

Gay Right Holds GOP in a Firm Embrace

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By Richard Minter; INSIGHT

SUMMARY: Conservatives and homosexuals makes strange bedfellows, but gay activist Richard Tafel and the Log Cabin Republicans say stick to the unifying issue: economics.

TEXT: Meet the newest member of the religious right. He's an ordained Baptist minister and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School who has helped elect a score of Republicans nationwide and rarely is seen without his trademark blue blazer and rep tie. He's young, smart, dedicated, conservative - and gay.

Richard Tafel is executive director of Log Cabin Republicans, the voice of some 8,000 gay Republicans. He and his organization are giving social conservatives the first real fight they've had within the party since abortion and forced busing divided Republicans in the early 1970s.

The gay conservative movement first jelled in opposition to the Briggs Initiative, a 1978 California ballot proposition that would have barred gays from teaching in public schools. The San Francisco-based opposition group called itself the Log Cabin Club, a name meant to evoke the GOP's first successful presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln. The group was small but won a key conservative ally: Ronald Reagan. The Briggs Initiative was defeated, and Log Cabin went on to form chapters around the country.

Log Cabin Republicans now comprises 41 chapters in 21 states. Since most chapters were formed in the last five years, gay Republicanism may be considered one of the fastest-growing political movements in America today.

Tafel is religious and right-wing, but his similarity to the party's most faithful and effective foot soldiers ends there. His call for legal protection for gays and lesbians has touched off firefights in the GOP's southern and western flanks: Wins, losses and ties for gay Republicans are being tallied on the political scoreboard.

Among the victories: Gay Republicans helped elect California Gov. Pete Wilson and Massachusetts Gov. William Weld in 1990. In 1992, Log Cabin worked to send Christine Todd Whitman to the New Jersey governor's mansion. Last year, Log Cabin endorsements helped Richard Riordan become mayor of Los Angeles and Rudolph Giuliani become mayor of New York. (Giuliani captured about 33 percent of the gay vote, according to exit polls.) Though other factors were at work, Riordan and Giuliani were the first Republicans to move into the mayor's office in their cities in a generation. Riordan's remarks to gay supporters illustrate the change occurring in Republican circles. "Log Cabin was a significant factor in my victory and is a valued friend of my administration," he wrote.

Among the defeats: Two delegates to the 1994 Texas GOP convention, Andy Smith and Paul von Wupperfeld, fought to drop antigay planks, but pro-family forces refused to alter the platform and crushed Smith's motion. "Limited government is government staying out of the bedroom," Smith argued. The convention, however, elected Tom Pauken to run the state party; Pauken is a man who told his Sunday school class that homosexuality "is a sin, it's wrong. You don't hate the sinner, but you cannot defend, in my view, homosexual conduct."

In Utah, 10 members of the local Log Cabin Club, mostly veterans and small-business owners, were elected to the state and county GOP conventions, but the Utah Eagle Forum, a social conservative group that led the fight against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s, probably will make procedural moves inside the state party that ensure that gay delegates have little voice in changing the platform. "We'll fight against these people to the bitter end," promises Gayle Ruzicka, president.

Many traditional conservatives share Ruzicka's skepticism about gay Republicans, whom they consider to be liberals in conservative drag. "I think the burden is on them to show why [their policy ideas] are conservative," says Tom Jipping, a vice president of the Free Congress Foundation, an organization founded by New Right leader Paul Weyrich. The foundation is recognized widely as the agenda-setter for "family values" conservatives. Given the libertarian leanings of gay Republicans, Jipping argues, "They'll be with us anyway on economic issues." As for social issues, "The question is: What are they going to do for the GOP that they wouldn't do otherwise?"

No doubt a handful of older gay Republicans still cling to the dying Rockefeller Republican credo ("We can do everything the liberals can, only cheaper"), but members of the new generation, however loosely associated, are rock-ribbed free-marketers. Gay conservatives range from Bruce Bawer, a gifted art critic, to David Brock, the outspoken author of *The Real Anita Hill*. A coterie of conservative gays in the Reagan administration dubbed themselves the "laissez-fairies." California's Wilson has appointed openly gay Republicans to senior posts in the state's Office of Consumer Affairs and Department of Motor Vehicles. Marvin Liebman, a gay conservative activist since the 1960s, served as director of special projects for the Federal Trade Commission under President Bush. The Republican mayors of San Francisco and Los Angeles have appointed officials to reach out to the gay community. And at least two former Republican congressmen are gay: Robert Baumann of Maryland and John Hinson of Mississippi.

Like many gay conservatives, Richard Tafel is hard to pigeonhole, or to ignore. He is serious about his belief in God, serious about reducing the leviathan federal government and serious about taking over the Republican Party's machinery.

Hailing from Bucks County, Pa. - an area better known for WASPs and horses than for gay activists - Tafel attended Harvard Divinity School and created a commotion when he refused to adopt a doctrinaire feminist line. "For the first time in my life I encountered the radical left, and it was vicious," he says. "I was shocked. We prayed for those who died during Reagan's bombing of Libya. I asked why we never prayed for the victims of terrorism." Tafel's suggestion was not greeted warmly. "It was a politically correct nightmare."

Harvard Divinity Professor Sharon Welch's class, "Introduction to Theological Education for Ministry," stretched well beyond the ritualized denunciation of the "sexist" Bible. In Welch's class, offensive words included "capitalism," "Christianity," "tradition" and "America," according to the *Harvard Salient*, a student newspaper. Tafel was shouted down when he objected to this brand of political correctness in a required course. Later, the professor segregated the students for a week. Welch taught the women; a male professor taught the men.

When the male students returned to Welch's classroom, they were expected to explain how the class had revealed their submerged misogyny. Most of the Harvard men complied. When Tafel refused, he was derided, ironically enough, as a "typical straight white male." "I refused to talk about my sexuality in class, even though it would have won me points with those people," he says.

Another divinity student told a Harvard newspaper: "It's just replacing one tyranny with another. You used to have witch hunts. Now the witches are hunting." Tafel sought professors better known for their pedagogy than their politics. "After the first year, I spent very little time at the Divinity School," he says. He found an island of sanity in Harvard Yard - the Memorial Church - and a spiritual leader, Peter Gomes, a black pastor who served at the Reagan and Bush inaugurations. "It was oasis and my salvation," says Tafel. He graduated in 1987.

After being ordained by the American Baptist Church through the Philadelphia Baptist Association, Tafel worked at Memorial Church. Eventually, he left Cambridge for Boston's South End to serve as campaign manager for friend Mike Duffy, an openly gay Republican running for the state legislature. Though the Boston Herald put Duffy's opponent on an electoral list of "endangered species," he raised three times more money than his Democratic opponent and won 44 percent of the vote in a district in which Democrats outnumber Republicans 8-to-1.

Duffy lost the election, but the race drew gay support for Weld's successful bid for governor. Weld rewarded Tafel with the directorship of the Adolescent Health Program for the state's public health department. "I was the first Republican in the [public health] building," Tafel says. More than a year later, in 1993, he agreed to move to Washington to set up the Log Cabin national office.

Clearly, Tafel has arrived. He has been featured in the pages of almost every major American newspaper and on television programs ranging from Nightline and Larry King Live to Good Morning America and the McNeil/Lehrer NewsHour. Newsweek magazine named him one of the 30 most influential gay leaders in the country.

Tafel not only is changing the GOP, but struggling to move gay activism starboard as well. Most gays, claim Tafel and his allies, are embarrassed by leather-clad activists marching on St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York and the in-your-face antics of ACT-UP, an activist group known for its aggressive slogans ("We're here, we're queer, get used to it!"). According to Tafel, most want to lead quiet, professional lives in which sexual practices are a private matter. This doesn't mean they want to stay in the closet; rather, some gays say privately, a silent confidence in being "out" represents the maturation of the gay movement.

Tafel urges gay activists to return to their roots. The gay movement in the 1950s comprised conservatives and liberals, he says. "In fact, the conservatives so dominated the strategy that at the first gay-rights demonstrations, a rigid dress code was required: Men wore suits and women wore dresses."

In time, the cooler-headed conservative leaders of the gay movement were driven out by 1960s radicals. A 1969 riot in a New York bar called Stonewall was the turning point, consolidating the grip of the radical left. "The gay community was basically flying with one wing - the left wing - in America's two-party system," explains Tafel. "It inevitably found itself flying in circles."

Tafel offers gays a choice, not an echo. In an interesting twist, he opposes the Clinton health care reform proposal because it would harm the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries, thereby slowing the search for cures for a range of diseases. "Introduce price controls and you can kiss an AIDS cure goodbye," Tafel recently wrote in the Washington Times.

Of course, many gay activists see it differently. "If a cure for AIDS is to come, it will come only from a massive Federally initiated project, like Eisenhower's Highways Project, or the Apollo project," writes Steve McQueen, the publisher of DCQ, a gay newspaper.

McQueen's comments indicate the change in the debate within gay political circles. When Tafel praises New Jersey's Republican governor, McQueen writes: "There he goes again. More selling Gays and Lesbians on the virtues of God, country, and the grand Old Party." But the differences between McQueen and Tafel are larger than politics. McQueen's generation fondly remembers the 1960s protests; Tafel's sixties memories are of grammar school. "When I was chosen as one of the nation's 30 gay leaders by Newsweek," Tafel says, "I was the only one under 40."

What disturbs old-line activists such as McQueen is the fire and brimstone that Tafel reserves for the fringes of the gay movement. Case in point: the National Man Boy Love Association, or NAMBLA. Tafel sought to drive NAMBLA out of gay marches and to rescind its membership in the International Lesbian and Gay Association. "This is not about inclusion or First Amendment rights," he wrote in the *Baltimore Alternative*. "It is about a pedophile support group cloaking their mission in civil-rights language. Exploitation of young people is deplorable regardless of the sexual orientation of the predator or the victim."

Tafel isn't the only gay conservative outraged by NAMBLA. Many gay conservatives can outdo the religious right in their fiery opposition to what defenders of the practice call "a different kind of loving." "NAMBLA should be taken to the edge of the river, shot and thrown in," says one gay conservative in New York. "Pedophilia is wrong in general and specifically reinforces the most lurid gay stereotypes."

It's too soon to say how far gay Republicans will go in moving the GOP or the gay movement their way. Certainly their toughest battles lie ahead. Still, they offer the party mainstream a compelling compromise on gay rights: Say nothing pro or con, and stick to economics. "That's a formula sure to win half of the gay vote away from the Democrats," says Tafel.

Eliminating the party platform plank on homosexuality would be seen as a retreat, claims the Free Congress Foundation's Jipping, and would cost the GOP the support of many Reagan Democrats and social conservatives. Besides, Jipping wonders, how many votes can conservative gays muster? "I'm not sure what they bring to the table," he says. Tafel says his string of electoral successes speaks for itself.

Tafel also favors antidiscrimination legislation for gays, an issue that divides gay conservatives. Some believe that if special protection exists, gays should cash in, as do women and racial minorities. Others argue that it would be wrong for the federal government to tell employers and landlords whom they may admit and on what grounds. Oddly enough, both sides seem to agree with Jipping; changing laws to prohibit discrimination against gays amounts to "social engineering."

Still, Tafel's antidiscrimination legislation, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 1994, is much less broad than similar bills usually are. It doesn't cover housing, public accommodation and rights for domestic partners. "I wanted to keep the focus on job discrimination," says Tafel. Employers are offered three exemptions in Tafel's bill: for religious reasons, small business and the military. According to Tafel, this carefully crafted legislation has a much greater chance of passing Congress than the broader bills offered by liberals. "This bill gives me credentials in the gay community. I need that when I say to gay voters, 'You can trust me on this.'"

Tafel is working with Senate nominee Mitt Romney, a Republican, in his run against Sen. Ted Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat. When Romney refused to bash gays, his popularity jumped in the polls. He now is ahead of the senator who controls the gay agenda in Congress. "The gay left is very critical of me because I'm working with Romney," says Tafel.

Other antidiscrimination activists are more ambitious. They call for eliminating state sodomy laws, completely lifting the ban on gays in the military and sanctioning gay marriage. These last two agenda items are not the political arsenic they once were. Barry Goldwater, known as "Mr. Conservative" during his 1964 bid for the presidency, has called for lifting the gay ban. "It's no great secret that military studies have proven again and again that there's no valid reason for keeping the ban on gays," Goldwater wrote in the Washington Post last year. During the last decade, more than \$500 million in tax dollars were "wasted," Goldwater writes, hounding gays out of the military. "The conservative movement has as one of its tenets the belief that government should stay out of people's private lives." (Goldwater also sent a taped message to the Log Cabin's Los Angeles meeting in August.)

As for gay marriage, Bush administration adviser and "New Paradigm" thinker James P. Pinkerton says it is not such a bad idea. Marriage, he argues in *Newsday*, "lengthens the time horizons beyond immediate gratification" and has "a civilizing impact on society." What's true for heterosexuals, he implies, should be true for homosexuals.

Tafel and the Log Cabin Republicans are sure to play a role in the latest skirmish in the "culture war." It began when Cato Institute Executive Vice President David Boaz wrote an article titled "Don't Forget The Kids," published in the *New York Times*. He skewered family-values conservatives for criticizing gays while most of the social problems they lament (abortion, divorce, latchkey kids and out-of-wedlock births) result from misbehaving heterosexuals. Boaz, who believes that two parents are better than one in raising children, argues that conservatives have been sidetracked attacking gays. After surveying several national conservative journals, he notes that articles on homosexuality far outnumber those on, say divorce. Turning to an index of the publications of the Family Research Council, a social-conservative group, he asks: "Would it be unfair to point out that there are two items on parents' rights and none on parents responsibilities?" Boaz concludes: "Scapegoating...gay men and lesbians may get [the right] some votes and contributions, but it is not going to solve any of American families' real problems."

Boaz's piece ran on a Saturday, the edition of the newspaper with perhaps the fewest readers each week, but Patrick Buchanan didn't take the weekend off. "Boaz, has his social history backwards," he writes, "It was not the Right that started this cultural war. It was militant homosexuals who first stormed across society's old borders."

As the battle for the soul of the GOP continues on the op-ed pages and in party caucuses throughout the land, a gay Baptist minister gathers his flock. Richard Tafel promises to give social conservatives one hell of a fight.

GRAPHIC: Photos (color), A) Tafel: Calls for legal protection for gays and lesbians has touched off firefights in the GOP.; B) Jipping: Revoking the GOP plank on homosexuals would be seen as a retreat. Both By Rick Kozak/Insight