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Gay Gun Advocates Draw Bead on O'Reilly

By CQ Staff, CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY

To put things mildly, Bill O'Reilly is not the apologetic type. The notoriously combative Fox News talk show host won't back down from provocative arguments or factually disputed features aired on "The O'Reilly Factor." So it was news, of sorts, when gay and lesbian activists got O'Reilly to at least acknowledge that his fabled "no spin zone" had oversold an alarmist report about "a national underground network" of lesbian gangs raging through the nation's cities.

The furor began at the end of last month, when the offending segment aired. O'Reilly introduced the piece by asserting that the gangs were "raping young girls" and "terrorizing people."

O'Reilly also interviewed the primary source for the story, Rod Wheeler, a Maryland security consultant and former District of Columbia police officer. Wheeler added a lurid detail to the talk of an epidemic: He told O'Reilly that some gangs called themselves "the pink-pistol-packing group" and assaulted people with pink 9 mm Glock handguns.

That's where the sensational report bumped against a real-life interest group. There is, as it happens, a national coalition of some 10,000 gay and lesbian gun owners called "the Pink Pistols." But far from visiting mayhem on unsuspecting young girls and random passers-by, the group conducts advocacy work on behalf of the traditional conservative cause of defending Second Amendment freedoms.

As the group's real profile became known throughout the blogosphere, gay and lesbian activists inundated the O'Reilly Factor with e-mail, phone calls and letters demanding an on-air retraction. GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, mobilized its own grass-roots campaign against the report, and a civil rights group, The Southern Poverty Law Center, issued a point-by-point rebuttal of the claims in O'Reilly's segment.

Wheeler soon responded, replacing his personal Web page with a "clarification and apology" asserting that viewers had misunderstood his comments. He hadn't meant to implicate the Pink Pistols in violent gang activity, he said, and when he mentioned "over 150 of these gangs" in the Washington metropolitan area, what he actually meant was that there are 150 gangs of all types in the region. He did concede that his reference to a "national epidemic" of lesbian gangs was overstated.

Wheeler says he's received nearly 300 e-mails about the report, many of them hostile, and he wants to make clear that he has nothing against lesbians: "They think I was saying lesbians are bad people. I feel awful about it." On the other hand, he's standing by his belief that lesbian gangs are using pink pistols in crimes: "This is not something I made up."

Pink Pistols spokeswoman Gwen Patton views such contrition with skepticism. “I think there was a great deal of sensationalizing and agenda-driving going on here,” she says. “Perhaps Mr. Wheeler’s own personal feelings regarding the gay and lesbian community entered into it.” Patton also wants the record to show that the group doesn’t dispense literal pink firearms: “It’s pink as in the pink triangle,” she explains.

After Wheeler issued his apology, O’Reilly agreed to do an on-air interview last week with GLAAD spokesman Rashad Robinson. O’Reilly defended the story while conceding that it could have been overhyped. He cited some reports that groups of lesbians had committed violent acts in New York, Memphis and Philadelphia, making these episodes a trend in his view. “It’s a valid story,” he said. “Is it out of control? No. . . . I’m not in fear of the lesbians beating me up tonight.”

Robinson says O’Reilly’s “non-apology apology” is a great deal shy of the retraction GLAAD was looking for. “The story is a complete and total fabrication, and he still has failed to offer one shred of evidence as to why it’s legitimate news,” he says. At the same time, however, he says it represents progress of a sort: “It’s important to recognize that O’Reilly rarely admits to exaggerating a story and promising to do better next time.”

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