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Gay Republican in the American Culture War:
Wisconsin Congressman Steve Gunderson, 1989-1996

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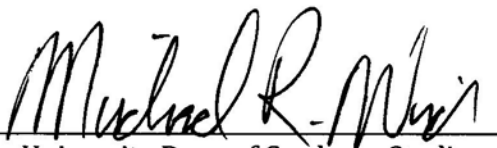
Graduate Studies

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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2011
Under the Supervision of Dr. Oscar Chamberlain

The intent of this research paper is to create a biographical narrative, using previously unemployed primary sources and various secondary accounts, which finds meaning in Wisconsin Representative Steve Gunderson's convoluted congressional departure. I contend the inculcation of allegiance to Republican majority party strategy that Gunderson endorsed in the 1989 Madigan-Gingrich Whip race hardened Republicans against Party outliers as it spurred the Republican Revolution. That tactical reorientation later dislocated the openly gay Gunderson from his party in 1996, denying Wisconsin constituents an opportunity to reelect the man who would have been the first Wisconsin chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture.

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CONTENTION

On September 7 of 1995, eight-term 3rd District Wisconsin Representative Steve Gunderson laughed as he admitted to news show host Chris Matthews that he knew he was Republican before he knew he was gay.¹ First elected to Wisconsin's 91st Assembly District in 1975, Gunderson could not have foreseen the political events that would drive such an intense national interest in his personal life at the twilight of his political career. Later he confessed, had he known the trials he would face in the 1990s, he would never have run for United States Congress.² By 1995 though, Gunderson had grown accustomed to the pressure-cooker political atmosphere his unique identity attracted, both from antigay elements within his party and those made curious by the easy coexistence of his traditional worldview, Lutheran faith, and homosexuality. Gunderson had nothing else to hide. He was handling the attention with the same resolve that had enabled him to win a determinedly Democratic congressional district eight campaigns running.

The intent of this research paper is to create a historical narrative linking Representative Steve Gunderson's visible role as gay Republican Party outlier and strategy critic with his 1994 outing on the floor of the House of Representatives and his convoluted 1996 departure from Congress. Gunderson publically called his political exit an act of coercion and discrimination; it my intention is to piece together a biographical account, using previously unemployed primary sources and various secondary accounts, which grounds Gunderson's charges and looks for meaning in the

¹ Steve Gunderson, interview by Chris Matthews, VHS, *Politics with Chris Matthews*, America's Talking, September 7, 1995, Box 8, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

² Steve Gunderson and Rob Morris, *House and Home: The political and personal journey of a gay Republican congressman and the man with whom he created a family* (New York: Dutton, 1996), 106.

uncertainty of his final two congressional campaigns. I contend the Republican Party's new activism, hardened by the political rise of Representative Newt Gingrich, abided heterosexual rhetoric in a bid to become the majority party in the House of Representatives. This electoral strategy emboldened local Republican opposition toward Gunderson in Wisconsin's 3rd District, threatening his incumbency during Gingrich's Republican Revolution in 1994. The openly gay Gunderson was forced out of office when Republican opposition to his candidacy nationalized in 1996; the specter of a smear campaign by the right wing of his party prevented Representative Steve Gunderson from serving as the first Wisconsin chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture in the 105th Congress.³

³ Gunderson's previously unaccessed congressional papers are paramount sources, but equally vital are other primary source documents: his published statements and interviews, newspaper and magazine profiles, House remarks and floor speeches, his autobiographical book *House and Home*, his press releases and speeches, as well as his February 2011 email exchange with the author. Scholarly secondary sources contribute to my analysis of key events and political conflicts before and after the Republican congressional takeover – the historic monographs, journal articles, and works of synthesis I cite frame the political era of the 1990s, detail the emergence of the American culture wars, and provide analysis of the intraparty conflicts central to this research.

GINGRICH'S VISION: 1983-1989

In the early 1980s an energetic congressman from Georgia named Newt Gingrich began to plot an improbable congressional comeback by House Republicans, a minority party of almost three decades. Gingrich believed that entrenched House Democrats had become thuggish and corrupt in their politics and he envisioned an antigovernment Republican Party unified in message, confrontational toward Democrats, and fully in control of the United States legislative agenda. On the advice of former President Richard Nixon, Gingrich refashioned himself a rebel against the agenda of his own leadership, gambling that his defiance would exacerbate intraparty tensions and eventually lead to an overthrow of the accommodating Old Guard Republican leadership.⁴ In March of 1983 he enlisted twelve like-minded colleagues and formed the Conservative Opportunity Society, a semantic counterpoise to the three words Gingrich would spend the rest of his congressional career opposing: Liberal Welfare State.⁵ Under Gingrich's leadership, the COS effectively began to use floor speeches and the House ethics process to articulate minority Republicans' legislative dissatisfactions, but his party's inability to adequately capitalize on the Reagan Revolution at the congressional, state, and local levels of government across the country continued to test Gingrich. In 1986 he gained control over a much larger Republican congressional campaign committee called GOPAC and turned it into a national conservative conscription operation, disseminating videotaped lectures promoting his slogans, his

⁴ Steve M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry that Defined a Generation*, Oxford University Press: New York, 2008), 53.

⁵ Jason DeParle, "Rant, Listen, Exploit, Learn, Scare, Help, Manipulate, Lead," *New York Times*, January 28, 1996.

strategies, and his activist brand of Republicanism.⁶ Thousands of GOPAC videocassettes were distributed to Republicans across the country, including congressmen like Gunderson.⁷ In addition to his GOPAC advocacy, Gingrich elevated his public profile throughout the decade by working with activists like Paul Weyrich and Grover Norquist to merge the money, passion, and votes of disparate conservative groups into one firmly antigovernment Republican coalition. He freely criticized prominent Republicans who made political concessions to the majority Democrats, a tactic House Minority Leader Bob Michel of Illinois likened to “trashing the institution” of Congress itself.⁸ When Gingrich took a shot at the House Minority Party Whip post in 1989, it was the moderate Republican Gunderson’s unexpected endorsement that catapulted Gingrich to party leadership and effectively set the congressional Republican Revolution in motion.⁹

It took a fortunate series of events for Gingrich’s political star to rise. When House Minority Whip Trent Lott won his 1988 Senate race Representative Dick Cheney from Wyoming succeeded to Lott’s House Whip post without opposition. Shortly thereafter, newly elected President George H.W. Bush nominated Cheney to be his Secretary of Defense. Coming only hours after Cheney’s acceptance, Gingrich’s announcement ignited an unusually aggressive House Republican leadership race against Edward Madigan, a ninth-term, so-called consensus Republican from Illinois hand-picked by House Republican Minority Leader Robert Michel. For a House

⁶ Newt Gingrich, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 101-113.

⁷ Gunderson’s congressional papers include two boxes of cassette tapes, including a number of GOPAC tapes. Newt Gingrich, “Listen, Learn, Help, Lead,” VHS, GOPAC, Box 9, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁸ Adam Clymer, “Michel, G.O.P. House Leader, to Retire,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1993.

⁹ The Republican Revolution of 1994 resulted in a net gain of fifty four seats in the House of Representatives and a pickup of eight seats in the Senate, making Republicans the majority party in Congress for the first time in forty years. The Republican Congressional freshman class of 1995 was comprised of seventy three representatives and eleven senators.

Republican Party increasingly hungry for congressional relevance, Gingrich's candidacy held real appeal. Long an advocate that Republicans develop ambitious strategies to win majority control of the House, Gingrich had worked for years to galvanize conservative activists and reshape Republican attitudes with the COS, GOPAC, and his willingness to partner with other Party factions, including Steve Gunderson's own moderate 92 Group.¹⁰ Still, inasmuch as Gingrich energized many House Republicans, his brash style also made him controversial with certain members who thought him a risky prospect for a Party leadership position.

On the timeline of events that culminate in Steve Gunderson's turbulent political end, his decisive backing of Newt Gingrich for Minority Party Whip in 1989 ranks both first and foremost. Gingrich allied himself with Gunderson from the very beginning. After Vin Weber from Minnesota, Gunderson was the second person Gingrich called after deciding to enter the Whip race. As founder and leader of the moderate Republican 92 Group, Gunderson had loosely banded with Gingrich's COS in the 100th and 101st Congresses, and Gingrich knew that Gunderson's support would sway at least some of those House Republicans hesitant to take a chance on him. Gunderson admitted he put himself "in a no-win position" by opposing the candidacy of his Agriculture Committee colleague Edward Madigan. However, he shared that as early as 1985, he and other influential congressional Republicans began to believe that they shared a forward-looking spirit with Gingrich that, if properly merged, could produce real party strength and "might well manage to unite Americans as a whole across party

¹⁰ Gunderson was a founder and chair of the moderate 92 Group at the time, which sought to achieve a House Republican majority by 1992.

lines.”¹¹ Though Madigan was a close friend, and “one of three people in Congress to whom I owed the most,” Gunderson spent that Friday afternoon “phoning every moderate member that I was close to and asking them not to commit to anybody else” until they had at least had a chance to speak with Gingrich personally.¹² By deploying Gunderson as a friendly face to the Old Guard and moderate Republican camps and engaging in member-to-member campaigning, the Gingrich team collected fifty-six vote commitments after only a week. Increasingly divisive politicking “that confirmed the basis for the [Gingrich] revolt” culminated in dramatic, emotional breakdowns by both Gingrich and Madigan only one week prior to the March 22 secret ballot vote.¹³ An internal Gingrich campaign tally sheet indicates that Gingrich was nearly able to split Gunderson’s moderate ‘92 Group, securing nine of its twenty members on his way to an incredible 87-85 victory over Madigan.¹⁴

Other academics have already recognized the impact of Gunderson’s endorsement in the Whip race. Douglas Harris deconstructed the entire contest and argues it presaged a larger adjustment in congressional Republican strategy; the closeness of the race, coupled with Gunderson’s campaign efforts on behalf of Gingrich, affirm that longstanding factional lines began to blur for Republican congressmen in 1989. Harris demonstrates that individual Republican members regarded the selection of Gingrich over Madigan as a conscious choice about political tactics, not a selection of

¹¹ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 98-102. Gunderson’s autobiographical account of events is insightful and illuminating as a record of historical memory; it is also highly personal and partial. This research regularly challenges the analyses of political events Gunderson provides his readers.

¹² Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

¹³ Don Phillips and Tom Kenworthy, “Gingrich Elected House GOP Whip; Increased Partisan Polarization Foreseen,” *Washington Post*, March 22, 1989, sec. A.

¹⁴ Douglas Harris, “Legislative Parties and Leadership Choice: Confrontation or Accommodation in the 1989 Gingrich-Madigan Whip Race,” *American Politics Research* 34, no. 2 (March, 2006), 203. The tally sheet was uncovered in the Gingrich archives by Douglas Harris. The sheet had prospective Madigan supporters marked with *Mad.* and committed Gingrich supporters denoted with stars beside their names. It is almost certainly accurate because its final tally numbers are the same as the actual vote.

issue stances or policy planks.¹⁵ A slim but passionate majority united around the notion that Gingrich had “the vision to build a majority party and the strength and charisma to do it.”¹⁶ Gunderson helped Gingrich convince moderates and younger congressmen that winning a majority in the House was more important than any of their individual political loyalties, goals, or allegiances.

Still other political scientists have connected Gingrich’s whip race victory to the Republican Revolution itself. Douglas Koopman found that Gingrich supporters were not significantly more conservative than Madigan supporters. What united Gingrich supporters was an “estrangement from both the Democratic and Republican leadership” that made a vote for Gingrich a vote of protest. House Republicans were not exclusively hostile to the Democratic leadership for increasingly shutting them out of power; they were also hostile toward Republican leaders, including Republican Minority Leader Robert Michel, for being too obliging to the majority Democrats. The traditionally issue-oriented factions in the House minority “arrayed along the entire ideological spectrum, but they joined to form a narrow majority over the accommodating insiders,” whose cooperative politics Reagan Republicans like Gingrich and Gunderson did not subscribe.¹⁷ If Edward Madigan’s narrow defeat can, in part, be attributed to his identification with Michel, then Gunderson’s influential support of Gingrich was representative of a new House Republican willingness to sacrifice political independence for a shot at majority party control.

¹⁵ Ibid, 216-217.

¹⁶ Balz and Brownstein, *Storming the Gates*, 132-133. The quote is attributed to Nancy Johnson, the other notable moderate Republican whom Gingrich had allied with early in the Whip race.

¹⁷ Douglas Koopman, *Hostile Takeover: The House Republican Party, 1980-1995* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 19.

GUNDERSON'S DILEMMA: 1990-1993

Steve Gunderson's influential commitment to Gingrich was a transformative event for both the House Republican Conference and Gunderson's place in it. Deeply inspired by Ronald Reagan, Gunderson had carried a reputation as hardworking public servant into the United States House of Representatives in 1980, and he had maintained that persona through unglamorous work on the Agriculture Committee, the Education and Labor Committee, and the Rural Health Care Coalition. After only nine years in Congress, Gunderson's consequential endorsement launched him into the Republican congressional leadership; Gingrich rewarded Gunderson by naming him Chief Deputy Whip in charge of strategy for the 101st Congress.

With Gingrich holding the number two Republican leadership position in the House, minority party strategy under Gunderson's direction turned sharply rightward. In a bid to become the House majority party in the presidential election year of 1992, the Republican leadership effectively stoked American political antipathy by identifying ethical lapses in the Democratic House, exposing the House banking and the congressional Post Office scandals, and encouraging Republican candidates to differentiate themselves from Democrats by highlighting conservative policy stances on divisive social issues. The national GOP platform, effectively controlled by Christian Coalition supporters, adopted policy planks opposing same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by gay couples.¹⁸ Gunderson believed that, with the economy in bad shape and the deficit out of control, "Party leaders had determined that Bush could not be reelected on an economic agenda, and had accordingly decided to embrace the

¹⁸ Tina Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*, (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2008), 79-80.

radical right's social agenda."¹⁹ In August, with Democrat Bill Clinton knocking at the door of the White House, that radical right wave crested at the Republican National Convention in Houston. Pat Buchanan's infamous "culture war" speech questioned the moral integrity of Democratic candidates and drew a divisive line between the parties' attitudes on homosexuality, abortion, and religion as he officially threw his support behind a second George H.W. Bush term.²⁰ Buchanan's speech drew considerable attention in the press and some criticism from the more temperate voices in his own party, but it had effectively signaled a new and merciless Republican resolve to win at the expense of gay Americans.²¹ Gunderson admitted, "As I watched this happening—and as I saw myself, in the role of deputy whip for strategy, expected to further this despicable agenda—I felt increasingly alienated and frustrated."²² Gunderson, anticipating the divisive tone the convention would take and troubled at his own inability to influence his party's strategy direction, did not attend the festivities.

In those difficult years in which he served as Gingrich's Chief Deputy Whip, Gunderson found little comfort in his personal life. To gay Americans living their lives openly, Gunderson's acceptance of the Chief Deputy Whip position epitomized the "closets of power" issue weakening the political progress of a national gay community still suffering with the AIDS crisis.²³ Even as they adopted the methods and tactics of earlier civil rights movements, gay rights supporters continued to face setbacks in the final decade of the twentieth century due to the closeted sexuality of the movement's

¹⁹ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

²⁰ Pat Buchanan, *Republican National Convention Address*, Republican National Committee, C-SPAN, August 17, 1992, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/ConventionAdd>

²¹ Jackie Calmes, "Tougher GOP Stance on Social Issues Reflects Surge of the Religious Right," *Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 1992, sec. A.

²² Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 159.

²³ Michaelangelo Signorile, *Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power* (New York: Random House, 1993). Signorile argues that powerful gay Americans should be outed in order to abolish "the closet" as a homophobic means of gay rights, culture, and identity repression.

political base.²⁴ Gunderson, his longtime partner Rob Morris, and his friends frequented gay bars in the District of Columbia, and the perceived contradiction between his own apparent sexual identity, the intolerant antigay stances of many his colleagues, and his ostensible complicity as a new member of the House Republican leadership increasingly attracted public confrontation by gay rights activists. Gunderson now admits, “They were right: I had not done enough for people with AIDS. My friends and fellow gay men were dying, and here I was, a leader of the party of Jesse Helms...doing too little to combat... antigay rhetoric.”²⁵ Though Gingrich had been formally introduced to Morris before he selected Gunderson to be his Chief Deputy Whip for strategy, Gunderson had never spoken directly to Gingrich about his sexuality. An escalating effort by gay rights groups ACT UP and Queer Nation to out Gunderson in his home district ahead of his 1992 reelection campaign, though, compelled him to bring the subject out into the open.²⁶ The first time the two spoke directly on the subject was in the summer of 1991, when it was clear to both that Gunderson’s sexuality had made his congressional seat a target for Democratic and even conservative Republican challenges. Though Gingrich affirmed his private support and quietly shared he aspired to lead a big-tent Republican Party, he did not encourage Gunderson to go public with his sexual orientation.²⁷ It was, perhaps, the best advice that Gingrich was able to provide at the time. Neither liked addressing the issue and both men certainly believed that, should Gunderson embrace a

²⁴ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 16. Clendinen and Nagourney use freshman representative Barney Frank’s experience to explore the “hidden gay social life of Washington” in some detail. Ibid, 430-431

²⁵ Gunderson, *House and Home*, 152.

²⁶ The efforts to out Gunderson by activists Michael Petralis and Tim Campbell are partially recounted in Gunderson’s *House and Home*, but more complete information on the effort can be found on in Signorile’s *Queer in America*, 87.

²⁷ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 139-141.

fuller public identity, his opportunities for advancement within the Republican Party leadership and his prospects for reelection in Wisconsin would both be jeopardized.

Gunderson was not short on opportunities to remind Gingrich of his private political dilemma. A public letter to President Bush signed by Gingrich and eight other Republicans in April of 1992 criticized Bush's Commerce Secretary for meeting with officials from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The letter alleged the meeting was a "slap in the face to every voter who affirms the traditional family." When Gunderson caught wind of the letter from Morris, who had read about it in the *Washington Blade*, Gunderson fired off "the most personal letter" he had ever sent to a colleague.²⁸ Gunderson told Gingrich he would resign as Chief Deputy Whip if Gingrich stood by the letter. Gingrich mollified Gunderson by admitting he had signed the letter without reading it. Though Gingrich never issued a retraction letter to Bush or the Washington press, the incident at least confirms that Gingrich still valued Gunderson's support. Gunderson later reflected on the incident: "Cynics would say that Newt had the best of both worlds there...that may or may not be true. I just don't know." Gunderson cites Gingrich's notorious comparison of homosexuality to alcoholism as proof of his "profound misunderstanding" on the subject, but he regularly excuses Gingrich's mistakes and chalks them up to Newt's habit of being "incautious" in his public statements.²⁹ Though Gunderson had successfully opened a dialogue with Gingrich, his leader's insistence that social issues drive Party policy ahead of 1992 seriously troubled him. Even after Gunderson's resignation threat, Gingrich continued to work with

²⁸ *The Washington Blade* is a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender newspaper that serves the Washington D.C. metropolitan area.

²⁹Kim I. Mills, "Gingrich expresses thoughts on gays," *Fredericksburg Free-Lance Star*, November 24, 1994, sec. C. Gingrich's comparison of homosexuality to alcoholism was widely covered by the press and was originally reported in the *Washington Blade*.

vitriolic antigay leaders such as Paul Weyrich to form Republican strategy.³⁰ As his private life careened into his political one, Gunderson began to believe that “the party desperately needed some voices from the center... [and] I was one of the few people in Congress who could make a dramatic point about the offensiveness of it all.”³¹

Steve Gunderson held the position of Chief Deputy Whip under Gingrich through the 102nd Congress, but his publicly unannounced departure from the position on the opening day of the 103rd Congress cast him as “hero to some and villain to others.” Gunderson’s autobiography *House and Home: The political and personal journey of a gay Republican congressman and the man with whom he created a family* thoroughly recounts his challenging experience in Gingrich’s inner circle. Gunderson alleges Gingrich consistently disregarded his concerns over the negativity of their strategies and the emergence of “hate rhetoric” by conservative candidates in 1992. Gunderson said Gingrich repeatedly offered him “pep talks” instead of taking his strategy suggestions seriously, which made him feel alienated among his fellow minority party leaders.³² In his official press release regarding his strategic departure, Gunderson cited the Houston GOP convention as a sign that the House Republican leadership had ceased representing “mainstream Republicans in this country and even in the Congress.”³³

Though he had made his opposition to Gingrich’s strategy unapologetically public, Gunderson still cared about Gingrich’s perception of his resignation. Though he believed he had Gingrich’s private approval (“He understood—and, I think, subconsciously approved of —my gutsy move”), Gunderson found himself the target of

³⁰ Donald T. Critchlow and Nancy Maclean, *Debating the American Conservative Movement: 1945 to the Present*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 157-158.

³¹ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 164.

³² *Ibid*, 162-175.

³³ “Gunderson Steps Down as Chief Deputy Whip,” Press Release, January 4, 1993, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

unanticipated Republican criticism. He contends that conservative Republicans in Washington and elsewhere, many aware of his homosexuality, privately began to view him as sort of Republican “pariah.”³⁴ In the aftermath of his departure Gunderson banded together with roughly forty other “governing Republicans,” moderates who “resisted the takeover of the party by confrontational conservatives” in an informal organization called the Tuesday Lunch Bunch.³⁵ Gunderson admits he did not fully realize that by resigning his leadership post and publicly distancing himself from Gingrich’s aggressive agenda he had set himself up as “the prime symbol of moderate resistance to the right’s takeover of the party,” nor did he realize he was “laying the groundwork for what would be the first primary election challenge of my congressional career.”³⁶

Even after his departure from the House minority party leadership had blown over, Gunderson knew the simmering debate on gay soldiers in the United States Armed Forces would only further ostracize him from his conservative Republican colleagues. In September of 1993, Gunderson did not explicitly disclose his sexual orientation to his fellow House members with his passionate defense of the “don’t-ask, don’t-tell” compromise, but for Gunderson, “Who virtually everyone in Washington knew was homosexual, to condemn his own party’s opposition to gays in the military was an incautious thing to do... it was potential political suicide.” Gunderson’s speech, which included personal reflection on the 1991 effort by ACT UP and Queer Nation to out him in his home district, received many front page stories and a few positive opinion

³⁴ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

³⁵ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 176-188.

³⁶ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

editorials in the Wisconsin press.³⁷ Not unexpectedly, Gunderson's office was flooded with emotional and sometimes offensive letters from constituents. One letter from a man in Hudson, Wisconsin, suggested that his support for gays in the military was the result of "AIDS dementia." Though he had dodged questions about his personal life with some success in 1991, the question of Gunderson's sexuality reemerged as a potential political liability ahead of the 1994 midterm election.³⁸

³⁷ Gunderson's speech was during debate on the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1994, which occurred September 28, 1993. For an example of news coverage on Gunderson's speech, see Patrick Jasperse, "An introspective Gunderson takes stand for tolerance on gay rights," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 10, 1993.

³⁸ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 138.

POSTER BOY: 1994

Steve Gunderson wanted to retire after the 103rd Congress. He did not want public office to become a career, a mantra he repeated to supporters and opponents throughout the 1990s. His original plan had been to serve twelve years in congress, but “In 1992 I found myself running again, partly because I felt challenged by the nationwide anti-incumbent sentiment and partly out of a need to vindicate myself in the wake of the House banking scandal,” which had touched nearly everyone in Congress.³⁹ Gunderson shared that when 1994 came around, “I had already spent twenty two years in elective office at the state and federal levels. And I really longed for a more stable schedule, and a better work-life balance.”⁴⁰ While he was still mulling a congressional retirement separate faxes from conservative activists Don Brill and Chuck Lee, sent directly to Newt Gingrich’s Washington office, pushed Gunderson and his partner off the fence and into one final congressional campaign. The faxes, forwarded by Gingrich to Gunderson’s office the next day, signaled a growing disenchantment with Gunderson by members of the Eau Claire County Republican Party and a group called Concerned Republicans of Wisconsin. The letters warned that Gunderson’s homosexuality, coupled with alleged (and unspecified) public criticisms of Christians and the Bible, signaled a “departure from Republican values” that 3rd District Republicans would not support in 1994. Gunderson summed up the intent of the letters succinctly in *House and Home*: “You were okay before everybody knew you were a fag. Now everybody knows you’re a

³⁹ When the scandal over the widespread abuse of the private, unregulated House bank’s operation broke, Gunderson said he had not bounced any checks. The House ethics committee eventually identified twenty-two such checks from Gunderson. See Patrick Jasperse, “Obey, Gunderson bank woes deepen,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 17, 1992, sec. A.

⁴⁰ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

fag. And we don't want to be represented by a fag."⁴¹ Incensed, Gunderson decided that he could not let himself be driven out of Congress. "Irony of ironies," he mused. The right wing of his party had tried to drive him out of office, but "their tactics had only convinced us to run again." The warning shots fired by Brill and Lee had convinced Gunderson that, should he give in to their demands and opt out of the race, antigay factions in the Republican Party would use that victory as an example around the nation, "and neither of us [Gunderson nor Morris] wanted that to be my legacy."⁴² Gunderson and Morris steeled themselves for an eighth and final congressional campaign.

While his fellow Republicans worked to link themselves to Republican Whip Newt Gingrich's increasingly popular brand of conservative revivalism, Gunderson began to understand that his 1994 campaign would be a painfully personal affair. Rumors of a mounting conservative opposition in Eau Claire County compelled Gunderson to announce his candidacy on February 3rd, two months earlier than he ever had before. He sought to quash the insurgency by using his announcement to promise that this would be his final congressional campaign. That announcement did not have the impact Gunderson had hoped for; he now believes it actually encouraged his challengers to try harder to defeat him "while they still had the chance."⁴³ At Party caucuses in Wisconsin's 3rd District later that month, he admits he was "terrified" of the unfamiliar Christian-conservative constituency in attendance and worried he was being forsaken by his own party.⁴⁴ Over the course of the primary and general elections, no

⁴¹ Brill's letter was sent on behalf of a group called Concerned Republicans of Wisconsin. Chuck Lee sent his letter independently, and threatened to campaign against Gingrich in his Georgia district if he did not prevent another Gunderson candidacy.

⁴² Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 237-250.

⁴³ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

⁴⁴ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 250.

fewer than seven other candidates would vie for Gunderson's seat. Don Brill, a retired vocational education instructor who had faxed one of the anti-Gunderson letters to Gingrich, became the first Republican primary challenger Gunderson had faced since his first congressional campaign in 1980. Brill was joined by two third-party conservatives in challenging Gunderson: Perot Independent Mark Weinhold and Taxpayers Alliance Party candidate Chuck Lee, the other individual who had faxed his grievances to Gingrich directly.⁴⁵ While Gunderson was at work in Washington, these three conservative candidates began canvassing the 3rd congressional district, trying to convince Republican voters that it was time to bring their gay congressman home from Washington. Gunderson also learned that national news magazines were prepping stories on his conspicuous fight for political survival. Chandler Burr asked to profile both Gunderson and Morris for the *New York Times Magazine*, and Chris Bull, Washington reporter for the *Advocate*, told Gunderson that he planned to write an article focused on his sexuality. Not without reservations, Gunderson and Morris agreed to participate in both, fearing the absence of their involvement would only make the articles more damaging.

Steve Gunderson and his staff cautiously debated their campaign strategy for 1994. Emotional disagreements between his campaign managers and Morris occurred over the strategies Gunderson's campaign should take in response to both overt and veiled attacks against Gunderson's sexual orientation. Focus groups conducted by Frank Lutz, presidential candidate Ross Perot's former pollster, showed a high likelihood of voter abandonment should Gunderson go public with his homosexuality. Morris, though, felt strongly that Gunderson should use the personal attacks as

⁴⁵ Four candidates entered the Democratic primary election.

opportunities to speak out against discrimination and remind the Republican Party of its historic role in fighting prejudice. Morris, unlike Gunderson's staff, cared little about the outcome of the election. While his family and staff fought over strategy, Gunderson quietly fretted. "For the first time since 1980," Gunderson admitted, "I was hesitant, reticent, and actually very scared about going back to my district to campaign."⁴⁶

Gunderson's unexpected 1994 primary challenge arose from value-based opposition to homosexuality woven deeply into American faith and culture. Scholars have established that homosexuality has acquired a kind of centrality in American culture, symbolizing for many a transgression against which notions of normalcy are defined.⁴⁷ Analyses of the popular use of language about gays, the portrayal of gay and lesbian people in the media, and the exclusivity of certain legal rights provide evidence that an antigay system of prejudice not only existed in 1994, but remains a fixture in American life.⁴⁸ That system of prejudice, for Gunderson, expressed itself as a coalition of 3rd District constituents whose political interests surfaced when they learned their Republican congressional representative was gay.⁴⁹ In Wisconsin and across the nation, conservative political activists effectively used the theatrical protests and literature of Gunderson's gay activist critics, *Queer Nation* and *ACT UP*, to introduce homosexuality to evangelical and Catholic voters in stark terms, painting homosexuals as social deviants worthy of both moral and political opposition.⁵⁰ As popular religious coalitions fixed their eyes on "a national religious establishment, or, more specifically, a Christian

⁴⁶ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 264-273.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (University of Chicago Press; 1999), 1-26.

⁴⁸ Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith. *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 31-32.

⁴⁹ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 264-265.

⁵⁰ Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*, 92.

civil religion,” local resistance to an eighth Gunderson term was hardened by the religious convictions of many 3rd District Republicans.⁵¹

Other historians interested in American conservatism are now focusing on the emergence of this so-called Religious Right electoral group as a significant event in United States political history.⁵² Historians and political scientists credit President Ronald Reagan for tapping into a reservoir of anxiety suffered by Christians over social issues and incorporating the Religious Right as a dependable electoral fixture in Republican politics.⁵³ Queer theorists argue a symbiotic relationship between the Republican Party and the Christian Right, forged by Reagan, helped consolidate conservative Protestant political influence across the United States beginning in 1980. On homosexuality, theorists contend that conservative Christian fundamentalists have built an “efficient institutionalized system of cultural reproduction, propagating a cosmology that constructs homosexuality as one element in a semiotic chain signifying moral decline.”⁵⁴ Though many prominent Republicans have had uneasy relationships with Religious Right organizations, Reagan attempted to satisfy the Religious Right through his government appointments, executive actions, policy commitments, and selections for the federal judiciary, effectively moving the country to the right on social issues throughout the decade.⁵⁵ Reagan’s successor, President George H. W. Bush, drew on antigay rhetoric to appease the powerful Religious Right element of the Republican

⁵¹ Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 5-6.

⁵² Sarah Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, ed. Douglas Kellner, *Critical Perspectives* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 161-180.

⁵³ Donald Crichtlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 186.

⁵⁴ Barry D. Adam, “The Defense of Marriage Act and American Exceptionalism: The “Gay Marriage” Panic in the United States,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (April, 2003), 264.

⁵⁵ David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 205-206.

Party in 1992.⁵⁶ Leafing through the drafted speeches that litter his congressional papers, it is clear that Gunderson often reflected fondly on the words, deeds, and political philosophy of President Reagan.⁵⁷ But to be sure, it was precisely the same “Christian Coalition types” Gunderson feared and vilified in Wisconsin that Ronald Reagan had inspired to political action. Though many of these new faces likely supported Gunderson’s work on behalf of education, health care, and agriculture, these men and women stood firmly opposed to the idea that an increasingly out, gay Republican still wanted to serve as their congressional representative.⁵⁸

California Representative Bob Dornan’s March 24, 1994 accusations on the House chamber floor stripped Gunderson of his remaining anonymity. In a contentious debate on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Dornan took issue with Gunderson’s stance on an amendment offered by Republican Mel Hancock of Missouri. Hancock’s amendment sought to prohibit schools receiving federal funds from creating programs that encouraged or supported homosexuality “as a positive lifestyle alternative” and Gunderson had tried, unsuccessfully, to get Hancock to alter its language. In his fiery rebuttal to Gunderson’s opposition, Dornan warned of an American moral and cultural “meltdown” presaged by attitudes like Gunderson’s and branded homosexuality a root cause of child pornography, drive-by shootings, gang assaults, and carjackings in the United States. Dornan then turned his sights on his Republican colleague, referencing a speech Gunderson had given at a “huge homosexual dinner” twelve days earlier and accusing Gunderson of having “a revolving door on his

⁵⁶ Crichtlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy*, 218-237.

⁵⁷ Boxes 2, 10, 32, 34, 35, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI. I found many hand-written and typed drafts of speeches from the 1980s that reference or quote Ronald Reagan, though a noticeable shift to Abraham Lincoln seems to occur at an indeterminate time in the 1990s.

⁵⁸ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 249-250.

closet.”⁵⁹ Dornan later agreed to retract his speech from the Congressional Record, but his comments to the press in the hours and days following the incident were unapologetic. He told the *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram* that he was tired of Gunderson’s “lectures” and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* that conservatives had a moral obligation to “expose... and destroy” gay Republicans like Gunderson.⁶⁰ Dornan’s hostility and commentary are revealing. Gunderson’s homosexuality was not a directly causal agent of Dornan’s outburst—it was his willingness, as a Republican, to critique heterosexist orthodoxy that had sent Dornan into a rage.

Though Gunderson provided no immediate public comment on the Dornan incident, he had already made public an official press release concerning his attendance at the event, a benefit hosted by the Baltimore chapter of the Human Rights Campaign Fund.⁶¹ That press release reveals the speech’s intent as a defense of “middle America’s perspective on civil rights issues.”⁶² In his keynote address, Gunderson tasked gay activists with articulating a more effective case for political recognition from the American mainstream. Gunderson told attendees that “gays need to better understand Americans’ perspective” and called for a greater dialogue between the groups. Gunderson attempted to shield himself from conservative criticism by using his address to stress that, as a Republican supportive of gay rights, he was in a unique position to issue an important challenge that gay activists meet Middle America halfway. For

⁵⁹ Bob Dornan, US House of Representatives, House Session, March 24, 1994, C-SPAN, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/HouseSession970>. Representative Dornan asked for and was granted unanimous consent from the House to withdraw his remarks against Gunderson, though the C-SPAN Video Archive still holds the contentious debate.

⁶⁰ Gunderson, *House and Home*, 11.

⁶¹ Frank A. Aoukoffer, “Gunderson silent on attack by fellow Republican in House,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 25, 1994. Kevin Kennedy, spokesman for Gunderson, told the media on the day following the Dornan incident that Gunderson would not comment on the matter.

⁶² “Rep. Gunderson calls for tolerance and diversity,” March 12, 1994, Office of Representative Steve Gunderson, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

members of the HRCF, his attendance itself signaled a willingness to help frame their issues in a way more Americans might find palatable. Gunderson's careful attempt to embrace a fuller public identity and make good on Gingrich's big-tent aspirations had been viciously slandered by one of his own Republican colleagues.

Nearly a year later, at another Human Rights Campaign Fund event, Steve Gunderson blamed the media's "consumption of the politics of sensationalism" for encouraging a popular misunderstanding of his purpose and impact at the Baltimore event. He charged the Wisconsin press with being "absolutely consumed" by that particular speech "not because of the things I said but because I mentioned Rob [Morris]'s name." Since 1992, he protested, "after giving probably one hundred plus speeches on health care, fifty speeches on education and forty speeches on agriculture the only thing my district received any press coverage of any significance on was the four speeches I gave on gay issues."⁶³

Gunderson's relationship with the Wisconsin and Minnesota press had grown tenuous by 1991, when reporters from the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* and the Milwaukee *Journal* attempted to make a story out of Gunderson's private life after gay rights activists attempted to out him in his home district.⁶⁴ The press's preoccupation, though, was certainly exacerbated by the confusing answers Gunderson sometimes provided when questioned about his sexual orientation.⁶⁵ Conditioned by old habits and the unflappable belief that his personal life ought to have no bearing on his political one, Gunderson retreated from the public eye in the wake of the Dornan incident. Though

⁶³ Representative Steve Gunderson, speech to the Human Rights Campaign Fund, Audio, March 5, 1995, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁶⁴ The effort to out Gunderson in Wisconsin was conducted by a Minneapolis gay rights group, who showed up at a parade in La Crosse to distribute literature that alleged Gunderson was gay.

⁶⁵ "Congressman Rejects Gay-Rights Activists' Demand To Disclose His Sexual Orientation," St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, July 22, 1991, sec. A. In this example, a reporter asked Gunderson if he was gay; Gunderson said he could not answer the question because "he couldn't prove it" to the reporter one way or the other.

the Wisconsin press had reported on Dornan's attack, Gunderson continued to treat the topic of his sexuality as if it were old dynamite on the campaign trail. His congressional colleagues had roundly rebuked Dornan for his outburst, but Gunderson knew he badly needed to shift the attention back to his congressional successes and his conservative credentials. Gunderson asked Newt Gingrich to come to Wisconsin to speak at his April 16th campaign kick-off dinner with that specific purpose in mind.⁶⁶ Gunderson wanted to show his 3rd District Republican opposition that, despite his resignation from Gingrich's leadership team (and his homosexuality), he still had the support of the architect and voice of the conservative movement in the national party.

Newt Gingrich used that speech to call for Republican Party unity ahead of the midterm election, but his unequivocal endorsement did not convince Gunderson's Republican detractors to reconsider their opposition. After news emerged, on the day of Gingrich's visit, that Don Brill would oppose him in the Republican primary, Gunderson learned that major write-ups were also being prepared by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*.⁶⁷ *Time* sent a reporter to Wisconsin to cover Gunderson's 1994 campaign and planned to run the story alongside a destructive pre-election piece on Gingrich. Though the piece was never published, the article would have suggested the Republican Party's new proclivity for taking heterosexist stands was destroying one of its most talented congressmen.⁶⁸

As summer began, Gunderson's electoral challenge only grew more intense. The concerted Christian-conservative effort to overwhelm the Eau Claire County Republican Party and "torpedo" the Gunderson reelection campaign was now popularly being

⁶⁶ Richard Mial, "Gingrich speaks at dinner for Gunderson," *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 17, 1994, sec. C.

⁶⁷ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 303.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 304. The *Time* piece was never published, a fact Gunderson attributed to the relatively "boring" nature of politicking in western Wisconsin.

documented by journalists covering the campaign.⁶⁹ From the outset, Brill refused to debate Gunderson. At a weekend Republican Party meeting in June, Brill refused to sign a GOP unity statement offered by Republican Party 3rd District chair Doug Knight. The clean campaign pledge did not mention Gunderson specifically, but Knight was backing the incumbent Gunderson and wanted to discourage any viciousness that might sour the public and spoil his party's chances of holding the congressional seat, regardless of primary victor.⁷⁰ Knight also knew that a Republican running to the right of Gunderson would probably not be elected in the general election. Brill's antagonism was not confined to his interactions with Gunderson. Brill's campaign literature warned of homosexual efforts to "increase their lobby... through promotion and indoctrination" and suggested gay Americans deserved to be "disciplined."⁷¹ Brill's antigay stances were designed to appeal to Christian conservatives in Eau Claire County, a local example of a national electoral pattern in 1994. Though Christian Coalition leaders insisted they intended to remain independent from specific political parties, the movement's growing legitimacy, access to organizational resources, and key role in nomination and platform politics made it one of the most important groups that gathered under the GOP umbrella in 1994.⁷² Nationwide, Christian Coalition organizers converted unease over schools, the government, and popular culture into a grassroots political movement that attracted even moderately religious Christians. In the 1994 elections, the Coalition was involved in one hundred and twenty House races, distributing some forty million voter guides to Christian voters. At the local level, Coalition members provided training

⁶⁹ Craig Gilbert, "On Politics: Religious Right asserts its presence in the state," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 23, 1994, sec. B.

⁷⁰ Associated Press, "2 Won't Sign Pledge?" *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, June 27, 1994, sec. A.

⁷¹ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 276.

⁷² Michael H. Crespin, Suzanne M. Gold, and David W. Rohde, "Ideology, Electoral Incentives, and Congressional Politics: The Republican House Class of 1994," *American Politics Research* 34, no. 2 (2006): 135-158.

sessions for those unfamiliar with the structure, rules, and strategies of Republican nomination politics.⁷³ At the Eau Claire caucus, Gunderson said he faced an unprecedented “family values army” three hundred strong. They were there, he was sure, because they had been led to believe by Christian Coalition activists that the only way to “save their children from the influence of predatory homosexuals... and to save America from degradation was to show up at these caucuses” and compel the Republican Party to do their will. Later that evening, Gunderson was not recognized at the opening dinner of the caucus, an “outrageous lapse in decency and protocol” which stunned both Gunderson and his supporters. A surging, national, pro-Republican movement was, on a local level, doing its best to deny a passionate Lutheran Republican incumbent’s candidacy.⁷⁴

On July 1, 1994, John McCormick of *Newsweek* called Steve Gunderson to read him the draft he was readying for print. He felt Gunderson deserved to hear the article in full before it went to press. McCormick’s article, “Poster Boy,” was a bitter pill. It faults the Republican Party for inadequately handling the question of Gunderson’s sexual orientation but finds little sympathy for Gunderson, whom McCormick accuses of “trying to have it both ways.” McCormick said Gunderson could not both criticize the heterosexist element of his Party and argue that his sexual orientation was explicitly personal.⁷⁵ Gunderson picked up that issue of *Newsweek* while campaigning in

⁷³ Balz and Brownstein, *Storming the Gates*, 310-312.

⁷⁴ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 250-251.

⁷⁵ John McCormick, “Poster Boy,” *Newsweek*, July 11, 1994. McCormick’s article is included in a longer piece by Eleanor Clift called “The Year of the Smear.” McCormick took his title from a quote by Gunderson opponent Chuck Lee, who publicly charged Gunderson was “rapidly becoming the poster boy for the homosexual movement.”

Platteville, increasingly aware that his effort to be more open with voters was creating volunteer shortages and a serious fund-raising problem for his campaign.⁷⁶

Gunderson's 1994 primary race had become an opportunity to symbolically postpone the emergence of an openly gay Republican candidate for major political office. As his team approached the primary, however, it became clear that Gunderson had not experienced a full-scale Republican revolt from his candidacy. Rather, he was being subjected to a challenge by a vocal minority opposition emboldened by an intense national family values movement in American politics that encouraged Republican candidates to take conservative social issue stances and conservative voters to expect that kind of Republican candidate in the 1994.⁷⁷ The conservative sweep of Republicans into the House of Representatives in 1994 was not a permanent party realignment, nor was it a Republican Party commitment to forever stand against gay rights issues. Gunderson believed that the vehemence leveled by Brill's campaign could be credited to a desperate effort to symbolically "stop the gay movement within the Republican Party," but by remaining in the race, Gunderson had confirmed that Wisconsin's 3rd District Republican voters did not share Brill's concern.⁷⁸ Gunderson defeated Brill in the September Republican primary by a margin of three to one.

The Gunderson campaign shifted its attention to the general election, where hurdles to a final congressional term remained. Only weeks after his primary victory, Chris Bull's *Advocate* article, "Outward Bound," hit 3rd District newsstands. Instead of portraying him like the "gay hero" he had hoped it would, Gunderson said the article

⁷⁶ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 279-281.

⁷⁷ Critchlow and Maclean, *Debating the American Conservative Movement*, 158.

⁷⁸ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

was tantamount to “celebrity gossip.”⁷⁹ Bull suggested that Gunderson’s refusal to acknowledge his homosexuality stemmed from a regrettable conviction that, by formally coming out, he would necessarily marginalize his Wisconsin constituents. The article, which focuses primarily on Gunderson’s relationship with his partner Rob Morris, makes it explicitly clear that Gunderson is gay.⁸⁰ Though the Wisconsin press covered Gunderson’s outing in the *Advocate*, Gunderson’s campaign effectively minimized the article’s impact, even generating a successful half-hour television program in which Gunderson respectfully answered questions about his long term relationship with Morris from curious 3rd District residents.⁸¹ Two unanticipated events, however, still threatened to upset Gunderson’s general election candidacy. Harvey Stower, now Gunderson’s official Democratic opponent, officially struck a hard-line stance on abortion and secured the backing of Wisconsin Right to Life Committee, an endorsement that had already been promised to Gunderson.⁸² Livid, Gunderson feared the Religious Right element, which now backed third party candidate Chuck Lee, might actually shift their support to Stower as a result. Later that September, longtime Democratic Representative David Obey signed a widely circulated letter soliciting financial support for Stower, a betrayal of what Gunderson called the “gentlemen’s agreement” among the Wisconsin delegation to not campaign against other sitting members. Despite these setbacks, Gunderson said he received a surprisingly “tremendous reception” at the Oktoberfest parade in La Crosse. Though they had put his campaigners on the defensive, neither the *Newsweek* nor the *Advocate* pieces had a measurably negative impact on the 3rd District’s perception of Gunderson. The

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰Chris Bull, “Outward Bound,” *Advocate*, October 4, 1994, 40-45.

⁸¹ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 302.

⁸² Ibid, 297-298.

enthusiasm gap separating Gunderson's detractors and his actual voting constituents had narrowed considerably by October.⁸³

With only four weeks left before the midterm election, Steve Gunderson came out on his own terms. Carefully vetted by both Gunderson and Morris, Chandler Burr's *New York Times Magazine* article took a sympathetic view of Gunderson's personal-political dilemma. Burr told readers Gunderson was doing his best to fit into a Republican Party he hardly recognized anymore—less as a gay man than as a pro-business, socially moderate, fiscally conservative Reagan Republican. Titled “Congressman (R), Wisconsin. Fiscal conservative. Social moderate. Gay.,” Burr's piece pinned Gunderson's decision to quit his Deputy Whip post directly to the 1992 GOP Convention, highlighting Gunderson's characterization of the event as a display of Republican “intolerance and hatred across the board.” Burr also identified Gunderson's ambiguity regarding his sexuality as a product of a genuine desire to stay focused on the needs of his congressional district. Analyzing Gunderson's tough race for an eighth congressional term, Burr said that Gunderson presented a real problem for his Republican leadership, maintaining that “pragmatic Republican leaders actively support Gunderson and his fellow moderates while not rejecting the party's ideological right wing, but they can't have it both ways forever.” Chandler even secured and included commentary from Gingrich, who credited Gunderson for possessing the “inner strength” to toe the line between “the gay community... [and] the conservative community” and acknowledged, “I really admire him [Gunderson] a lot.”⁸⁴ By placing the responsibility of a potential loss of a congressional seat firmly on the shoulders of Gingrich and the right

⁸³ Ibid, 299-307.

⁸⁴ Chandler Burr, “Congressman (R), Wisconsin. Fiscal conservative. Social moderate. Gay,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 16, 1994. Gunderson's take on article can be found in *House and Home*, 306-307.

wing of the Republican Party, Burr had done what McCormick and Bull had not. He had highlighted Gunderson's commitment to the issues of his congressional district and asked his audience to recognize the difficulties of being the first openly gay Republican congressman in United States history.

Gunderson's official coming out did not lose him the editorial support of regional Wisconsin newspapers ahead of the general midterm election. The *Milwaukee Journal*, the Saint Paul *Pioneer Press*, the *Wisconsin State Journal*, the Eau Claire *Leader-Telegram*, and the La Crosse *Tribune* all endorsed Gunderson over Stower. The caterwaul of opposition to Gunderson's homosexuality had retreated considerably, and many newspaper opinion editors recognized Gunderson for handling the hostility of his primary challenge and its corresponding national attention with grace. In addition, the *Milwaukee Journal* wrote an encouraging pre-election piece that reported most voters believed Gunderson's personal life should not be an issue on Election Day. The authors noted, "Not one of two dozen voters interviewed at random... said that Gunderson's personal life was a factor."⁸⁵ As his campaign wound down, Gunderson said he had been "in the trenches fighting long enough" for Wisconsinites to at least respect his endurance.⁸⁶ On November eighth, polling by Gunderson's campaign indicated that nearly ninety percent of voters were aware of Gunderson's sexuality when they cast their ballots. Gunderson won the general election, defeating his Democratic and conservative third-party challengers with a comfortable 56% of the total vote. He had survived the conservative blitz of 1994, a time he would later call the "meanest time in

⁸⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, November 1, 1994.

⁸⁶ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 306.

politics... the politics of personal destruction."⁸⁷ He had received a vote of support after an intensely personal campaign that drew unwanted attention to his personal life and attracted a curious national audience. In the months following their victory, Gunderson and Morris began writing their shared memoir, *House and Home*. They hoped their story could challenge the kinds of gay stereotypes that had troubled Gunderson since his time as Newt Gingrich's Chief Deputy Whip, confident Gunderson had faced his final congressional campaign.

⁸⁷ Representative Steve Gunderson, interviewed by Mary Matalin and Dee Dee Myers, *Equal Time*, MSNBC, 1995, Box 8, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

REPUBLICAN REVOLUTIONARY: 1995

While Steve Gunderson had been fighting for his political life, a conservative revolution was occurring in American politics. Republican candidates rode a wave of unprecedented electoral support to claim majority control in both the House of Representatives and the Senate for the first time in forty years. Not a single Republican incumbent lost his or her seat in the election. The Republican leadership had refined the message crafted in 1992, ultimately muting the social-issues focus which had prompted Gunderson's leadership resignation.⁸⁸ Instead, they had embraced genuine economic and legislative policy reform in their "bold plan to change the nation," the Contract with America.⁸⁹ The Contract was the House Republican leadership's method to unify the party's diverse and growing factions, including "moralists hostile to dominant social trends they saw as evil, enterprisers hostile to dominant economic policy they saw as foolish, and moderates ... hostile to dominant congressional procedures and norms they saw as unfair." Gingrich and his team used the Contract to effectively nationalize the 1994 elections.⁹⁰ Though the Contract (which pledged House Republicans to vote on popular institutional reforms) generated support from the American public, journalists, historians, and political scientists describe the Contract as a set of slogans written to draw the GOP caucus together — not a document many incumbent House Republicans expected they would actually have to act on.

Though he signed the Contract, multiple written accounts note Steve Gunderson's lack of enthusiasm for it. At the signing ceremony in late September, out of

⁸⁸ Balz and Brownstein, *Storming the Gates*, 274-275.

⁸⁹ Ed Gillespie and Bob Schellhas, *Contract with America: The Bold Plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Armey and the House Republicans to Change a Nation* (New York: Random House, 1994).

⁹⁰ Koopman, *Hostile Takeover*, 142.

sight of cameras, a number of older Republicans, including Gunderson, reportedly “snickered at all the extravagant language being heaped on the Contract by their leaders.” Many Republican incumbents believed the Contract was simply an act of political theater. Sometime during the signing ceremony, Gunderson openly admitted to a reporter that, “We didn’t take it seriously.”⁹¹ In the months following, however, Gunderson began to publically praise the Contract for omitting the divisive social issues that had been central to the hostile strategy direction he had ostensibly supported in 1992.⁹² Gunderson has since taken his support further, even connecting his exit from the Deputy Whip post to the Contract with America’s disciplined focus on economic and regulatory issues. In *House and Home* he implies that, had he not committed his act of public defiance two years earlier, the Republican leadership would have crafted a Contract that would have focused on homosexuality, abortion, and religion.⁹³ While it is difficult to prove any such relationship exists, it is important to remember the influential role Gunderson played for Gingrich in the Minority Whip race of 1989. Preference for unanimous endorsement by Republican incumbents and candidates, coupled with the relative uncertainty of the balance of power in the 104th Congress, suggests Gingrich and the other authors of the Contract had Gunderson and his “governing Republicans” in mind when they crafted their historic pledge.⁹⁴

The Republican Revolution is a striking turning point in American political history and confirmation that “reaction... [as] the foundation of modern conservatism”

⁹¹ Dan Balz and Ronald Brownstein, *Storming the Gates: Protest Politics and the Republican Revival* (USA: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 42-43.

⁹² Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

⁹³ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 178.

⁹⁴ Douglas L. Koopman, *Hostile Takeover*, 142-147. See Koopman’s work for a more thorough analysis of the construction and actual impact of the Contract.

is a tactical and effective electoral strategy.⁹⁵ Though political historians have only recently begun to evaluate the movement, the dramatic Republican gains of 1994 embody the eclipse of New Deal liberalism by a resurgent conservative ethic, a political shift fortified by Ronald Reagan's presidential victory in 1980. Gingrich's efforts to foster partisan confrontation are rooted in the Reagan decade, a political era which weakened Republican moderates like Gunderson, radicalized party policy, explicitly committed Republicans to Christian values, and narrowed the boundaries of tolerable disagreement within the Party on social issues. Gingrich's activist style of leadership, sanctioned by the 1989 Minority Party Whip vote, was a highly effective and directly causal agent of Republican success in 1994. The anti-majority strategies adopted by the Republican minority after Gingrich's Whip victory, honed during the presidency of George H. W. Bush, hit a crescendo with the Republican congressional takeover that few could have expected; Gingrich had become "Reagan... at warp speed."⁹⁶

The Contract with America was the culmination of a decade-long effort to effectively unify the Party under Newt Gingrich's activist banner. Gingrich effectively used the Contract as the foundation for a nationalized Republican midterm campaign that stressed an ideological commitment to less government, more personal responsibility, and family values, a message which propelled him to the position of Speaker of the House when Michel stepped aside. During his first term as Speaker, Gingrich effectively centralized power, controlled the larger Party agenda, and succeeded, along with seventy four freshman congressmen, in polarizing a majority of

⁹⁵ Charles W. Dunn and David J. Woodward, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 12-15.

⁹⁶ Steve M. Gillon, *The Pact*, 54. The quote is from conservative activist Grover Norquist.

representatives toward the right wing of the Republican Party.⁹⁷ In Gingrich, the American conservative movement found a leader to unite its factions and spread the message of a new, national Republican vision.

Fresh off his commanding reelection, Steve Gunderson sought to incorporate his political principles into Gingrich's vision for the 104th Congress. Because the urgent need for gay people to make their presence felt in the new Republican House was "dramatically underlined several times in 1995," Gunderson, for the first time, brought his full identity with him to Congress. Certain he had faced his final election challenge, he began to openly challenge the pervasively antigay sentiments and policy positions of his House Republican colleagues. As the veneer of the Republican Revolution began to crack, Gunderson emerged as a representative out of step with his leadership, a Republican reporters could depend on to articulate that all was not perfect in Gingrich's new majority. With more microphones on Republicans than ever before Gunderson kept himself busy in 1995 criticizing a Party long out of practice in handling the active attention of news reporters. In his book *Lessons Learned*, Gingrich admits that his leadership team had not prepared to effectively manage the news media after winning control over the House.⁹⁸ In the first such major incident of the 104th Congress, the new House Majority Leader, Dick Armey of Texas, inadvertently called Representative Barney Frank, a gay Democrat from Massachusetts, "Barney Fag." Although Armey immediately apologized, insisting the remark was accidental, his critics alleged that his words epitomized a prevailing Republican animosity toward gay Americans. Reporters

⁹⁷ Randall Strahan and Daniel J. Palazzolo, "The Gingrich Effect," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): 89-114.

⁹⁸ Gingrich, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way*, 75-76.

sought out Gunderson for perspective, and the story only faded when he personally vouched for Armev's tolerant attitude toward his own homosexuality.⁹⁹

The impact of Gunderson's emergence as gay rights spokesman was not only reserved for those Republicans in his own congressional chamber. Gunderson publicly wrote his party's chief presidential candidate, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, to challenge his rejection of a \$1,000 campaign contribution from a Log Cabin Republican organization. In his letter, Gunderson asked if Dole would also prefer not receive his public endorsement and support due to his homosexuality.¹⁰⁰ The Bob Dole incident attracted intense media interest and catapulted portions of Gunderson's letter onto the front page of the *New York Times*.¹⁰¹ After Dole called Gunderson up to apologize and affirm his acceptance of gay Republicans, Gunderson issued a positive press release reiterating his steadfast support for Dole's candidacy.¹⁰² Gunderson later reflected, "Even more than my resignation from the Whip job, my letter to Bob Dole put Republicans on notice about antigay prejudice."¹⁰³ After Dole's mea culpa, Gunderson targeted another Republican presidential candidate, Pat Buchanan. Following Buchanan's strong showing against Bob Dole in early Iowa Caucus polling, Gunderson issued a press release that warned his fellow Republicans, "No one will drive moderates, women, minorities and the young away from our party more than Buchanan."¹⁰⁴ Four days later, news broke that Pat Buchannan's presidential campaign co-chair, Larry

⁹⁹ Gunderson, *House and Home*, 321-323. Armev repaid Gunderson for his timely support by placing the reauthorization of the Ryan White CARE Act on the Suspension Calendar, allowing the AIDS funding allocation bill to breeze through the House without attracting "hateful, homophobic" amendments.

¹⁰⁰ "Letter to Majority Leader Senator Bob Dole," September 6, 1995, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

¹⁰¹ *New York Times*, September 8, 1995.

¹⁰² "Statement of Rep. Steve Gunderson to the reply of Senator and Presidential Candidate Bob Dole regarding campaign contributions," September 7, 1995, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

¹⁰³ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 323.

¹⁰⁴ "Statement of Rep. Steve Gunderson," February 13, 1996, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI

Pratt, held ties to white supremacist and militia groups. The Associated Press used a quote from Gunderson in their story, which garnered national attention: "No one advocates the politics of prejudice, intolerance, and hatred more than Pat Buchanan."¹⁰⁵ It had been four years since the Republican Party Convention in Houston, but Gunderson had gotten his chance to respond to Buchanan's unfriendly rhetoric.

Though he remained dedicated to his committee assignments, opening up about his identity allowed Gunderson a unique opportunity to become a congressional leader on gay rights issues in the 104th Congress. His standing as the only openly gay Republican in Congress allowed him footing from which to pitch strategy and policy battles in the new Republican House. In one example, Gunderson singularly lobbied his Party leadership to accept a controversial \$5,000 donation from the Human Rights Campaign in the fall of 1995.¹⁰⁶ Though right wing representatives, including Gunderson critic Bob Dornan, pressured the Republican leadership to return the money, Gingrich accepted the donation and publicly thanked the HRC. In July of 1995, Gunderson was able to secure a "strong and...surprising commitment by the Republicans to Ryan White," an AIDS funding bill which provided aid to cities, states, clinics and individuals with the disease.¹⁰⁷ Gunderson was never more popular with the news media than in the 104th Congress. He went on NBC's *Politics with Chris Matthews*, Fox's *Fox Morning News*, and CNBC's *Equal Time* in the first months of 1995 to talk about his now public sexual orientation and his Party's new congressional majority. He suggested the new Republican House majority offered moderates a new opportunity to emerge as party leaders, spoke critically and dismissively of the rightward drift of the

¹⁰⁵ Knight-Ridder, "Aide leaves Buchanan camp: report links him to white supremacist groups." *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, February 16, 1996, sec A.

¹⁰⁶ The Human Rights Campaign dropped the word Fund from its title in 1995.

¹⁰⁷ David Dunlap, "Gay Leaders Resisting Attacks Against Gains," *New York Times*, February 12, 1995. Ryan White refers to The Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency Act.

Party, and explained his decision to go public about his sexual identity with clarity. "I spent fourteen years in the Congress believing that ... it didn't and shouldn't matter. I came to the conclusion that with the stereotypes it did matter. I had to change it so that in the future it wouldn't matter."¹⁰⁸ At the height of the 104th Congress, Gunderson even took a turn presiding over the House, a moment that would have been unimaginable in the 103rd Congress. "That says more and does more in changing the image of the gay and lesbian community than people have any idea," Gunderson said. Even his Republican colleagues, he believed, "have become very comfortable with me as a professional."¹⁰⁹ Much had changed since his outing by Dornan and Steve Gunderson was set to retire on top.

¹⁰⁸ See Steve Gunderson, interview by Chris Matthews, *Politics with Chris Matthews*, VHS, MSNBC, September 7, 1995, Box 8, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI; Steve Gunderson, interview by Chris Wallace, *Fox News Sunday*, VHS, Fox, January 17, 1995, Box 8, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

¹⁰⁹ Joe Patrick Bean, "Gay GOP congressman challenges party," *San Antonio Express-News*, August 1, 1996, sec. A.

RESIGNATION: 1996

In early 1996, Steve Gunderson and Rob Morris published their book *House and Home*. They did not anticipate that Gunderson was soon to become embroiled in what 3rd District Republican Party Chair Doug Knight would later call the “weirdest race” he’d ever seen. With the Republicans somewhat surprisingly in control of the House in the 104th Congress, the June death of Republican Bill Emerson, Missouri, left Gunderson second in line to Chair the House Committee on Agriculture; he later accepted the committee vice-chairmanship.¹¹⁰ When committee chairman Pat Roberts of Kansas decided to run for the United States Senate, Gunderson, who had publicly vowed to retire, found himself in a position to chair the committee should Republicans hold their House majority 105th Congress. Local dairy interests, understanding the major influence Gunderson would have over American agricultural policy, immediately asked Gunderson to reconsider and seek a ninth term. Reflecting fondly, Gunderson shared, “I can’t even begin to tell you the number of folks who I didn’t even know – small family farmers from all across the district – who came up to me at different events pleading with me to run again.”¹¹¹ Gunderson, who privately desired the chairmanship, now publicly refused to rule out another campaign. Citing his earlier pledge to retire, a 3rd District Republican Party effort to prevent Gunderson from reneging stiffened in resistance. Many Republican officials across the state admitted frustration with Gunderson’s unclear intentions. They argued “the Gunderson guessing-game” was unfair to others who had taken him at his word and signaled their interest in the 3rd

¹¹⁰ “Gunderson Named Vice-Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee,” July 23, 1996, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

¹¹¹ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

District Republican nomination. More so than ever, local oppositional Republicans perceived Gunderson a single-issue candidate. Though he remained dedicated to his regular committee assignments, he had also embraced a heightened gay rights profile in the 104th Congress, a fact reiterated when Gunderson gave an impassioned and widely covered speech in which he asked his colleagues to take the “meanness out of the Defense of Marriage Act” at the height of the write-in clamor.¹¹² Gunderson had pledged to not to run after 1994 but admitted he had not expected to be presented with such a “million to one” opportunity; he held that his pledge was irrelevant given the “amazing” change in circumstances.¹¹³ He made no move, though, to secure a place on the September Republican primary ballot despite an emerging network of support for a ninth Gunderson term. On April 27, the day before the 3rd District Congressional Republican caucus, Gunderson officially asked his supporters to drop the cause.¹¹⁴ He cited an earlier pledge to former state legislator Jim Harsdorf (who had emerged as the Republican front-runner in the race, sans Gunderson) in which he had promised not to enter the primary should Harsdorf remain committed to running. Gunderson also cited his refusal to endure another hostile primary, this time against Harsdorf. “Obviously, changed circumstances could justify such a decision. But it is quite another to change the conditions by which I would reconsider. Therefore, I will not reconsider.”¹¹⁵

Rather than subside, support for Gunderson grew louder over the summer of 1996. A genuine grassroots effort to encourage 3rd District voters to write Steve

¹¹² “Gunderson Tells Colleagues Take ‘Meanness’ Out of Defense of Marriage,” July 12, 1996, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ “Rep Gunderson speech on decision not to run for reelection, achievements during tenure, etc,” Audio, April 27, 1996, Box 8, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

¹¹⁵ “Statement of Rep. Steve Gunderson,” April 26, 1996, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

Gunderson in for the Republican nomination took shape. Tim Koxlien, spokesman for the Committee to Write In Steve Gunderson, said, “The focus we have—even though Steve Gunderson is an excellent legislator and has done a great job—is that this [the House Agriculture Committee chairmanship] is the most important position for Wisconsin that anyone in Congress could have.”¹¹⁶ Harsdorf officially filed his intent-to-run papers with the Wisconsin Election Board in early July, with rumors of a Gunderson reconsideration swirling.¹¹⁷ Despite the emergence of a network of support, he kept his pledge to Harsdorf and did not file his paperwork by the July 10 deadline.¹¹⁸ At Gunderson’s request, the Committee to Write In Steve Gunderson commissioned a telephone survey of likely voters over a late July weekend. That survey, conducted by American Viewpoint, revealed sixty three percent of Republican voters would cast a write-in vote for Gunderson, a boon to the small but devoted group of supporters.¹¹⁹ Most Republicans in the survey group believed having their representative serve as House Agriculture Committee Chairman was “very important” and only a third thought Gunderson’s personal life was relevant to the race. In addition, the survey found high voter approval of Gunderson among 3rd District constituents.¹²⁰ Money, in the form of the Agriculture Committee chairmanship, trumped moral values in the eyes of many Wisconsinites. At the national level, Gunderson received the financial support of the Human Rights Campaign and the endorsement of Candace Gingrich, the gay sister of

¹¹⁶ Robin Toner, “Political Briefing; The Campaigns for Congress,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1996,

¹¹⁷ “Harsdorf Files Petition, Makes it Official,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 3, 1996. sec B.

¹¹⁸ Patrick Jasperse, “Gunderson Leaves Door Open for Write in Bid,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 10, 1996, sec A.

¹¹⁹ AP, “Survey: Gunderson win possible,” *Telegraph Herald*, July 29, 1996.

¹²⁰ Craig Gilbert, “Gunderson's write-in campaign will begin or end today, Republicans divided over possible entry,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 31, 1996.

Speaker Gingrich, while he and Morris lined up dates for a cross-county tour in support of *House and Home*.¹²¹

The Gunderson write-in effort was fueled largely by Wisconsin dairy communities and agribusiness interests, but a growing chorus of official Republican voices cried foul. Gunderson likened their criticisms to the opposition he faced in 1994, labeling the effort to prevent his candidacy “the most intense and mean-spirited activity I have seen throughout my political career.” Eight days after his passionate and widely covered criticism of the proposed federal legislation to restrict marriage to heterosexual couples, five former chairmen of the 3rd District Republican Party publically encouraged Gunderson to end his write-in effort.¹²² They called on him to “end this game” and “recapture the trust” of his fellow 3rd District Republicans by throwing his support behind Harsdorf.¹²³ Gunderson told supporters the State Republican Chair offered his support for a write-in bid, then retracted it; he also claimed the State Party Executive Director, R.J. Johnson, had been “even more harsh” than the State Republican Chair in his effort to stymie a Gunderson campaign. Gunderson had disagreed with Wisconsin Republican officials before, “But, never have I witnessed a State... engage in such strong and strident efforts to make sure it [the chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee] didn’t happen.”¹²⁴

Steve Gunderson scheduled two public addresses in the Chippewa Valley for the first of August, the release of the positive survey results leaving many expecting him to officially endorse the write-in campaign. What one Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* reporter

¹²¹ AP, “Gay Group Pledges Money to Gunderson Campaign,” Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel*, July 20, 1996, sec A.

¹²² The group did not include sitting 3rd district Republican Party chair and Gunderson supporter Doug Knight.

¹²³ AP, “Gay Group Pledges Money to Gunderson Campaign,” Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel*, July 20, 1996, sec A.

¹²⁴ “Statement of Rep. Steve Gunderson Regarding Role in 3rd District Race,” July 31, 1996, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

called “the most unusual mini-saga in Wisconsin politics” ended that day.¹²⁵

Gunderson’s speeches and official press release alleged that antigay discrimination left him no choice but to officially call off the write-in campaign. He offered details of a series of private conversations with Gingrich, alleging that the Speaker had warned him that conservative activist (and Gingrich mentor) Paul Weyrich and others in the right wing of the Party were planning to launch a well-financed effort to defeat Gunderson in order to prevent him from assuming the Agriculture Committee chairmanship. Gingrich even cautioned that they were willing to spread rumors that both Gunderson and Morris had AIDS. Gunderson told his audiences that Gingrich promised to support him if he continued to pursue a ninth term, but advised him to stop the write-in effort, warning him that there were people “prepared to do whatever was necessary to not only defeat me, but destroy me... I honestly had no idea how badly some people want to get rid of me, simply for being what I am.”¹²⁶ In the official press release sent to the media on the eve of his announcement, Gunderson said that he had put his family through enough ugly campaigns. He told the media would rather be forced out of the race than submit himself to another round of hatred and intolerance from “Lincoln’s party.”¹²⁷

Gunderson's decision to drop his write-in bid was unexpected and ironic. *House and Home* ends on a triumphant note, his homophobic critics vanquished and his eighth term secured, his life with Morris set to finally to settle down. Yet the same forces that Gunderson and Morris believed they had defeated in 1994 they now held responsible

¹²⁵ “Some Calling 3rd District Congressional Race ‘Weird,’” St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, July 15, 1996, sec E.

¹²⁶ Greg Zoroya, “A Leader Falls Amid a War in the House,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1996.

¹²⁷ “Statement of Rep. Steve Gunderson Regarding Role in 3rd District Race,” July 31, 1996, Box 14, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

for an aborted 1996 campaign. “This marks a victory for bigotry and discrimination,” Gunderson said in one of his final press releases as 3rd District Representative.¹²⁸

In the aftermath after his announcement some rose to challenge Gunderson’s accusations that antigay bigotry was to blame for his departure. A news analyst at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* said the speech was not Gunderson’s finest political moment. The writer warned Gunderson risked “blotting a reputation for honesty and hard work” on behalf of voters who seemed not to care about his sexuality.¹²⁹ The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* also attempted to verify Gunderson’s accusations regarding Gingrich’s warnings and Weyrich’s plan to defame him. Weyrich officially denied involvement in any effort to end Gunderson’s campaign or slander Gunderson, offering the press this prepared statement: “I wish I could claim credit for driving Rep. Steve Gunderson out of office but regrettably I cannot. As usual, Boss Gingrich is making up the facts as he goes along.”¹³⁰ Gingrich, when questioned about Gunderson’s version of events less than two weeks later, told reporters he was not aware of any independently-financed conservative smear campaign and said he had never urged Gunderson to end write-in campaign. “I said to him... I thought he would get the chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee... I don’t remember mentioning any individuals. It was entirely his decision, and he had my absolute support if he wanted to run.”¹³¹ State Republican Party officials and Wisconsin 5th District Representative James Sensenbrenner, all of whom had opposed Gunderson’s write-in candidacy, adamantly defended their positions after Gunderson dropped his reelection bid. They claimed Gunderson had put

¹²⁸ Zoroya, “A Leader Falls Amid a War in the House.”

¹²⁹ Dennis McCann, “Gunderson’s exit not his finest political moment,” *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, August 5, 1996, sec B.

¹³⁰ Craig Gilbert, “Congressman says bigotry ended his career,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 1, 1996, sec A.

¹³¹ “GOP Convention Insider,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 12, 1996, sec A.

himself in an untenable position by failing to secure a place on the primary ballot and maintained that Gunderson's sexuality was irrelevant to their opposition.¹³²

In front of a large crowd at "Out Vote '96" in Chicago a few weeks later, Gunderson continued to allude to Republican bigotry as the impediment to a ninth term and a major committee chairmanship. He provided his audience more details about his meetings with Gingrich, telling his audience that Gingrich had privately warned of "people in our [Republican] leadership and in our conference who will oppose you becoming chairman because if an openly gay person becomes chairman it somehow legitimizes homosexuality."¹³³ Immediately after quoting Gingrich, Gunderson asked his audience to challenge congressional Republicans on their family values stances, singling out Gingrich's public admission that he would not be attending his gay sister Candace's wedding as an example of a family values double-standard.

While the family values rhetoric of Newt Gingrich, however inadvertently, stoked national Republican opposition to a gay man becoming chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, a legitimate moral incongruity in Gunderson's proximity went unnoticed. Callista Louise Bisek, from Gunderson's Wisconsin hometown of Whitehall, served as a congressional aide in the office of Steve Gunderson before becoming Chief Clerk in the House Committee on Agriculture.¹³⁴ Rumors of an affair persistently linked Bisek to Gingrich throughout the 1990s, and in 1999 a lawyer for Gingrich's second wife, Marianne Ginther, secured permission from a Georgia court to conduct a videotaped deposition of Bisek.¹³⁵ During the deposition, Bisek admitted that her romantic relationship with Gingrich began in November of 1993, while

¹³² Gilbert, "Congressman says bigotry ended his career."

¹³³ Representative Steve Gunderson, speech to 'Out Vote '96, C-SPAN 2, August 17, 1996, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/GayPo>

¹³⁴ Gingrich Productions, About Us, <http://www.gingrichproductions.com/aboutus.html>

¹³⁵ Timothy J. Burger, "Business as usual for Newt's girlfriend," *New York Daily News*, August 14, 1999.

Gingrich was still married to Ginther.¹³⁶ Gingrich claimed that he and Ginther were legally separated at the time, but Gingrich's lawyers later conceded that the relationship continued even after the Gingriches were reconciled and Newt had assumed the Speakership. On August 18, 2000, the former Gunderson aide Biseck became the third wife of Newt Gingrich.¹³⁷ Gunderson has never publicly commented on the extramarital phase of the relationship between Bisek and Gingrich, though given his proximity to the two individuals, it seems likely that he or his staff had knowledge of the affair. In *House and Home*, Gunderson suggests that he knew Marianne Ginther well, at one point citing the "deep personal affection" she had for Gunderson even after his resignation as Chief Deputy Whip.¹³⁸ At the end of 1995, it was Gunderson who hugged and consoled the weeping husband and wife after "the totality of how hard it's been" finally hit Newt, who had been suffering ethics investigations since assuming the Speakership.¹³⁹

Steve Gunderson first claimed, "I stand before you today as the number one example in America of job discrimination based on sexual orientation" in front of that "Out Vote '96" audience. He repeated that claim, word for word, to his national book tour audiences. During a question-and-answer session at a Boston bookstore, an attendee pointedly asked Gunderson why he had dropped his write-in campaign given the symbolic impact a House committee chairmanship would have had for gay Americans. Gunderson explained that, during a forty-five minute conversation with Gingrich, he concluded he could overcome the challenge of a write-in campaign in Wisconsin but could not effectively counter a major independent expenditure against him. Gingrich, he said, had made it clear that "Even if we were successful back home,"

¹³⁶ Tribune News Service, "Gingrich Friend Dates Affair To '93," *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1999.

¹³⁷ Buffalo County Historical Society. *Buffalo County biographical history: celebrating 150 years, 1853-2003*, 131.

¹³⁸ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 178.

¹³⁹ David Maraniss and Michael Weisskopf, *Tell Newt to Shut Up!* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 91-98.

there was no guarantee Gunderson was going to be accepted as a gay committee chairman in Washington.¹⁴⁰ Resigned, Gunderson concluded his Boston bookstore talk by quietly admitting to his outwardly liberal audience that “the verdict was out” on whether there was room for gay politicians in the United States Republican Party.

Fifteen years later, Gunderson’s perspective on his departure is more measured. He does not blame Republican Party leadership for his exit and seems more content to characterize his decision as a product of local political forces beyond his control. “The third district was already a Democrat district. History has shown that I defeated a Democrat and a Democrat succeeded me... When the conservative element of the party refused to step aside, I honored my commitment to not seek re-election.”¹⁴¹

Gunderson’s words ring true; Representative Ron Kind, a Democrat, has held the seat since Gunderson’s retirement. Gunderson told me that Gingrich played absolutely no role in his decision to drop his bid for a ninth term, a considerable contrast from his earlier remarks. “The only role that he and other Republican leaders played was [to express] a growing concern that the party was being split back home” over the question of a potential write-in campaign. Gingrich was concerned about losing the seat to the Democratic Party. “And when I chose not to run, he obviously did everything in his power to encourage me to endorse the Republican nominee,” a dilemma Gunderson calls one of the most difficult experiences of his political life.¹⁴² Gunderson found himself in a precarious position after officially calling off the write-in campaign. Harsdorf had been a loyal friend and colleague throughout his political career, “But having just published our book *House and Home*, I was on a national book tour. And in

¹⁴⁰ Steve Gunderson and Rob Morris, *House and Home*, August 6, 1996, CPAN, We Think the World of You Bookstore, Boston, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/HouseandH>

¹⁴¹ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

¹⁴² Ibid.

order to have some level of personal integrity, I had to stay out of that race because Jim [Harsdorf] had taken positions on gay issues that were directly opposite of my work in this area.” Gunderson says that, had he endorsed Harsdorf, the national media would have accused him of putting party over principle “and I’d have lost the basic integrity and honesty I had spent twenty two years in office trying to uphold.” Gunderson now believes Harsdorf had been counseled by social conservatives to take positions that would help him should there have been a Republican primary between them.

Gunderson felt those positions put him in a bind, and the best he could do was simply stay out of the race.¹⁴³ Despite a confused and bitter political exit, Gunderson seemed publicly relieved to be leaving office. His final public interviews in office were marked by the confidence of a man who knew he would have easily won another term had he supported the write-in effort. “I mean, it’s pretty clear back there they [3rd District voters] decided what was and was not important... they said... when we look at what Steve has done on rural health care or education or agriculture, how can we vote against him just because of this one issue, even if we don’t understand it?”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Charles Bierbauer, “Gunderson Leaves ‘Increasingly Polarized’ House,” CNN, November 28, 1996.

LEGACY

In *House and Home*, Steve Gunderson admits he has often reflected on the irony that, as a gay man and a leader of moderate Republicans, he was “instrumental in securing the ascendancy to power of the most conservative Republican leader in a generation, and one is considered, fairly or unfairly, a vicious homophobe.”¹⁴⁵ While it remains unclear whether Gingrich privately supported another Gunderson campaign, it is certainly true that Gingrich’s hostile brand of Republicanism had the inadvertent effect of putting Steve Gunderson’s conservative credentials on trial throughout the 1990s. Under Gingrich’s leadership, the gap that separated the politics of the American electorate and Republican activists widened, leaving the gay Republican Gunderson politically exposed in no man’s land.¹⁴⁶ Despite his unhappiness with the Republican leadership after 1989, Gunderson remained sympathetic to the conflicting demands on Whip-turned-Speaker Gingrich. Whether true or not, Gingrich had convinced Gunderson that although the Speaker “adheres to the concept of a big-tent party... He is often pressured by the far right of the party. Sometimes I think he's in a catch-22 situation.”¹⁴⁷ Gunderson’s unwavering support for Gingrich seems contradictory given their dissimilar viewpoints and political styles, but Gunderson’s personal reflections in *House and Home* reveal a unique and complex relationship between the two representatives. During his first few congressional terms, when Gunderson admits he was still uncomfortable with his sexuality, Gingrich made it clear to Gunderson that his

¹⁴⁵ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 107.

¹⁴⁶ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: the Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 21.

¹⁴⁷ Representative Steve Gunderson, interview, VHS, *CBS News Sunday Morning*, CBS, August 2, 1996. Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Box 8, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, WI.

sexual orientation did not matter to him. Gunderson says Gingrich was one of the few Republicans in Washington who plainly saw no contradiction between his homosexuality and his conservative values. Gunderson actually credits Gingrich for helping him come to terms with his sexuality. “When he [Gingrich] chose to run for Republican Whip, I was the second person he called. And when he was elected, I was one of two individuals asked to serve as his Chief Deputy Whip. He knew at that time I was gay. He took a lot of heat for selecting me from social conservatives and stuck to his principles of what does and doesn’t matter.”¹⁴⁸ Though Gingrich is often characterized as a principle instigator of the divisive culture wars of the 1990s, Gunderson remains a tireless defender of Gingrich, repeatedly calling him “the closest thing I have in politics to an older brother” in the early days of Gingrich’s speakership.¹⁴⁹

If Steve Gunderson’s sexuality had an uncertain impact on his failed 1996 write-in campaign, his public emergence as Party agenda critic undoubtedly invited Republican opposition. Though he explained, “the conservative element of the Republican Party... didn’t want either a vocal moderate Republican or an openly gay Republican” in 1994 or in 1996, Gunderson’s voting record inadequately supports the first half of that contention. In the 104th Congress, thirty-nine of the two hundred and thirty-six Republican representatives voted as or more independently of the GOP agenda on major bills than Gunderson, including his fellow Wisconsin representatives Mark Neumann, Thomas Petri, and Scott Klug.¹⁵⁰ What is true about Gunderson’s contention, though, is that he took public steps, as early as January of 1993, to distance

¹⁴⁸ Steve Gunderson, email with the author, February 2, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Gunderson and Morris, *House and Home*, 100-102.

¹⁵⁰ Representative Steve Gunderson, US Congress Votes Database, *The Washington Post*. <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/congress/members/G000524>. The U.S. Congress Votes Database documents every vote and member of the House and Senate since 1991. Data is pulled from several sources, including the House clerk, the U.S. Senate and the biographical directory of the U.S. Congress.

himself from the agenda of his Party leadership and actively identify and oppose a pervasive, heterosexist Republican Party ethos.¹⁵¹ Though he had little ability to dissuade others from attaching inordinate significance to his sexuality, Gunderson's homosexuality became a measure of difference that allowed him to carve a niche as Party outsider and strategy critic. Gunderson effectively promoted a persona of political autonomy from the agenda of the Republican Party leadership, packaging himself as an "unpredictable Republican" who "supported the Contras and the Arts," an independent streak he could easily support by pointing to his shocking resignation as Chief Deputy Whip.¹⁵² Though his public actions undoubtedly won him support from Wisconsin's independent voters, his private criticisms reveal an undeniably simplistic perspective on Republican Party politics in the 103rd and 104th Congresses. *House and Home* is saturated with references to the "far right" elements and "guerrilla tactics" that "threaten to tear the [Republican] Party apart." His was an attitude that found unyielding bigotry in the ideology of American conservatism but refused to equate the vitriol of Pat Buchanan with the voting public who swept Gingrich to power, though the two are connected.¹⁵³ While it is true that Gunderson became a nuisance for the Party's family values image at both the local and national levels in the 104th Congress, Gunderson never posed a serious strategy threat to Speaker Gingrich's agenda. The conspiratorial effort to push Gunderson to drop his write-in bid, real or exaggerated, effectively silenced a sharp voice of dissent in a House Republican Party thin in their majority, scored with ideological fissures, and regularly derided by the Washington press. It also cost the Republican Party a seat in the 105th Congress.

¹⁵¹ Koopman, *Hostile Takeover*, 107.

¹⁵² Representative Steve Gunderson, interviewed by Mary Matalin and Dee Dee Myers, VHS, *Equal Time*, MSNBC, 1995, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Box 8, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹⁵³ Critchlow and Maclean, *Debating the American Conservative Movement*, 156-173.

In Gingrich's confessional *Lessons Learned the Hard Way: a Personal Report*, Steve Gunderson is not mentioned.¹⁵⁴ Gingrich does laud the "raw courage" of first term Wisconsin congressman Mark Neumann, identifying him as a Republican worthy of mentoring.¹⁵⁵ Other than a few photos buried among hundreds in his congressional papers, there is little other evidence to suggest Gunderson and Gingrich shared an especially close relationship. They share screen time during a brief, celebratory Lincoln Day video sent out to congressional campaign donors only weeks after their historic takeover of the House, but they speak to the camera individually, giving the viewer the impression that the two congressmen could have filmed their parts on different days or even in different places.¹⁵⁶ Though I found personal correspondence Gunderson and his staff had saved from Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, no correspondence from Newt Gingrich, personal or professional, could be found among his congressional papers. Gingrich did, however, read Gunderson's *House and Home* and provided a quote for the dust jacket. The Speaker of the House promised readers an insightful examination of the difficult line "all true leaders must tread—balancing the sometimes conflicting responsibilities of our private and public lives," a difficulty certainly shared by both men.

Steve Gunderson's inimitable congressional career offers historians a unique perspective on differences among ideological conservatives in American politics. In a bid to become the controlling American political party in the House of Representatives,

¹⁵⁴ The absence of Gunderson in published works is notable. Gunderson receives only passing mention in previously cited books such as *Storming the Gates* and *Hostile Takeover*, and he receives no mention in *Fulfilling the Contract* or *Off Center*.

¹⁵⁵ Gingrich, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way*, 171. Interestingly, Neumann voted "present" in the re-election of Gingrich as Speaker in January of 1997, expressing a lack of confidence in him over ongoing ethics investigations.

¹⁵⁶ Republican National Committee, *Lincoln Day Video*, VHS, NRCC Communications, February 9, 1995, Box 8, Congressional Papers of Representative Steve Gunderson, Wisconsin Historic Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin. Lincoln Day, held annually in February or March, is a celebration and fundraising event for many state and county organizations of the Republican Party.

congressional Republican Party moderates like Steve Gunderson surrendered leadership to Newt Gingrich and lost control of an increasingly partisan agenda. Gunderson's advocacy on behalf of Gingrich allowed him access to the future Speaker's inner circle, the very center from which calculated heterosexist orthodoxy emerged prior to the Republican Revolution. The inculcation of allegiance to majority party strategy that Gunderson supported in the Madigan-Gingrich Whip race eventually displaced Gunderson from his own political party. Any certainty regarding the conspiracy that forced Gunderson's political exit, however, remains curiously elusive.

We remember Wisconsin Representative Steve Gunderson for his congressional policy accomplishments but also because he fought against the stigmatization of his sexual identity by his congressional colleagues. He navigated two sometimes oppositional moral currents, both integral to his own character, without sacrificing a commitment to either, and he did so while becoming a congressional leader on education, health care, and agricultural policy in the United States. Gunderson refused to let his sexuality define his politics in a uniquely Republican way. He embraced a lonesome role as conservative go-between for gay rights activists and never stopped lobbying his congressional colleagues for compassion on equal rights issues, even when he became their political target. Steve Gunderson, understandably, got it wrong during his book tour stop in Boston. His intrepid congressional career serves as testament that the verdict on whether you can be gay and be a Republican is no longer out.

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