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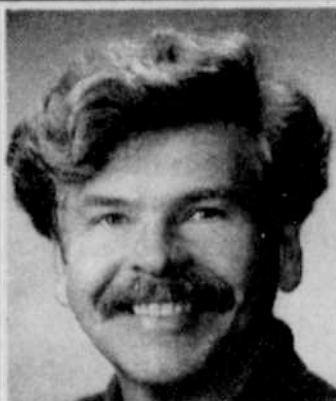
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local news

Whose party?

The battle lines are drawn in the Republican Party

by Irene K. Hislop

The Republican Party is in crisis, both nationally and locally. At the precinct, state and national levels, "Christian" fundamentalists are trying to make the party a vehicle for their ideology, and moderates are scrambling to join forces against them. In Oregon, the Grand Old Party as we know it may be dying.

Although the Oregon Citizens Alliance lost on Ballot Measure 9, they've made several recent gains within the Republican Party at the county level. Lon Mabon, head of the OCA, was elected as one of four delegates from Clackamas County to the statewide central committee. Al Mobley, the man the OCA ran as a spoiler in the 1990 gubernatorial race, was elected county chairman in Polk County. In Multnomah County, former OCA communications director Mike Wiley was elected vice chair. They are the most notorious but by no means the only OCA-backed candidates to gain power within the Republican Party since the presidential election. The irony is that they are making progress while even the extremist Christian Coalition admits that bigots such as Pat Buchanan played a part in George Bush's defeat.

Part of the problem seems to be that while those on the far right are organized into a few powerful groups, moderates are a loosely affiliated collection of individuals and organizations. Nationally, the extremists have Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition; locally, Lon Mabon and the Oregon Citizens Alliance are rallying the troops. On the moderate side is Oregon Republican Party Chairman Craig Berkman—for now. Party-chair elections are in late January, and Berkman is far from being a shoo-in for re-election.

Berkman was elected chairman to put the party back together after the OCA ran independent candidate Joe Lutz against Sen. Bob Packwood in 1986. Berkman has brought the GOP from debt to prosperity, but now he's wondering how to bring it from bigotry to tolerance. OCA officials and supporters went into a rage when Berkman spoke out strongly against Ballot Measure 9.

The question of how to rein in the far right has the potential to bring together a broad range of the political spectrum. Gay men and lesbians, both Republican and non-Republican, and anyone else interested in protecting civil rights stand to lose if the extremist streamroller is not stopped.

Log Cabin is a group of gay and lesbian Republicans and their allies, but according to organizers, the group is nearly as unpopular with other gays and lesbians as with far-right extremists. Eric Brown, the Northwest regional director of Log Cabin, claims that gay and lesbian community organizations often treat gay Republicans with contempt and refuse to work with them, preferring to put all their eggs in the Democratic basket. While many would dispute this, Brown clearly feels that the gay and lesbian community does not support Log Cabin.

"[The gay community] needs to stop bashing Republicans who are gay and lesbian," said Brown. "It's not wrong; it's different. If gays and lesbians can't figure out that different is OK, we're in trouble."

Brown thinks the best way to fight an extreme right-wing Republican Party is to prevent one from coming into existence. He feels it's possible for the party to be fiscally conservative and socially moderate at the same time, but only if moderates, including gays, stay in the party.

"If we're not in both parties having a voice," Brown said, "we're not going to get our civil rights. If left-wing extremists in the gay and

lesbian community think the Republican Party is going away, they're on acid or they're dreaming."

Working within the GOP is one approach to stopping the far right. Clearly, if progressives within the Republican Party were a large, educated and solidified voting block, that would prevent the conservative extremists from taking over. For many progressives, joining the GOP is simply unthinkable—a sacrilege. People can effect change within the GOP from the outside. Brown says all respectful allies—even Democrats—are welcome in Log Cabin. Any voter registered as an Independent can vote on the Republican ballot in the primaries held before general elections. That tactic could set off a chain reaction which could ultimately affect the Republican Party platform. The last item on the primary ballot is the selection of precinct committee members, according to Republican Project Manager Jackie Davis. Those committee members go on to elect a chair and vice chair from each county, as well as delegates in larger counties. The number of delegates is based on party registration in that county. The county chairs, vice chairs and delegates make up the state central committee, which determines the state platform and the state delegates to the national convention.

Generally, contests for precinct committee members are uncontested and unnoticed by the general public. The same goes for minor city- and county-level offices such as school boards. In recent years, fundamentalists have crept into these offices by running as "stealth candidates." While political candidates are usually desperate for media attention, stealth candidates refuse to speak to the media and the general public. If they do say anything about their political views, it is in fundamentalist churches.

Now that this tactic is being exposed in the media across the country, it is unclear how effective it will continue to be if the voting public is alert for stealth candidates. The Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund is one group working to alert the public to these kinds of tactics.

"Yes, it's great to be on the winning side for a change," said a press release from the Victory Fund, "and we certainly would all like to take a break from politics for a while. But that's exactly what the homophobic extremists want us to do." The recent presidential election was the first time a large and organized gay voting bloc commanded the attention of politicians. The Victory Fund warns that the community can't afford to rest because the far right would leap to regain their power.

The Victory Fund warns that as "friendly" lawmakers are appointed to the Clinton administration, far-right extremists will try to fill their vacant offices. Both the Victory Fund and Brown agree that gays and lesbians need to start running for minor local offices.

While this conflict within the Republican Party is not new, things do seem to be coming to a head. Both moderates and extremists have pondered leaving or working outside the Republican Party. While the OCA has tried for the last few years to use the threat of running third-party candidates to bully the party into concessions, only recently have moderates publicly considered leaving the fold. Earlier this fall, Berkman toyed with the idea of reorganizing a new Republican party in Oregon, but he has decided against it.

Whether the GOP in Oregon implodes, explodes or stabilizes, the conflict is not just one within our state. Small towns and big cities all around the United States are witnessing the same battle within the GOP.