

**THE MAYOR OF**



**CASTRO**

**STREET**

*the Life & Times of*

**HARVEY MILK**

**RANDY SHILTS**

**THE MAYOR  
OF CASTRO STREET**  
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The book is an expansion of "The Life and Death of Harvey Milk," first published in *Christopher Street* magazine in March 1979.

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**For  
Bud and Norma Shilts,  
My mom and dad**

*“If a bullet should enter  
my brain, let that bullet  
destroy every closet door.”*

## Acknowledgments

More than anyone else, Scott Smith, Harvey's lover and the executor of the Milk estate, helped make this book a complete account of both Milk's personal and political life. He spent many hours unselfishly recounting his own memories with Harvey and putting me in contact with many other people important in Harvey's life. Like Scott, Joe Campbell also deserves special thanks for delving deeply into personal and sometimes painful memories about his relationship with Harvey. I'm also indebted to Harvey's friends Jim Rivaldo, Frank Robinson and Tom Randol for their help in the research phases. Political activist Michael Wong gave me the single most useful document for the book when he shared the detailed diary he kept of every interaction he had with Harvey for over five years. Jim Gordon of the Harvey Milk Archives, Bob Ross of the *Bay Area Reporter* and Charles Morris of *The Sentinel* also permitted me to intrude on them for many days, pouring over their files and back issues. I'm indebted to Allan Berube of the San Francisco Gay History Project for sharing his intriguing research about the effect that World War II had on the San Francisco gay community. My friend David Israels spent long hours as both sounding board and prodder. Many journalists shared their perceptions with me while I was researching the book; among the most useful undoubtedly were Francis Moriarty and Victor Zonana. This work would never have known a place on a bookshelf without the faith of my editor, Michael Denny. Thanks also to my friends Dan Yoder, Ann Neuenschwander, Tom Lang, my brother Gary Shilts and, of course, Steve Newman for their personal support during the writing process.

## **Author's Note**

There are times, rare times, when the forces of social change collide with a series of dramatic events to produce moments which are later called historic. Just such a time fell on San Francisco during the late 1970s. The tide of history that briefly swept the city included dramatic scenarios of assassinations, rioting, political intrigue and angry street demonstrations which routinely drew crowds numbering into the hundreds of thousands. But most significantly, San Francisco became the national vortex for the aspirations of a new movement which was only then coming of age—the gay movement.

History offers few people whose lives neatly parallel the social causes they come to represent, but from this turbulent era came such a man, Harvey Milk. The story of Harvey Milk is, to a large extent, the story of the gay movement in San Francisco, and, ultimately, the nation. This is the story of Harvey Milk, his life and times.

This book is a piece of journalism that employs standard, professional reportorial techniques in the gathering and verifying of all the information cited. In the course of this narrative I reconstruct scenes, recount conversations, and occasionally attribute observations to people with phrases such as “he thought” or “she felt.” All such references are drawn from either the research interviews I conducted specifically for this book or from direct knowledge gained over the years working as a San Francisco reporter. In checking the accuracy of facts in this book, I have relied on the usual technique of using on-the-record interviews, or, when that was not possible, corroborating possible points of contention with at least three unnamed sources. That’s a standard rule of reporting and the basic discipline of the book.

Most of the information about Harvey Milk’s personal life came from approximately one hundred and forty interviews I conducted with people, ranging from septagenarians who have known three generations of the Milk family to the people with whom Milk played basketball on his high school junior varsity team and the men with whom he spent



his last nights. The overall analyses of San Francisco city politics and the evolution of gay politics in the Bay Area was profoundly shaped by my five years of reporting in San Francisco, as both a television correspondent and a freelance writer. During that time, I knew Harvey Milk and covered the panoply of other figures in this book. I worked the City Hall beat under the administrations of both the late George Moscone and Dianne Feinstein. Most of the observations about the sociology of the Castro Street neighborhood come from the fact I've lived in the area since 1975. Because I'm an acknowledged gay journalist, I've also had access to interviews and anecdotes which generally elude other reporters. The lack of many lesbians in important roles in this book comes from a reality I could not alter as a journalist; Harvey did not have much contact with lesbians either socially or politically.

This book will not please idealogues looking for a political tract. Conversely some might complain that it is sympathetic to the gay point of view, because no traces of moral outrage against homosexuality are to be found on these pages. On this point I agree with historian John Boswell when he wrote, "What will strike some readers as a partisan point of view is chiefly the absence of negative attitudes on this subject ubiquitous in the modern West; after a long, loud noise, a sudden silence may seem deafening." I suspect others might fret that this book is indiscreet in its discussion of private topics not normally raised in the journalistic forum. I can only answer that I tried to tell the truth and, if not be objective, at least be fair; history is not served when reporters prize trepidation and propriety over the robust journalistic duty to tell the whole story.

Randy Shilts  
July, 1981  
San Francisco

## Prologue

*Eleven A.M., November 27, 1978.* A huddle of disbelieving reporters crowds around a locked door in San Francisco City Hall. A few feet away, down a narrow hallway and behind another closed door, the lanky body of Supervisor Harvey B. Milk sprawls face down in a spreading pool of blood.

The outer door is opened and closed by the police and city supervisors; reporters knock elbows trying to get a glimpse of any detail. They don't know what they're looking for, but it's their job to look anyway. A television crew bursts on the scene, adding to the confusion. The mayor's been shot. No, Harvey Milk's been shot. They've both been shot? Are they dead? With the Jonestown mass suicide only nine days behind them, the newspeople ask the obvious question: Is this the work of the People's Temple hit squad?

The small door opens again. Inside, the cadre of young aides Milk had gathered together fall into one another's arms crying, their eyes dazed with confusion. "We've lost it," says one. "It's over."

Harvey had always told them it would end this way, with bullets in the brain. But only when they see the black rubber body bag, covered with a crisp, pleated sheet, being rolled to the waiting ambulance does Harvey's prophecy become the palpable reality that makes for bad dreams and bold headlines.

On the other side of City Hall, reporters mob another locked door. Behind it, a police officer picks the still-burning cigarette from between the fingers of Mayor George Moscone who, like Milk, was felled with shots in the chest and then coolly executed with two bullets pumped into the back of his head. Board of Supervisors President Dianne Feinstein must make the stunning announcement: "Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk have been shot . . . and killed." The gasps drown out her next words. Her voice breaks as she delivers the shocker: "Police have a suspect. Supervisor Dan White."

A few blocks away, Dan White and his wife are walking from St.

Mary's Cathedral to Northern Station. White turns himself in to a former colleague and close friend. Within an hour, he puts his confession down on tape, telling how he crawled through the basement window, shot the mayor, reloaded his gun, and shot Harvey Milk because Harvey had smirked at him. The all-American boy, former paratrooper, onetime firefighter, ex-cop, and the one politician who had stood up to what he called the "splinter groups of radicals, social deviates, and incorrigibles" is charged with two counts of first-degree murder.

Hours later, forty thousand tiny flames quiver in the night breeze as mourners carrying candles trudge somberly to City Hall. In three-piece suits, black leather jackets, blue jeans, and neatly pressed dresses, they gather under the cloudy autumn sky to remember the gangly ward politician with the funny name, the thick black hair, the corny jokes and the New York accent. The speakers apologize for talking less about the powerful mayor, who was one of the best-known politicians in California, than about Harvey Milk, the unlikely populist who had lost three of the four elections in which he was a candidate and served less than eleven months in office once he was elected. The emphasis surprises few in the largely homosexual crowd. The mayor had given them leadership, but Harvey Milk—the nation's first openly gay city official—had given them a dream. "A true function of public officials is not just to pass laws and approve appropriations, but to give hope," Harvey had said repeatedly in his five-year political career. In death, Harvey Milk's dream started casting a shadow far larger than anything he could have fashioned in life; such is the nature of mortals and martyrs, dreams and their shadows. Even as the mourners ponder the constant turbulence of the recent troubled years in San Francisco, some start to speak of a Harvey Milk legend.

A stocky, handsome man has driven fifty miles through the night to join the mourners. He is confused by all this talk. Joe Campbell met Harvey Milk in 1956. For seven years they were lovers. What do politics have to do with homosexuality? he wonders. With the Harvey he knew, homosexuality was something to conceal, to be vaguely ashamed of, certainly nothing to walk down the street and crow about. The lover he knew was infinitely more concerned with redecorating his apartment than with changing the world.

Across the continent, a younger man watches pictures of the candlelight march on the late night news. Jack McKinley recalls the five years he spent loving Harvey Milk in New York City during the 1960s.

That his stubbornly conventional former lover, a successful Wall Street financial analyst whose politics rarely strayed to the left of Barry Goldwater, would get shot to prove some political point seems unfathomable to him. But as McKinley looks at the mile-long procession of softly glimmering lights in San Francisco, he's sure of one thing. This is good theater and Harvey loved good theater.

Scott Smith barely feels alive as he walks down the marble steps of City Hall toward the sea of candles. He had met Harvey in New York when Harvey was a Broadway producer making the avant-garde scene as a forty-one-year-old hippy. They had moved to San Francisco together, established their camera shop, and lain in bed until the early morning hours arguing campaign strategy. "You're going to write about the life of Harvey Milk?" he asks some months later, almost sardonically. "It's all so strange. Nothing needs to be fictionalized. If somebody tried to write it as fiction, no one would believe it."

"Swing low, sweet chariot." The song drifts gently into the night, as forty thousand stand beneath the grand rotunda of City Hall where Harvey Milk had worked and died. At midnight, the crowd melts quietly away. Candles are left to shimmer on the bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln sitting in front of City Hall, the lights casting a multitude of tiny shadows. The mourners turn to walk back toward Castro Street, where it seems right for this night to end. After years of searching and drifting, Castro Street had become Harvey's hometown, and he had worked to make it a hometown for tens of thousands of homosexuals from around the world. The mayor of Castro Street, that was Harvey's unofficial title. And now the mayor of San Francisco and the mayor of Castro Street lie dead. What is left is the dream and its lengthening shadow.

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# **Contents**

Acknowledgments	xi
Author's Note	xiii
Prologue	xv
<b>PART I THE YEARS WITHOUT HOPE</b>	<b>1</b>
1 The Men without Their Shirts	3
2 Gay Everyman	12
3 Judy Garland's Dead	30
4 Sodom by the Sea	47
<b>PART II THE MAYOR OF CASTRO STREET</b>	<b>67</b>
5 Politics as Theater	69
6 The Early Invaders	81
7 The First Skirmish	95
8 Gay Main Street	111
9 Harvey Milk vs. The Machine	127
10 Orange Tuesday	153
11 Showdown on Castro Street	169
<b>PART III SUPERVISOR HARVEY MILK</b>	<b>187</b>
12 Media Star	189
13 Willkommen Castro	211
14 Deadline Pressure	229
15 Curtain Call	252
16 No Cross, No Crown	263
<b>PART IV THE LEGEND BEGINS</b>	<b>297</b>
17 Justice and Thieves	299
18 The Final Act	324
Epilogue	340

## Appendix

I. A Populist Looks at the City Speech to the Joint International Longshoremen & Warehouseman's Union of San Francisco September 10, 1973	349
II. A City of Neighborhoods Address at Inaugural Dinner January 10, 1978	353
III. The Hope Speech Keynote Address to Gay Caucus of California Democratic Council (San Diego) March 10, 1978	359
IV. That's What America Is Speech at Gay Freedom Day Rally June 25, 1978	364
V. Harvey Milk's Political Will Tape-recorded November 18, 1977	372
Notes on Sources	376
Index	381

# **PART I**

## **The Years without Hope**



