

Provincetown Progressive

Remembering Urvashi Vaid (1958-2022)



by Bruce Bawer

Of all the far-left radicals in our time who've smoothly parlayed revolutionary rhetoric into comfy establishment sinecures, Urvashi Vaid, who died on May 14 at age 63, was one of the smoothest. A daughter of privilege – her father was a writer and professor, her mother a poet and painter – she attended Vassar and Northeastern Law before diving headfirst into the world of progressive activism, first working for the ACLU's National Prison Project and then, in the 1980s, landing powerful positions – first as Public Information Director, then as Executive Director – at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, at the time America's most influential gay-rights group.

In those days the gay-rights movement, as led from above by Vaid and likeminded leftist souls, might just as well have been run directly from Moscow. In Vaid's *New York*

Times [obituary](#), Clay Risen puts it this way: “Ms. Vaid was at the center of a wide array of progressive issues...insisting that freedom for gay men and lesbians required fighting for gender, racial and economic equality as well,” her overarching and unapologetic goal being not to win acceptance for gays but to “build...a progressive movement.” In other words, well-off gay guys who donated money to the NGLTF thinking they were fighting antigay bigotry were actually funding a range of far-left causes that were, more likely than not, utterly at odds with their own interests.

Recognizing that Vaid’s shrill rants against capitalism, Christianity, and the patriarchy only served to reinforce the public perception of gay people as social misfits and political extremists, a number of gay writers (among them myself, Jonathan Rauch, Walter Olsen, Andrew Sullivan, and the late Paul Varnell) threw ourselves into the fray, getting out the message, in countless articles as well as in such books as my own *A Place at the Table* (1993), that most gay Americans weren’t really all that different, in most ways, from most straight Americans.

Since most of us happened to be white males, the first response to our arguments by Vaid and her fellow self-styled “queers” was to smear us as a bunch of straight-acting, politically reactionary white boys – gay Uncle Toms, as it were – who hated sissy types, people of color, you name it. But over the course of the 1990s, as gays came out of the closet in record numbers, our basic message was confirmed: the issues that resonated most with gay America were precisely those that we supported and that Vaid and her ilk reviled as “assimilationist” – namely, same-sex marriage and the right to serve openly in the military.

In an effort to reverse the anti-leftist winds of change, Vaid wrote a book, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (1995), in which, ceasing for the moment to malign non-lefty gays, she tried to sell them – us – on her

“liberationist” line. In my [review](#) of *Virtual Equality* for the *New York Times* (yes, back then the *Times* would actually invite somebody like me to review a book like hers), I noted that, in some passages, Vaid told us non-lefty gays exactly what we wanted to hear – for instance, that the gay-rights movement “should seek to educate straight people instead of ignoring or demonizing them.” Yet on the whole, I added, *Virtual Equality* was “vintage Urvashi Vaid, proffering a vision of a ‘common, progressive movement’ for social, economic and political revolution led by gay people, who, in her view (though not, it seems to me, in the view of most gay people themselves), embody a radical differentness that makes them the natural vanguard for revolution.”

Alas for Vaid, although *Virtual Equality* received glowing reviews from her cronies on the left, sales were pitiful: precious few gay readers were interested in a stultifying 400-page-long chunk of agitprop about the need for mass liberation from the white overclass. Yet Vaid was nobody’s fool. If she approached gay politics with a stubborn Marxist utopianism, she was eminently pragmatic when it came to running her own career. Failing to connect with the rapidly emerging gay mainstream, she made a point of bonding with Bill Clinton, staying tight with him (her purported principles to the contrary) even after he signed the Defense of Marriage Act, reneged on his promise to lift the gay military ban, and was credibly accused of multiple sexual assaults.

And in the succeeding years, even as she continued to preach radical liberation, Vaid led a highly successful life as a jewel of the left-wing cultural elite, cruising through a series of big-ticket jobs at the Ford Foundation, the Arcus Foundation, and the Gill Foundation, founding a lesbian PAC, starting her own consulting group, sitting on various boards (including that of Planned Parenthood), writing another book (*Irresistible Revolution*, 2012), hanging with Tony Kushner, Rachel Maddow, and Hannah Gadsby, and living in Manhattan and

Provincetown with her partner, the “political humorist” (i.e., unfunny stand-up comic) Kate Clinton.

In a manifest attempt to sidestep the fact that Vaid wasn’t a reformer but a full-throated fount of revolutionary rhetoric, several of her obituaries have proffered a grotesque amount of revisionism. Just one example: at the website of the Boston public-radio station WGBH, the [headline](#) called her “the LGBTQ activist who spent decades fighting for equality,” and the article itself quoted another activist as saying that Vaid “wanted full justice and equality for all people.” No. No. No. First of all, during the period when she was primarily an out-loud-and-proud activist, there was no such thing as “LGBTQ” – a term that several obits have retrofitted onto her career. But far more important, Vaid was no more about justice or equality than Mao or Lenin. She wanted to use gays to spearhead a socialist rebellion – period.

Well, there was no socialist rebellion. In the short term, then, she failed. But in the long term? Well, the sobering fact is that if we hadn’t had people like her in key institutional positions a quarter-century ago, preaching political revolt, social upheaval, and cultural transformation as a day-to-day way of life and quietly furthering the careers of those who shared her convictions, we wouldn’t have, in the year 2022, an America whose fundamental liberties are being shredded and whose kids are being perniciously and permanently damaged by such toxic dogmas as transgender ideology and Critical Race Theory.

So for the time being, at least, it looks as if Urvashi Vaid won after all. And for those of us who care about the future of a free and strong America, nothing matters more than doing everything we can to undo her victory.

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