

PARIS AND LONDON, SÃO PAULO AND SAN Francisco, New York and Toronto—these were just a few of the cities scheduled to hold Pride parades later this month, celebrations that would have marked Pride’s 50th anniversary and collectively brought millions to the streets to show their support for and solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community.

COVID-19 has postponed these parades and left uncertain when, or how, they can safely resume. Yet Dr. Eric Cervini, a Harvard- and Cambridge-trained historian, views this pause as an opportunity to revisit Pride’s purpose and reconnect with its founding spirit. “Before they were parades, they were marches. They were open to anyone. You could carry whatever sign you wanted. Since then it’s become more like a Macy’s parade,” Dr. Cervini says, alluding to the growing corporate involvement at Pride events. “When we decide how to rebuild the parade after the pandemic,” he told Brunswick’s Wyatt Yankus recently, “I hope that we return to the origins of the event, meaning, let’s resist.”

Dr. Cervini captures that spirit of resistance, and some of its most over-looked origins, in his new book, *The Deviant’s War: The Homosexual vs. The United States of America*. At the heart of the story is Frank Kameny, who publicly battled the legal and

In a new book, **DR. ERIC CERVINI** spotlights early gay-rights pioneer Frank Kameny, a long-overlooked figure who helped launch a global movement. Brunswick’s **WYATT YANKUS** reports.

moral arguments against homosexuality after both had been used in 1957 to fire him from a government job. “He essentially invented what we now know as gay pride,” Dr. Cervini says. “He was the first to take the fight for gay rights, or at least the gay purges, to the Supreme Court. He was the first openly gay man to testify in Congress; first to demonstrate before the White House; the first to say that ‘Gay is Good.’”

Nearly a decade before the first Pride march took place, Kameny, who served in the US Army during World War II, filed a memorable petition with the US Supreme Court. “In World War II,” Kameny wrote, “petitioner did not hesitate to fight the Germans, with bullets, in order to help preserve his rights and freedoms and liberties, and those of others. In 1960, it is ironically necessary that he fight the Americans, with words, in order to preserve, against a tyrannical government, some of those same rights, freedoms and liberties, for himself and others.” Kameny passed away in 2011, at age 86, having seen others enjoy legal victories he was unable to win personally.

The book took Dr. Cervini seven years to research and write. The inspiration to do so came after he encountered the story of Harvey Milk, California’s first openly gay elected official, who was assassinated in 1978. Milk’s life had garnered the attention of Hollywood, with Sean Penn playing the titular role in the Oscar-winning biopic “Milk.” In a quest to learn more about Milk’s life, Dr. Cervini encountered, for the first time, the name—and work—of Frank Kameny.

The Grandfather of

PRIDE



Frank Kameny, second in line, protesting outside the White House in 1965—five years before the first Pride parade.

Dr. Cervini hopes his book can bring similar attention to a gay-rights pioneer. “I see him as the grandfather of our movement; every single American, every LGBTQ person in the world, should know his name, because what he stood for is why we celebrate Pride.”

For those who aren't familiar, what were the “gay purges”?

In the 15 years after World War II, an estimated one million Americans were arrested for homosexual activity: sodomy, holding hands, things like that. In the 1950s, 1,000 people were arrested for homosexual activity, each year, in Washington, DC alone. This was the same time Senator Joseph McCarthy was going after alleged communists in the federal government. For political reasons, they were also going after so-called sexual deviants, perverts, and homosexuals, within the government.

Their reasoning was that some of the homophile organizations, which were precursors to gay-rights organizations, had communist roots. So the thinking went: if you were a homosexual within the federal government and you had access to classified materials, then communists could find out about your homosexuality, threaten to expose you, and get you to reveal material to them.

The rationale to purge employees in non-classified material positions was that homosexuality was so abhorrent to other federal employees it would “harm the efficiency of the service,” that was the legalese term that they used. At a rate even higher than that of alleged communists, gays were being thrown out of their jobs. At least 5,000 “sexual deviants” were removed from the federal government in the 1950s, which is a conservative estimate. I would estimate that well over 10,000 were purged from the federal bureaucracy, not including the military, before the Civil Service Commission changed its policies in 1975.

And once you were purged, that followed you the rest of your life. That’s what happened to Frank Kameny. He was an astrophysicist, working for the Army Map Service, helping to map the world so that ballistic missiles could have a precise target—prior to that there was no coordinate grid system to use. He was arrested in a public restroom for homosexual activity and kicked out of his job in 1957. Since every single astronomy-related job required a security clearance, he couldn’t find work. Not even with a Harvard PhD, having graduated top of his class, and working in one of the most in-demand professions on earth: an astrophysicist at the dawn of the



In 2019, more than one million people celebrated Pride in London. Above, celebrants from the “Disney Pride” float.

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Space Race. Even for private-sector jobs, the security officers all knew each other and talked about him. He was in poverty.

The first purpose of the organization that he created, the Mattachine Society of Washington, (MSW) was to find other plaintiffs like him, who’d lost their jobs because of their sexuality, and who were willing to take their cases to court.

You write about the role of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI and of the DC Metro Police, and the level of scrutiny that this tiny organization receives—An FBI file of 900 pages.

Exactly. It seems out of proportion to the conceivable threat this organization posed. Was it just the communist threat or were there other dynamics in play?

When you first see the FBI getting involved they were looking for a way to prove homophile organizations were influenced by communists. When they realized that they weren’t, the FBI kind of drops the matter. And then Frank Kameny’s Mattachine Society popped up in Washington, DC seven years later and started sending their newsletter and magazine to J. Edgar Hoover, asking for meetings and really making a scene. They were trying to get meetings with every single Congressperson on Capitol Hill.

J. Edgar Hoover, it’s safe to say, was preoccupied by his own image. If it had gotten out that homosexuals had been sending him materials and organizing and thriving in Washington, DC, it wouldn’t have only undermined his image as an effective persecutor of gay Americans, but it also would have

questioned his own sexuality, which was already being whispered about at the time.

The Mattachine Society and other organizations debated about how to get the federal government to change its policies—do you lobby, educate, take social action? What one worked?

You see within Frank Kameny’s group, and within the entire early gay rights movement, a lot of experimentation.

At first, they were optimistic: They thought that they could just go to their Congressmen, to officials within the Defense Department. That didn’t work. And they were the first to picket at the White House and testify before Congress.

But the real lasting significance, where you see the dividends today, is that he was the first to take that fight to court. He allied with the ACLU, whose DC chapter literally started on the same day as the MSW—that was crucial. Kameny went to every single one of those meetings and introduced the topic of homosexuality and gay rights as a civil liberty issue, on par with the Black Freedom struggle, with Jewish persecution, with First Amendment infringement. Before then, gay rights was off the menu when it came to what the ACLU fought for, and he persuaded the ACLU to take it on, and created this alliance that continues today.

The brief that Kameny wrote himself and filed—what made it so memorable?

A volunteer attorney had helped Frank take his case all the way to the Appeals Court. But the attorney abandoned it after that because there was no way that the Supreme Court was going to rule in Kameny’s favor.

Frank recognized he didn’t have a very good shot of winning, but he could still educate the justices. He called it a Brandeis brief, which has historical precedent, and he essentially made this claim: If the government says homosexuality is morally bad, I am going to say that homosexuality is morally good. And you have nothing to prove otherwise because the only thing that you are basing this on is Scripture, and that is unconstitutional. He challenged both the morality and legality of it.

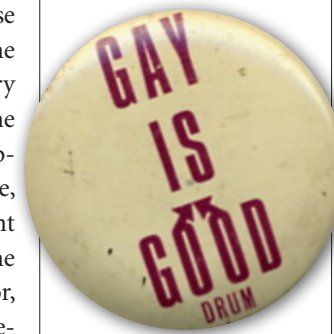
It wasn’t successful legally, but it ended up being a manifesto for his organization, for him personally, and eventually for the entire gay rights movements, all the way up until Stonewall.

Remember, this is 1961, almost a decade before the supposed beginning of Gay Liberation Movement in America, and Frank is already going to

court saying “Gay is Good” and really dismantling every single element of the rationale for the purges.

There are transcripts from a 1960s meeting between Kameny and Pentagon officials, some of whom sound sympathetic. The bureaucrats say they’re simply following the expectations of society, that it’s not their job to try to change society. “If you want to change things, you need to talk to society,” is, in essence, their advice. That certainly encapsulates how some business leaders feel about their role in societal issues. What lessons can we take from Kameny’s story and apply to today’s discussions?

What’s interesting about that transcript is that yes, they seemed sympathetic, and yes, they say “Oh, there is nothing that we can do, it is up to the wider world, you have to go to Congress, to the different branches to get things done”—but that’s similar to what officials throughout the American South would say to civil rights demonstrators: “You’re talking to the wrong person, that’s just the way that it is.” And in Birmingham, yes, there was a compelling moral component to Dr. King’s argument, but there was also an inarguable economic one: Business owners were eventually forced to confront, thanks to the boycotts, how costly and counter-productive discrimination was. You see versions of that now with the modern-day fight for LGBTQ+ equality, the enormous purchasing power of that community, how it responds when a company is supporting a discriminatory policy or is itself a discriminatory organization. History tells us is that discrimination isn’t just morally repugnant, it is also economically bad.



Above, a button from Frank Kameny’s extensive archives, carrying his most famous slogan. Below, members of the Mattachine Society, an early gay-rights group, are denied service at a Manhattan bar in 1966.



PHOTOGRAPHS: PREVIOUS SPREAD, BETTMANN / CONTRIBUTOR; TOP, PIETRO RECCHIA/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

PHOTOGRAPH: FRED W. MCDARRAH/GETTY IMAGES

And then there's the people, the talent, these organizations lose. You mentioned Kameny, an astrophysicist at the height of the Space Race, being out of work.

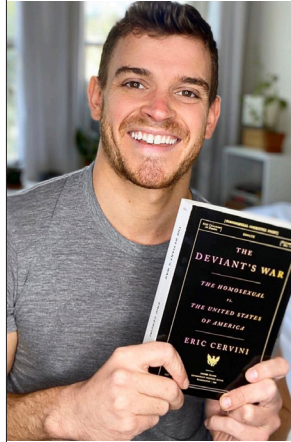
Exactly. And during the early days of the space race, the Americans were getting dominated by the Soviets. That they were turning down someone so uniquely equipped is unfathomable. But, it is still happening today: The military is still excluding trans Americans from service, 29 states have no sort of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation on the basis of sexual orientation, so these same things are happening today and states are suffering as a result; Americans are suffering as a result.

During the first two years I was in the Navy, it was still under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and you would have been thrown out of the service just as surely as anyone in Frank Kameny's day if you stood up and said that you were gay. These problems clearly linger, so what lessons can you draw from this history on how to solve them?

A takeaway from my research is that activism works if you aren't afraid to embrace every element of your identity. You saw it in the recent Democratic primary election, you see it in debates of different LGBT organizations and their political strategies. How far should they go, how much should they demand rights not just for ourselves—for gay marriage, for gay Americans—but for the most marginalized parts of their communities? Whether it is Stonewall, or the early days of the Gay Activist Alliance, the ones with least to lose are the first ones to fight back. When activists or members of the LGBTQ+ movement don't recognize that and try to prioritize the most "respectable" elements of our battle, or our identity, people fail, because it ends up alienating a silent majority within our community who say, "Yes, you may be gay but you are not speaking for me, you are not fighting for me." Only when you can articulate change for the most marginalized parts of the community will you succeed. You need numbers, you need a critical mass. Bigots and people in the middle will be turned off by you no matter how "straight" you may seem, so you might as well lean into that difference, or at least embrace your connection and obligation to other marginalized groups so that you can build a following. You see that in politics, in lobbying, in Pride.

How can we think about showing Pride this year when we can't stage parades and parties?

There are parts of our community who are still



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facing enormous challenges. Trans kids throughout the country are being directly targeted, even in the middle of a pandemic, not allowing them to play sports. Trans prisoners are dying because of COVID-19 and they're not receiving adequate protections. Like I said, 29 states still don't have any sort of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation. These are things that we have a moral obligation, especially those of us who are relatively privileged, to be fighting against.

Now with Pride being sexy, a way to sell products, companies need to realize there is going to be a backlash by the LGBTQ+ community if they don't start recognizing what Pride actually means, and that it is not just a means by which you can sell a product. That means identifying LGBTQ+ organizations to donate to, it means putting out policy documents about discrimination within your own companies and not doing business in discriminatory states or with discriminatory companies. If companies are not proactive about taking these measures to begin with, people within the LGBTQ+ community are going to get fed up. The time to start these conversations is now.

In other words, now that companies can't have branded rainbow lanyards in a parade, they need to show their commitment in other ways?

Exactly. Whether it is changing your policies, declaring your support of an anti-discrimination bill—there are ways of showing your commitment to Pride and to our community rather than putting out branded buttons and candies or parade float. And now is the time to think about this.

What are the other ways that companies could—should, even—celebrate Pride?

First, do the research. See where discrimination exists now: against trans Americans primarily, against especially homeless youth, 33 percent of whom are queer and have been kicked out of their homes by their families. Those parts of our community need help. And second, after doing that research, find organizations you can contribute the cash towards, because nonprofits, just like many companies and individuals and those marginalized groups, are struggling and they need to fight to stay alive. History has shown time and time again that it is in times of emergency that marginalized groups are the most victimized, especially by those in power. And in crises, they are the ones who are hurting the most. So if a company wants to prove that they truly support Pride, they need to put their money where their mouth is. ♦