

INDEPENDENTLY SPEAKING

Log cabin rolls over

Under Rich Tafel's leadership, the republican group's allegiances have become less clear

by Marvin Liebman

Hoping to raise the profile of gays in the GOP and change the party's direction, Log Cabin Republicans has made headway by claiming gays belong in both political camps. But the group's stance on a recent lawsuit against the Republican National Committee indicates the lengths to which Log Cabinites may be willing to go to secure a place at the Republican table. Log Cabin's decision to take the RNC's side on the suit, which charges rampant bias at the party's headquarters, also begs the question: Who has changed more since Log Cabin Republicans was launched, the GOP or Log Cabin's leaders?

Suing the RNC is Deborah Henson, a former fund-raiser for Oliver North who claims her firing from a job in the RNC's finance office was an act of discrimination. The lawsuit, and two supporting affidavits by former RNC employees, alleges that "the RNC maintains a workplace wherein sexual, racial, homophobic, appearance-based and anti-Semitic comments, jokes and horseplay are commonplace, tolerated and encouraged."

Rich Tafel, executive director of Log Cabin Republicans, said he did not believe there was a climate of intolerance at RNC headquarters. Henson, he said, "was implying that [anti-gay joking] was condoned and encouraged and I disagree with that. I've never heard that as far as the people I know." Even if the allegations were true, Tafel suggested, it would be nothing unusual. "Gay jokes take place in every office and it's not right," said Tafel.

Come on, Rich. First, gay jokes do not take place in every office. Second, the people you know at the RNC would hardly make anti-gay remarks to the face of one of the few gay Republican leaders in town. Your indignation may be disarming to some critics unschooled in Log Cabin's past. But to me it is embarrassing, given your earlier brushes with the Republican establishment. I urge you, and others who may be inclined to agree with you, to think back.

Remember Tyler Franz? On July 22, 1992, Franz, a longtime gay Republican, filed a complaint with the Washington, D.C., Office of Human Rights stating that, at the urging of the religious right, he was demoted to a lower position in the Bush-Quayle campaign because he is gay.

The campaign's personnel director called Franz into his office and told Franz that "due to ideological differences with the religious right," some campaign officials wanted him off the Bush-Quayle team. The job he was offered would keep him away from the public and effectively put him back in the closet, which Franz had strived so hard to escape.

As a result of the demotion, Franz resigned in "humiliation."

Franz telephoned me asking advice. I immediately notified Rich Tafel in Boston, where he worked for Gov. William Weld, the Bay State's pro-gay Republican executive. Tafel also served as head of the Log Cabin Federation, a national group of gay Republicans, with which I was then associated. I recommended he get down to Washington immediately and take over Franz's fight. This would be a singular opportunity to promote

the cause of gay Republicans.

Tafel came to Washington the next day. I credit him with taking full advantage of the situation, condemning the homophobia in the Bush-Quayle campaign and in the Republican Party.

According to *The Washington Post*: a "media circus had been unleashed. He's [Franz] become the latest lightning-rod of Campaign '92, entering the world of media politics, the world of charges and denials, of *Nightline* and *Larry King Live*."

At Franz's side every moment—sharing the limelight, the television cameras and the radio microphones—was Rich Tafel.

"The evangelicals want the party their way, and we want it our way," Tafel told *The Washington Post*. "There is a drumbeat among moderate Republicans that things have got to change. If I can't reform the party, then I won't vote for George Bush."

Gay Republicans had a long-sought national stage from which to deplore the way the religious right had taken control of their party. Rich Tafel became a star.

It was an exciting week, yet other people and events soon eclipsed Tyler Franz. He was forgotten, but not Rich Tafel. Tafel made tapes of his many television appearances and spliced them into a single video. This piece soon became his top promotional tool, which he de-

ployed at every opportunity. He finally became executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Log Cabin Republicans, which swallowed the Log Cabin Federation and made Rich Tafel the leading spokesman for gay Republicans. The struggle against homophobia in the GOP had a stalwart leader. Or did it?

Tafel's recent defense of the Republican National Committee in the face of objections nearly identical to those he raised less than four years ago is an amazing turnabout. It indicates an undue eagerness to become part of the Republican establishment. In his apparent desperation to be accepted, he seems to have lost touch with the real concerns of American lesbians and gay men—of any party.

The RNC hasn't really changed in four years. Among the issues raised by Deborah Henson and the two other former RNC employees who submitted supporting affidavits were charges that RNC officials engage in daily use of "lewd, obscene and profane language" and that staffers do frequent impersonations of "fags" and "homo-boys." One Jewish employee, according to Henson, was constantly referred to as the "whiny Jew-boy."

In one of the supporting affidavits, Kym Hill, now a fund-raiser for the Dole campaign, said, "It was not unusual during my tenure as a consultant to the RNC, to observe, hear and even participate in a great many conversations and activities which would appear to be totally inappropriate, politically incorrect and bordering on bigotry."

What has changed, I believe, are Tafel's tactics and the willingness of Log Cabinites like him to defer to discrimination, rather than denounce it. Has the "drum-beat of moderate Republicans that things have got to change" brought down the walls of intolerance inside the GOP? I think not. But why not continue the fight against homophobia and bigotry in the Republican Party rather than apologizing for it? Why not?

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