

Clinton speaks on Gore, hate crimes

Clinton condemned the GOP's stance on hate-crime legislation at a luncheon with gay Democrats in Texas

By Sonya Ross
Associated Press Writer

DALLAS — President Clinton accused Republican congressional leaders Wednesday of deliberately ducking his long-languishing hate-crimes legislation because they fear it would split the GOP base.

"If it doesn't get to be law, it's because the leadership doesn't want it," Clinton said during a fund-raising luncheon in Dallas with gay Democrats. He noted that, in light of a spate of hate crimes in recent years, more Americans and a majority of lawmakers in both parties support the bill.

"There has been a sea-change movement," Clinton said. "More and more people are identifying with our common humanity. Increasingly, society is moving toward higher levels of decency and justice. It's just a question of whether the leadership ... stays to the right of the country on this issue."

Clinton was in Texas to help raise money for his party and to attend a "Texas Tribute" in his honor. The three events he attended Wednesday were meant to raise \$1.5 million for Democratic candidates.

Dallas lawyer Larry Pease, one of the guests at the \$5,000-a-plate luncheon, called the event "an empowering session," adding, "It was historic because never before in this country would a president sit down with such a small group of people that used to be considered a political liability but now are a powerful voting block."

The luncheon was held in a private home in an affluent Dallas neighborhood. About 10 protesters from a group called Free Republic waved anti-Clinton placards on a sidewalk about a block away. "We don't appreciate his lies, his perjury and his obstruction of justice," said Mari Thompson, who said the group was not there to protest gay rights.

Clinton described the presidential candidates, Texas Gov. George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore, as "two fundamentally patriotic people" whose vastly different views on the economy are being blurred by "daily coverage of this or that flap" over smaller matters.

"Sometimes, I get the feeling the flaps are being deliberately used to

obscure the underlying reality," Clinton said. He said Republicans are "driven by ideology and control, not by evidence" that the policies he and the Democrats have espoused on Medicare are more effective.

"They are totally undeterred by the evidence," Clinton said. "The vice president will be elected if people understand exactly what the choices are."

Before leaving for Texas, Clinton said Congress' Republican leaders thwarted the hate-crimes bill because they are worried that its provisions covering gays and lesbians might anger the GOP's conservative core.

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President Clinton

"I think they think it will split their base or something," Clinton said. "I just hope and pray we can do it. If we can't do it, what does that Senate vote mean? Was it just some stunt?" he asked, referring to the Senate's 57-42 vote in favor of hate-crimes provisions in June.

A spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., denounced Clinton's remarks as "demagoguery at its worst."

"Pitting one group against another in order to gain personal electoral advantage is bad even for President Clinton," said Lott spokesman John Czwartacki said, adding that it "is certainly not our inclination" to put the bill to a vote.

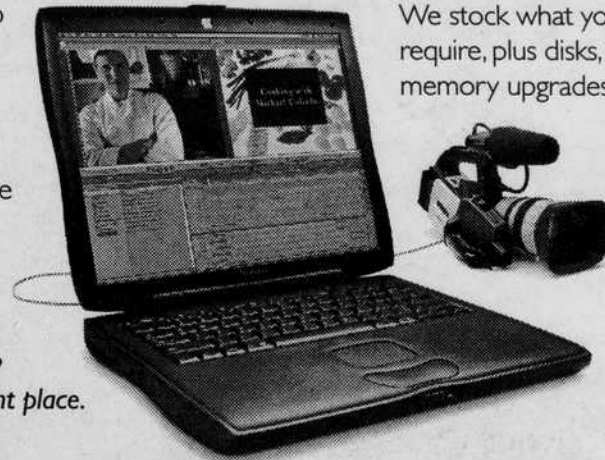
The anti-hate-crimes bill would define crimes against homosexuals in much the same way as racially motivated crimes. Clinton often raises the subject on visits to Texas, site of the 1998 dragging death of James Byrd by a trio of white men who hoped to launch a race war.

Clinton's plan would add crimes motivated by sexual orientation, gender or disability to the list of offenses already covered under a 1968 federal law, and allow federal prosecutors to pursue a hate-crime case if local authorities refuse to press charges.

The legislation also provides assistance to local law enforcement agencies in investigating hate crimes.

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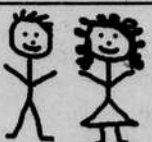
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