

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

THE STATE OF GAY POLITICS BY ROBERT DREYFUS

IN APRIL 1997, PRESIDENT CLINTON MET WITH A dozen prominent gay and lesbian activists in the Cabinet room of the White House. It had taken the president and gay leaders four years to again feel comfortable with one another since the disastrous battle to integrate gays into the military, in 1993. But after the rapprochement, Clinton began taking the actions that have made him the president who has done the most to improve the image of gays in America – from issuing a ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation in the federal civilian workforce to appointing an openly gay businessman to an ambas-

adorship. Clinton's renewed attentiveness to gay leaders demonstrates the importance of the gay constituency to Democratic politicians, especially in the coming election.

But even as the influence of the gay-rights movement grows, activists remain deeply divided over strategy: whether gays ought to seek quiet acceptance in mainstream society or instead aim to transform society's basic institutions. These tensions were evident in the planning of the April 30th Millennium March in Washington, the fourth organized national march to be attended by hundreds of thousands of gays and lesbians. The two biggest gay-rights organizations, the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, were squared off against each other with the HRC accusing the NGLTF of "undermining" the march. Dianne Hardy-Garcia, the Texan organizing the event, believes it is important for the self-esteem of gays and lesbians, especially those from rural areas. "You have to understand how hard it is to march in Odessa, Texas," she says. But Barney Frank, a gay Massachusetts congressman, called it a "waste of time that will use up the political, financial and eco-

economic resources of gay and lesbian people." Instead, Frank – and many others, including the NGLTF – would prefer that the energy used to get people to Washington, go instead toward grass-roots networking and voter registration.

These activists want to exploit the movement's expertise in getting out the vote – gay and lesbian voters now make up four to five percent of the overall turnout. Among Democrats, they have joined labor, African-Americans and women as a core constituency, voting two-thirds to three-fourths Democratic. "It's now become a reliable component of the Democratic vote," says Robert W. Bailey, professor of public policy at Rutgers University, adding that gays and lesbians vote at a higher rate than nongay voters. "Politicians are much more aware of the significance of the gay vote." According to Bailey, the gay constituency is so valuable in urban areas that even the moderate Re-

publican mayors in New York, Los Angeles and several other cities eagerly court it. And Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush put off meetings with openly gay Republicans until April, but after an unprecedented hour-long encounter, he announced that he was a "better person" for it. He was not, however, persuaded to reverse his opposition to gay marriage or adoption.

For Vice President Gore, the support of gays and lesbians is crucial, especially in all-important California. His presidential campaign has developed a network of 50 to 100 gay and lesbian fund-raisers based in virtually every major city, who are organizing events for him. Last July, a gala in Washington raised \$200,000 to benefit Gore's campaign, and Tomper Gore – crisscrossing the country to appear at several organized dinners and receptions – has raised several hundred thousand dollars in places such as Portland, Oregon (\$100,000), Atlanta (\$30,000), Dallas (\$75,000) and Chicago (\$50,000). Openly homosexual officials are sprinkled throughout the Democratic Party leadership. Organizers are recruiting hundreds of gays and lesbians to serve as delegates to the national convention this summer and, for the first time, the Democratic National Committee is trying to ensure that gays make up a balanced part of every state delegation at the convention. Jeff Trammell, a Washington public-relations executive who serves as Gore's gay liaison, says, "We've found the Establishment, and it is us."

Gays may be ready to crash the Establishment, but the Establishment is keeping its distance. Two of the movement's most significant state victories – the acceptance of gay marriage in Hawaii and a Maine law granting civil-rights protections to gays – were reversed through the efforts of the Christian right, and three other states have restricted the legal definition of marriage.

SOME GAY ACTIVISTS CRITICIZED THE WASHINGTON MARCH AS A WASTE OF ENERGY. BUT AN ORGANIZER POINTS OUT, "YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW HARD IT IS TO MARCH IN ODESSA, TEXAS."

to exclude homosexuals. Vermont is the sole state to legalize gay civil unions.

Virginia Apuzzo, political director of the NGLTF Policy Institute, has been on the front lines since 1976, when she battled unsuccessfully to win a gay-rights plank in the Democratic Party platform. More recently, she served as a high-ranking official in Clinton's White House. Even in that position, however, she chafed at gays' inability to move the agenda, and today she worries that gains are coming far too slowly. "It's like watching an iceberg move," says Apuzzo, who criticizes the movement's leaders for being too content to rub elbows with politicians. "After being in exile for so long, a welcoming embrace is very intoxicating. But what I'm saying is: Where's ours? What have we gotten? We've gotten to dress up with some straight people."

DRESSING UP WITH STRAIGHT PEOPLE is something that Elizabeth Birch does all the time. Birch is executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay-rights lobby in Washington with a \$20 million annual budget. A lesbian who came out at the age of twelve, she ran away from home at sixteen, hooking up with the radical feminist movement of the 1970s. Birch later gravitated toward the corporate world, graduated from law school and ended up as an executive at Apple Computer. "My journey," she says, "is reflective of the movement." Today, whether meeting regularly with the president, the vice president and members of Congress or sitting down with the wealthy gay supporters of HRC, Birch is a symbol of the gay movement's new sophistication.

"I got recruited because [HRC] needed a staff that could work with the moderate middle," she says. "Someone who knows how to work with the institutions of America as they exist." She's tried to create an image of the HRC that counterbalances the stereotype of gay activists as AIDS protesters shouting down their opponents and yelling obscenities. "The screaming was falling on deaf ears," she says. "I don't think it's helpful to sanitize our movement, but what I call the 'Weber set' hasn't been heard from." By "Weber set," she means the respectable, upper-middle-class gays and lesbians who can afford the expensive backyard barbecues.

With 360,000 members and a staff of eighty, the HRC is clearly the center of gay political power. The organization's lobbyists are backed by a \$1 million PAC that provides funds to more than 200

ROBERT DREYFUSS wrote "Dark Days for Gun Control" in RS 820.

candidates for Congress, with four-fifths of its money historically going to Democrats. From Chicago to Dallas to Los Angeles, and in smaller cities like Austin and Columbus, Ohio, HRC sponsors an annual black-tie dinner that often attracts hundreds of gays and lesbians who can afford ticket prices that range from \$100 to \$250 apiece. More than 3,000 members of HRC's Federal Club have signed up to contribute \$1,200 a year to build the organization's political war chest.

Yet Birch readily admits that despite HRC's access to the White House and Congress, the movement has few concrete accomplishments to show for itself. "I'm confounded by the slow pace of change," she says. "I'm very frustrated."

Seven years ago, the gay-rights movement seemed on the verge of a breakthrough. The election of Bill Clinton, who had embraced gays and lesbians during his drive for the presidency, gave the movement's leaders a chance to press their concerns. But gays - long accustomed to being on the outside, banging on the gates - all of a sudden found themselves unable to formulate an agenda. "We'd been pushing against this door - and suddenly the door opened and everyone just sort of fell in," says Urvasi Vaid, director of the NGLTF Policy In-

SOFTWARE MAGNATE TIM GILL IS FUNDING GAY COMMUNITY CENTERS IN CITIES LIKE MILWAUKEE, KALAMAZOO AND BOISE - PLACES NOT USUALLY CONSIDERED HOTBEDS OF GAY ORGANIZING.

stitute. "We were stumbling all over ourselves." Says Birch, "I don't think, as a movement, we were prepared. We didn't have a strategic idea of what to do first and what to do second."

From the very first days of the Clinton administration in 1993, both Clinton and gay activists found themselves on the defensive about the president's promise to issue an executive order dismissing the ban on gays in the military. Facing a hostile Congress (then in the hands of Democrats) and an angry phalanx of military brass led by Gen. Colin Powell, Clinton abjectly retreated and eventually adopted the much-abhorred "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Gay leaders felt betrayed. "Everybody just backed off for a couple of years," recalls Richard Socarides, who served until recently as the White House's liaison to the gay and lesbian community. "Within the administration, people thought that the gay issue was just too hot to handle."

As a result, progress stalled. When there was a Democratic majority in Congress, the White House refused to campaign for a gay civil-rights bill or for

hate-crimes legislation to protect gays from violence. Clinton's Department of Justice opted not to join the Supreme Court case that toppled Amendment 2, Colorado's anti-gay referendum. And in 1996, Clinton signed into law the so-called Defense of Marriage Act, which allows states to ban gay marriage. The president never seriously considered vetoing DOMA, says Socarides: "At the highest levels of the White House, the feeling was that Clinton could lose the election just over that issue." According to Birch, the person most strongly ad-

vocating that Clinton sign the act was Dick Morris, the president's consultant who also served as an adviser to the homophobic Senate majority leader, Trent Lott. So eager was Clinton to curry favor with conservative Christian voters that during the fall of 1996 he ran ads on Christian radio stations touting the fact that he'd signed DOMA. "I've never screamed as loud, in sheer rage, as I did over that," says Birch.

But in 1997, after their White House meeting, Clinton and the gay movement began to rebuild their ties. The

president announced his support of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, intended to bar private employers from firing or harassing employees over sexual orientation. The bill is HRC's top priority, since thirty-nine states do not offer such protection from

THE GAY VOTE IS FOUR TO FIVE PERCENT OF THE OVERALL TURNOUT, SO THE SUPPORT OF SUCH GROUPS AS THE EMPIRE STATE PRIDE AGENDA (LEFT) IS CRUCIAL FOR GORE.

homosexuals is wrong - ruffles gay leaders. It is the clearest evidence that, for all their progress, they lack the political muscle to bend Congress to their will, even on an issue that ought to be relatively uncontroversial.

AN ESSENTIAL PROBLEM FOR the gay-rights movement is its lack of deep-down, grass-roots strength outside the nation's capital. "It's a lot easier to influence politicians by doing what the born-again do, which is organizing a movement state by state, county by county, precinct by precinct," says Dudley

Clendinen, co-author of *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America*. "Building machines in congressional districts, well, that's what's never happened in this movement."

One reason is that for decades, activists have been divided into radical, moderate and conservative wings, and plagued by schisms between whites and blacks, gay men and lesbians, and the affluent and the underclass. Though diminished, those fault lines still exist, and they show up in the division between the two mainstream gay-rights groups - the left-progressive NGLTF and the Hu-



discrimination. Clinton also backed the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, emotionally citing the brutal murder of Matthew Shephard in Wyoming. But with the Republican leadership in the House and Senate solidly opposed to gay-rights legislation, both ENDA and the hate-crimes bill have been stalled, and the chances of enacting them are near zero. In 1999 and again this year, Clinton used his State of the Union address to call on Congress to pass ENDA, but to no avail. The failure to move the act - even though polls show that the public is largely sympathetic to the idea that discrimination against

man Rights Campaign, with its black-tie dinners, hefty budget and Establishment clout (HRC even endorsed Republican Al D'Amato over Charles Schumer in New York's last Senate race). Devoting much of its energy to gays who are African-American, Latino or members of other gay minorities, to working-class gays and community-based groups, the NGLTF sees its mission as going beyond gay civil rights to include a broader agenda for social change.

"We're a transformation organization," says Kerry Lobel, NGLTF's executive director. "We're not trying to leave things as they are and find a place for gays and lesbians in it. We take a radical position, and it annoys people in Washington. That challenges people who are quite comfortable with things the way they are." Many NGLTF activists consider the Human Rights Campaign too dominated by white, middle-class gay men and too dependent on well-heeled financial backers.

The NGLTF's Urvashi Vaid is the author of *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. She is critical of what she calls "gay elitists," as embodied in HRC's mostly affluent board of directors and in Access Now for Gay and Lesbian Equality, the lobbying group founded by prominent gay activist and longtime Clinton friend David Mixner. By tying themselves to wealthy fund-raisers and high-dollar donors, says Vaid, lesbian and gay leaders ensure that the

movement will focus on a narrow agenda. "Having to play to funders really does change the kind of leadership that people can provide," she says. "Why haven't racism and racial justice been taken up as a focus of the gay and lesbian movement? In part, because the funding isn't there."

In the states, the gay and lesbian civil-rights movement resembles World War I-style trench warfare. Hardy bands of activists, usually with few resources, charge into hostile city councils and unfriendly state legislatures seeking to undo anti-gay statutes, to get more funding for people stricken with AIDS, and to enact hate-crimes legislation and nondiscrimination laws. Says Matt Foreman, the veteran activist who heads New York's Empire State Pride Agenda, "These battles are incredibly difficult, and they are incredibly ugly." Just recently, his group won a civil-rights bill in Westchester County, north of New York, and a pro-gay teacher-employment victory in Buffalo, and it is working on a nondiscrimination bill in Long Island's Nassau County. In Albany, the state capital, a statewide nondiscrimination law that would cover employment, education, housing, credit and public accommodations has been stalled for thirty-one years. "And the hate-crimes bill is stuck too," says Foreman. "They've choked on that for eleven years."

Besides the NGLTF and the HRC, the Gay and Lesbian Political Victory Fund has provided \$2.5 million over the

past decade to help openly gay candidates run for office around the country. The Gill Foundation - established in 1994 by Tim Gill, the gay multimillionaire who founded the software company Quark - will provide \$8 million this year in support, primarily, of lesbian and gay local and state organizations and community-service centers. Its work centers on small and medium-size cities like Milwaukee; Kalamazoo, Michigan; and Boise, Idaho - places not usually considered hotbeds of gay organizing. "That's where the revolution is happening," says Donna Red Wing, who runs the foundation's OutGiving Project.

THE INTERNAL TENSIONS OF THAT revolution are fully evident in Atlanta. This city might seem to be unfriendly territory for gays, its Bible Belt environs

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having produced politicians like Newt Gingrich and Rep. Bob Barr, the far-right, thrice-married author of the Defense of Marriage Act. But the Atlanta area is also home to the Georgia Equality Project, a gay-rights group with 10,000 members. HRC, too, has a vibrant steer-

ing committee in Atlanta and closely with the GEP, says Lawrie Demorest, co-chair of HRC's board of directors. More than 1,100 people packed a piece last year to attend HRC's dinner, at which the state's governor, lieutenant governor and U.S. Sen. Zell Miller made appearances. "Do you realize the significance of what's happening here?" asks Demorest.

But what's striking at a meeting of HRC's Atlanta steering committee is that there are no black faces - the city is heavily African-American. Joan Garner, a black lesbian activist and executive director of the Southern Women's Fund, questions whether the city's white gay-rights community in Atlanta is serious about trying to work with gay African-Americans. "I was on HRC's dinner committee, and I was

the only black person on the committee," she says, adding that few black people could afford the \$175 ticket. "The agenda is not inclusive. It's set, and the leadership is mostly white and male-dominated. I don't want to be late to that." Blacks, she says, are already ready to face racism in the workplace and in daily life, and they don't want gay African-Americans

to add homophobia to their list of problems, so they often prefer to stay closeted. Current HRC priorities include domestic-partnership benefits, but these are not relevant to them if their gay lives are not public. Instead, says Garner, the rights groups ought to work on issues like affirmative action, housing, welfare and education.

Georgia Equality Project co-chair Harry Knox would like to bring more African-Americans into his family but seems at a loss as to how to do it. He tried, he says, to get GEP involved in affirmative action, "but some of the more conservative members really had an issue with that." Chris Crain, editor of the Atlanta gay newspaper *South*, says *Voice* is more blunt: "If Harry had tried to get GEP involved with issues like welfare, he'd be cut off at the door. [Its members] are wealthy or middle class and white." For its part, HRC is trying to diversify its mostly white membership, going so far as to hire a diversity consultant called Alignment Strategies. "We're trying to do the deepest work," says Birch, adding, "It may require quite a shift in culture and priorities."

The need for unity in the movement could not be more urgent. Julianne Malichuk, the White House's liaison to the lesbian community, notes that "many bills have been passed." She says that President Clinton could, with a few strokes of the pen, undo Clinton's pro-gay executive orders and appointments policy. "There's an illusion that we've gotten a lot," she says. "In the hinterlands of America, it hasn't changed."

