

sex and the professor

by Jeff Oliver
photos by Beth Schlanker

UMKC professor Harris Mirkin's essay on pedophilia set off a nationwide controversy; one year later, he's still talking



"I'm not God," says Harris Mirkin, political science professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "I really am not. I don't pretend to be God. I don't believe I'm God. I'm not particularly wise as a judge." He's smiling at the ceiling of his office.

It's the type of thing you can say without appearing pretentious only if someone has told you the world would be a better place if you were dead. And Mirkin knows that, so when he says it he lays his hands out to the side and surrenders.

Now, a full six years after he wrote the essay that made him famous, Mirkin sits in his office shrugging helplessly while he smiles his likeable smile and repeats the inflated phrase that floats, at one time or another, through the self-effacing fantasies of every author, academic and maker of ideas.

"I really do not believe myself to be a judge or a god."

Mirkin's essay, "The Pattern of Sexual Politics: Feminism, Homosexuality and Pedophilia," was accepted by the *Journal of Homosexuality* after Mirkin submitted it in 1997. It was published in 1999. The paper pulls on a thread that Mirkin says runs through the respective political and public reactions to feminism, homosexuality and pedophilia. It is an academic essay that not only describes how things are but also discusses how things could be.

The article didn't receive much public attention until last March. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, in an article about the pedophile cases in the Roman Catholic Church, identified Mirkin as a "trail-blazer" among an unofficial but coordinated cadre of academics seeking to normalize pedophilia. According to the article, evidence of Mirkin's membership in this pro-pedophile group existed in the professor's essay.

The pro-pedophile group, not to mention his position at the front of it, was news to Mirkin, and it was news to his colleagues. It was also news to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The Kansas City Star*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *The Independent* in London, the British Broadcasting Company, NPR, several newspapers in Japan and hundreds of talk-radio shows across the United States.

It sounded like bad news to Missouri Rep. Mark Wright, R-Springfield. In April 2002 he told the Missouri House of Representatives that Mirkin's ideas were "illegal." The House scrubbed \$100,000 from UMKC's budget (an amount equivalent to Mirkin's salary plus benefits) last April 3. With minor adjustments, the legislation cleared the state Senate April 25. By then, Mirkin could have filled a scrapbook with the press coverage he had received.

If the goal was to punish Mirkin and UMKC, the legislation achieved the opposite. Although the censure and resulting media attention caused a small crisis at UMKC, the school came out "looking pretty damn good," as Mirkin says.

Mirkin says he was worried, but only at the beginning. The worry subsided when he realized he would not lose his job. The worry disappeared when he received the university's support.

"The course of action was pretty clear," says Steve Ballard, head of academic affairs at UMKC. At the time, few at the school had actually read Mirkin's essay though the campus's copy of the *Journal of Homosexuality* volume 37 now cracks open to it at Miller Nichols

OPPOSITE PAGE: Harris Mirkin sorts through a stack of books in his office on the UMKC campus. On his door hangs an upside down map of the world. "I try to turn the world upside down," Mirkin says.

RIGHT: Mirkin holds a copy of the *Journal of Homosexuality*, which published his essay "The Pattern of Sexual Politics: Feminism, Homosexuality and Pedophilia" in 1999. The essay advocates discussion of adult-child sex and did not receive much public attention until last spring, and then the Missouri Legislature took notice.

Mirkin's media odyssey

1997: Harris Mirkin, a professor of political science at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, finishes his essay "The Pattern of Sexual Politics: Feminism, Homosexuality and Pedophilia" and submits it to the *Journal of Homosexuality*. The journal accepts the article.

1999: The *Journal of Homosexuality* publishes Mirkin's essay.

MARCH 25, 2002: Citing Mirkin's essay, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* describes Mirkin as a "trailblazer" among a group of scholars working to normalize pedophilia.

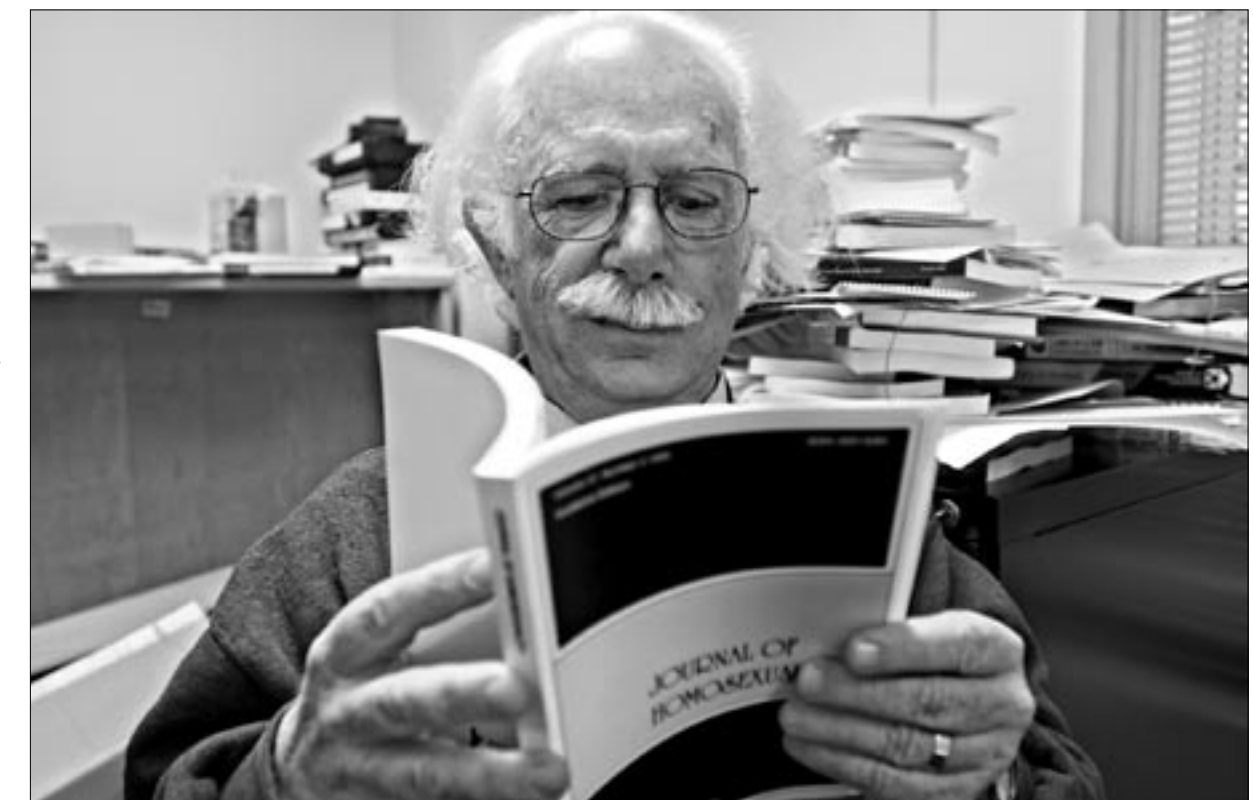
APRIL 3, 2002: In an attempt to "send a message" to Mirkin, the Missouri House of Representatives passes legislation docking \$100,000 (Mirkin's salary and benefits) from UMKC. The legislation passes the Senate on April 25.

APRIL 30, 2002: Mirkin appears on *The O'Reilly Factor*.

APRIL AND MAY 2002: Reporters from publications such as *The New York Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The Kansas City Star*, the British Broadcasting Company and several Japanese newspapers contact Mirkin asking for interviews.

AUGUST 2002: UMKC Chancellor Martha Gilliland is awarded the Hubert H. Humphrey Medal, which is given annually to the most outstanding public policy practitioner by the Policy Studies Organization. Gilliland won the medal "because of strong stands she has taken over the last year in defense of academic freedom and her fight opposing state cuts to funding for higher education," according to the organization.

SUMMER 2003: Mirkin will submit an essay for publication on the "eclipsed art" of depicting children naked.



An excerpt from Mirkin's controversial essay

"This article will develop a model of sexual politics by discussing the struggles over feminism and homosexuality, and then use the model to clarify the current political situation of pedophiles. Though the issues have shifted from the new woman, sodomy and masturbation in the early part of the century to current concerns with promiscuity, homosexuality and pedophilia, the general patterns of sexual politics have remained remarkably stable ...

In the sexual arena some groups are more privileged than others ... Sexual power positions are fiercely held and outcast groups, like those defined as political subversives, have little political protection ...

What is bourgeois becomes 'natural,' all else 'unnatural' ...

This article will argue that, like homosexuality, the concept of child molestation is a culture and class specific modern creation. Though Americans consider intergenerational sex to be evil, it has been permissible or obligatory in many cultures and periods of history ...

Ironically, in trying to protect children from sexual exploitation we have so eroticized them that almost any picture of a naked child is likely to be considered sexual and pornographic ...

There was little public discussion of gays and lesbians prior to the Stonewall riot in 1969 (though there was ferment within the gay community itself), just as in the 1990s there has not been a debate about the threat of child molesters. It was simply assumed that homosexuals were sick. Indeed a debate was precluded by the terms 'queer,' 'pansy' and 'fag' in the same way as any current discussion of intergenerational sex is stopped by the terms 'molester' and 'abuser' ...

Real discussions of pedophilia, as opposed to ritualistic condemnations, are almost non-existent. There are no commonly used neutral labels, and words like 'child molestation,' and 'child abuse' are used in the same way as 'fag' and

'queer' were: to preclude discussion ... Six and thirteen year olds are grouped in the same category ('child') and images of intergenerational sex acts that take place with pubescents and post-puberty teens are routinely projected back onto very young children.

In the same way as adolescents are merged with little children, all sexual activity is equated with violent or coerced sexual activity ... (Pubescents and adolescents) are never considered partners or initiators or willing participants even if they are hustlers.

If this area is to be discussed, distinctions need to be made. Rape and other non-consensual sexual activities need to be separated out in this as in all other sexual categories, and acts involving young children need to be separated from those involving youths. Distinctions need to be made between incestuous relationships with parents and other types of relationships ...

It is possible that being against child abuse has functioned as a way for Americans, who are often accused of ignoring their children in their quest for success and money, to feel virtuous — especially since it is often the caretakers of children that are accused of abuse ...

Much more attention needs to be paid to the patterns of sexual politics, and to the pressure groups that are active in the area ...

(D)espite the popularity of the phrase 'sexual politics' the dominant political concepts still reflect a time when sex and politics existed in separate spheres. Those outdated concepts distort our vision and need to be replaced." (sic)

from **"The Pattern of Sexual Politics: Feminism, Homosexuality and Pedophilia"** by Harris Mirkin, **Journal of Homosexuality, Volume 37, No. 2 (1999)**

"This was not an article about pedophilia."
—Harris Mirkin

Library. The faculty senate quickly issued a statement that Mirkin's opinions were his own but defended his right to express them.

In the midst of the mania, Mirkin emptied his voice mail — which holds 20 messages — four times a day. He says most of the calls were from people thanking him for discussing a sensitive topic. Mirkin held on to his position as chair of the political science department, and, with a renewed sense of possibility, he continued work on a book about child pornography. He will call the book *Forbidden Images, Forbidden Thoughts: Child Pornography in American Politics*.

After 30 years in Kansas City, Mirkin has no trouble letting you know he's originally from New York. He simply opens his mouth. The sound seems to arrive via a detour along Manhattan streets. It resonates from his entire head, particularly from his hair, which is curly, disobedient and almost yellow.

The image is Albert Einstein watered down with a bit of Mark Twain; it's a decent pedigree for a political science professor who likes to write about politics and sex.

There are at least 50 Web sites that explain why Harris Mirkin must be ignored, shunned or even investigated. Only a handful of Web sites praise Mirkin. Those sites, however, are run by groups most people probably wouldn't want to know exist, such as the North American

Man/Boy Love Association, which advocates mutually consensual relationships between men and boys.

One Web site belongs to Mirkin's neighbor Jacques Tucker. A retired Marine, Tucker is, in appearance as well as ideology, the orthodox answer to Mirkin's liberality.

The Mirkin-related part of Tucker's site opens: "The April 2002 hubbub. My neighbor on the left side of the street (if you're headed south). As Sgt. Friday said, 'Just the facts, M'am (sic).'"

"The facts," it turns out, are a collection of links to articles about Mirkin, a short history of his career and (self-contradictory though it might seem) some flattering quotes from a former student. Tucker says he created the site because "no one benefits from pedophilia." He says he'll likely keep it up as long as he lives.

This response typifies many readers' reactions to Mirkin's essay. It has little to do with the essay's main ideas: The political majority decides what is sexually acceptable; the majority will fight for the right to decide; and sexuality is a social construction. Critics have instead focused on the essay's claim that moral objections to pedophilia are either politically strategic or overly impassioned.

Mirkin frames his explanations of the article in terms of what it is not. "It was not an endorsement," he says. "This was not an article about pedophilia."

It can be a frustrating process to find out whether Harris Mirkin, a career academic and Princeton graduate, believes that sex between an adult and a child is acceptable.

Ask Mirkin, for example, if he believes Americans ought to open their minds regarding adult-child sex, and he'll cite studies that say children are less affected by such relationships than the general public thinks they are. He'll talk about how intergenerational sex was common in Greece and Japan. He'll say most of the phone calls and e-mails he's received since April 2002 are from people thanking him for allowing them to talk about the relationships they had as teenagers.

Ask him if his article gives aid and comfort to pedophiles, and he'll agree that it probably does, "if you want." Then he'll remind you that he has two grandchildren and that he isn't a pedophile.

Mirkin expresses his doubts about the allegations against Catholic priests. He'll explain that many of the alleged victims were older than 14 at the time of abuse. This means they were post-pubescent, which means even if they were involved sexually with priests, it can't technically be called pedophilia. He thinks some of the relationships could have been consensual though he admits he doesn't know what actually happened.

He does not condone sexual relationships involving minors and authority figures though this, more or less, defines any relationship between a child and an adult. He says only a monster can defend the raping and injuring of a child. "It's a terrible thing."

"So pedophilia across the board is wrong, correct?"
—Bill O'Reilly

Ask him enough questions, and he'll spread his arms and proclaim his mortality.

Sooner or later, you realize Mirkin has no idea whether adults ought to be having sex with children. What Mirkin does believe, undoubtedly, is that people should be discussing the matter. "I'm a John Stuart Mill-type liberal," he'll say. "If you question and then decide, it's better."

There is a simple genius to Mirkin's essay. You could say Mirkin never said adult-child sex is acceptable — he said adult-child sex might not be unacceptable.

It's a genius that wouldn't be considered genius at all if the goal were not simple discussion. With a topic like pedophilia, however, you have a conversation that is irresistible for someone who has staked a professional claim on the moral high ground. Someone like cable television's most popular conservative talk show host. Someone like Bill O'Reilly.

Representatives of Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor* had told the university that they would cover Mirkin's essay with or without his participation.

"They told me that if I didn't go [O'Reilly] would, in effect, crucify me in absentia," Mirkin says.

On the show that aired April 30, 2002, it doesn't take long for O'Reilly to get down to business.

"Look," O'Reilly says. "Let me ask you flat out: Don't you believe, doctor, that sexual contact between an adult and a child is wrong? Do you believe that?"

O'Reilly talks very calmly before his audience of 2 million viewers. He seems to hold a pin between the thumb and pointer finger of his left hand. He pricks each word as he says it, so there can be no confusion.

The distinction between what is pedophilia and what isn't pedophilia is important to Mirkin because he believes many have used the term incorrectly to make sex between adults and children sound more heinous. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the manual used by the American Psychiatric Association to diagnose mental illness, a pedophile must be five years older than the victim, and the victim must be prepubescent. Most of Mirkin's opinions about adult-child sex have to do with the type of relationship that involves post-pubescent minors and adults.

"All right. So pedophilia across the board is wrong, correct?" O'Reilly continues.

"What I ... " Mirkin says.

"Correct?"

"No, what — no, because you're not making ... "

"So pedophilia is defined as sexual contact with a child prepubescent."

"If you're ... If you're going to use a dictionary definition of pedophilia, but that's not the definition that is being used in the United States today."

"Sure it is. That is exactly what's being used."

It's hard not to see O'Reilly using Mirkin. Mirkin's stutter is so unsuited for this sort of exchange that, as he says later, "the only hope is that O'Reilly comes off looking like such a bully." By the end of the interview, O'Reilly has made his opposition to pedophilia clear, in case there was any doubt.

Then O'Reilly says, "But I read your article, and your article calls for quote 'discussions about this' and delineates rape and fondling and all. That is a bunch of bunk, and you should be ashamed for

trying to promote that kind of discussion." Now Mirkin has been chastised. But his appearance on the show is promoting the discussion in which 2 million people are participating. And so, smiling, he replies: "My article does call for discussion of the issues."

Mirkin says he will submit a new article for publication some time after the end of this semester. He isn't finished writing it, and he's not sure to which publications to send it. Mirkin knows few publications will touch the subject matter.

This essay is about the "eclipse of an art form," Mirkin says; in this case, it is the art of depicting children naked. "There is a long, long art tradition of depicting nude kids, especially nude boys," he says. "Now, almost any picture of a nude kid is likely to be considered child pornography." Using examples from famous artwork before the 1900s, Mirkin's essay will explain why naked children are now considered taboo in art.

"I imagine it will be controversial, but I can't imagine how reprints of famous pictures can get you in trouble," he says. "But then again, I could underestimate Missouri."

The last time Mirkin published, it took more than two years for the controversy to build and about a month for it to break. He says he doesn't know what to expect this time, but he's not worried. Indeed Mirkin, who admits he never had a burning desire to be a political science professor, seems to have recently discovered his passion. He has taken notes throughout the past year and is developing new theories about how "those who scream" dominate the public space. He smiles at the thought of what might happen when he publishes his book on child pornography.

He admits there's a possibility the spotlight has made him cockier. However, he says: "The truth is I'm 66. I know who I am." He harbors two regrets: One, *The New Yorker* called him silly (in an article by Louis Menand); and two, he accepted the invitation to appear on *The O'Reilly Factor* (something he wouldn't do again if given the chance).

"One of the things that interests me about me is that I do tend to believe in a fairly benign universe," he says. "I really think good will come out on top. Whatever the hell you define good as."



During his political philosophy class, Mirkin outlines plans for student anti-war protests. It has been more than a year since his essay provoked a storm of controversy.