

About three seconds later, city hall was bombarded by the media, ring-wielding couples and sign-carrying protesters. Supporters and critics alike were shocked. "Even though it's recent history, we can easily forget that the climate in 2004 was even more toxic than it is now,"

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says Kate Kendell, Executive Director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR). "There are two ways adding more fuel to an already serious conflagration of public dialogue can go: It can either inflame it and result in a serious backlash, or it can amplify it and force people to think hard about their opinions — and maybe change them."

Newsom's initiative paid off. The King of Cambodia announced his support for same-sex marriage. Spain sanctioned same-sex marriage. Newsom's action in the U.S. resulted in a dramatic shift in opinion. After years fighting for basic domestic partner rights, points out California State Senator Carole Migden, it took only a couple of months — and 4,000 marriages — to move the discussion of domestic partnership from the far left to the center. Looking back at the political landscape it's clear how far we've come. "Certainly [Newsom's] was a symbolic action, but it also brought same-sex marriage into the mainstream," says Migden. "Before that, I had to pull every string to get Governor Gray Davis to sign a domestic partner registry in 2001. Later, he agreed to expand those rights to be the most far-reaching in the country, but [it took] years of effort."

Forget about marriage. Newsom points out that in 2004 even Democrats were having a hard time talking about domestic partnerships. "Now John Kerry and John Edwards have the same position as Dick Cheney and George Bush: civil unions are what we should be fighting for. That's pretty remarkable — even though they're all wrong," he says. That statement right there is typical Newsom.



GAVIN NEWSOM

feels good about the first half of his term.

Good but not great.

Proud of his accomplishments,

he's not looking for anyone

to name an alleyway after him.

thinking out loud

THE POLITICIAN

In some ways, Newsom seems to struggle with being a politician, finding himself at times frustrated with the Democratic Party. “I talk to so many who agree [with same-sex marriage] but who won’t state their agreement and won’t do anything for advancement. I prefer people who don’t agree with domestic partnership, who can’t stand the notion of two people having any legal protection whatsoever. At least there’s purity to their cause. For the Democrats who are for marriage equality to say, ‘we’re not ready’ – well, how dare you? I mean isn’t your job as leaders to challenge the status quo? We weren’t ready for interracial marriage in 1948 – heck we weren’t ready in 1967 when 16 states were still denying it – but we stood on principle and it was one of the great moments in our party’s history. No one looks back and regrets that. I believe no one would regret it if we stood up on principle on this issue. There’s nothing people can do to stop this. It’s inevitable. So you either step up and do what is morally right and do it with conviction and purpose, or you ultimately will be held in account.”

is part of what has kept his approval rating consistently around 75% and his allies on his team. “When Mayor Newsom’s own party began to isolate him, he didn’t move. He stayed with us,” says Reverend Penny Nixon, Senior Minister of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco, one of the city’s largest churches focused on meeting the spiritual needs of the LGBT community. “Regardless of what political views people have, I personally will never forget what he did. That kind of leadership is what our country is hungry for.”

THE SAN FRANCISCAN

Newsom’s marriage initiative unified the city and helped solidify its reputation as a progressive leader in all areas of human rights. “People recognized equality when they saw it. The best thing that happened is that people got a taste of real equality,” says Rev. Nixon.

That feeling of true equality extended beyond the same-sex marriage issue and seems to have aligned diverse groups on oth-

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That kind of disconnect between public and private gets under Newsom’s skin. He doesn’t have an “inside voice” and doesn’t think he should. Last year he made what he calls a “sort of a defensive” statement in response to questions about homicide rates. He said that if by this time next year they didn’t substantially decline, he’d start his own recall drive. Not surprisingly, when rates didn’t decline he was asked, “So, are you going to start the recall?”

“I think out loud which is good and bad but I do tend to say the same thing publicly as I do privately. In political life you’ve got to be cautious ... but the challenge is also to be yourself and not become a ‘politician’ where you don’t say anything and you equivocate and pontificate and fingerpoint and explain away,” Newsom says. “What’s so disconcerting is I believe in politics and government, and when people don’t advance their private thoughts publicly, they are attacking that foundation and doing a tremendous disservice.”

While his own party may not always appreciate his candor, his resolve

er important issues. Kendell explains: “With other issues which are much more intractable, like crime and violence and homelessness – all of which are serious problems here – there’s a sense that we’re all invested in finding solutions. There’s a way in which we all see ourselves as being part of each other’s issues in a way that I don’t remember seeing as visible before.”

Newsom says: “The whole same-sex marriage issue was for me a celebration of diversity, life, love and commitment. But it also was about bringing people together ... and about the values of the city.” He sees these values – tolerance and empathy – as the foundation on which the city and the world should be created. “It’s been pretty extraordinary to be a San Franciscan in the last couple of years. I feel like people are more appreciative of where we are, where we live and what we represent. We’re not better [than anyone else]. We make mistakes and we learn from others constantly. But it’s that open-mindedness and willingness to learn – that tolerance – that defines the greatness of the city.”

THE MAYOR

The beginning of the third year of a four-year term in office is a peculiar time for many politicians. They are no longer new and shiny but seen as primarily responsible for the daily state of the city. Reelection considerations loom in the shadows.

In 2003, candidate Newsom made 327 policy pledges that have been converted into a works-in-progress list that is regularly updated and made available to the public in an effort, says Newsom, to remain transparent and accountable to his constituents and to himself. According to a January 2005 press release from the Mayor's office, 54% are accomplished or ongoing – meaning that a policy has been created and is being implemented – and 42% are in progress. Pretty impressive. But Newsom isn't satisfied.

"I feel good. Good but not great. There are so many things to do and so many challenges that remain. The frustration of the job is wanting to do everything immediately and at the same time focusing on the things you got into office for. So I feel good — but again, good not great," Newsom says of the first half of his term, thinking about the some problems San Francisco still faces – homelessness, violence, infrastructure, economic growth.

"There's lots of work, lots. The thing that drives my passion and sense of purpose is homelessness. With homelessness, success is not part of the definition," he explains. While he's proud of having created supportive housing units (including residences with both career and substance abuse counselors on site) for close to 2,000 people in the last two years, Newsom says that's just "a drop in the bucket" and is humbled by his experiences. "It puts your life in perspective, not just your job," he says. City Supervisor Fiona Ma says San Francisco thrives because of community involvement and education, citing Newsom's Project Homeless Connect where each month thousands volunteer. "They reach out to the homeless and try to get them into programs that they need, connecting them with attorneys, eye doctors, physicians. It's amazing when thousands of people go out and try to help other human beings." Last February a record 1,792 people showed up to lend a hand.

It's not only social issues that will define Newsom's first term. There's also the massive seismic upgrade of the city's 100-year-old water system. To lead the multi-billion dollar project Newsom appointed Susan Leal, one of his opponents in the 2003 race. "It was a massive compliment," Leal says. "I was Treasurer of the City and County, a position with no term limits, and I could have gone out feet first. We may not agree on everything but we are very supportive of each other." One huge issue they agree on is that to do it right the first time is to create something efficient and sustainable that will withstand generations of use.

From the gold rush to the dot-com boom, San Francisco has been seen as a land of opportunity. Looking at the future of the economy, Newsom is optimistic when pointing out that San Francisco has the highest minimum wage in the country, 37 new corporate headquarters securing space in the city, and a first-of-its-kind, \$51.6 million proposal to provide healthcare for all uninsured residents. He also worked closely with Senator Migden to bring the next big thing to his city: The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (State Stem Cell Headquarters). "San Francisco has always been a city of dreamers and doers, a city of innovation and discovery; a city that has embraced industries that align with those values."

THE CANDIDATE?

So, will Newsom be on the ballot in two years? Here's the Mayor's answer: "I assume so, but I'm not by any means certain. I can say this with sincerity: I don't think there's a worse job in American politics than being mayor of San Francisco if you don't feel you can have some impact. It's relentless; there is no escaping it. If you just do it for the symbolism and show up and do ribbon cuttings ... I couldn't imagine a worse thing in life. But if you feel you can have a little influence and a make a modicum of change, if you feel passionate, it's truly the greatest job anyone can imagine."

As a Mayor, a citizen or a candidate, it's clear that Newsom will stick with his convictions. He's in this for the work, not for the glory. "We all come and go. We're given a moment in time and we may get an alleyway named after us. So what? Stand on principle, say what you think and whatever happens happens. God, life is bigger than a title."

In terms of a title though, Mayor of San Francisco isn't bad, and it seems to suit him.

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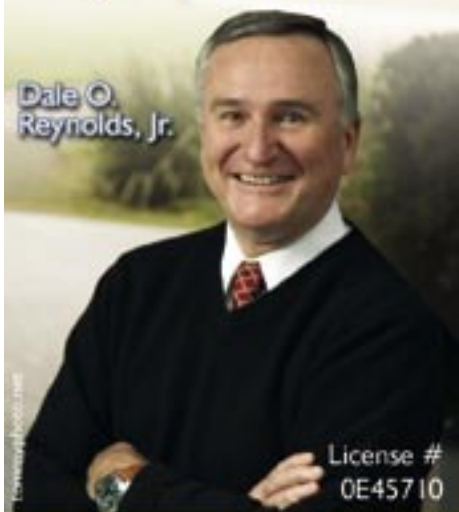
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