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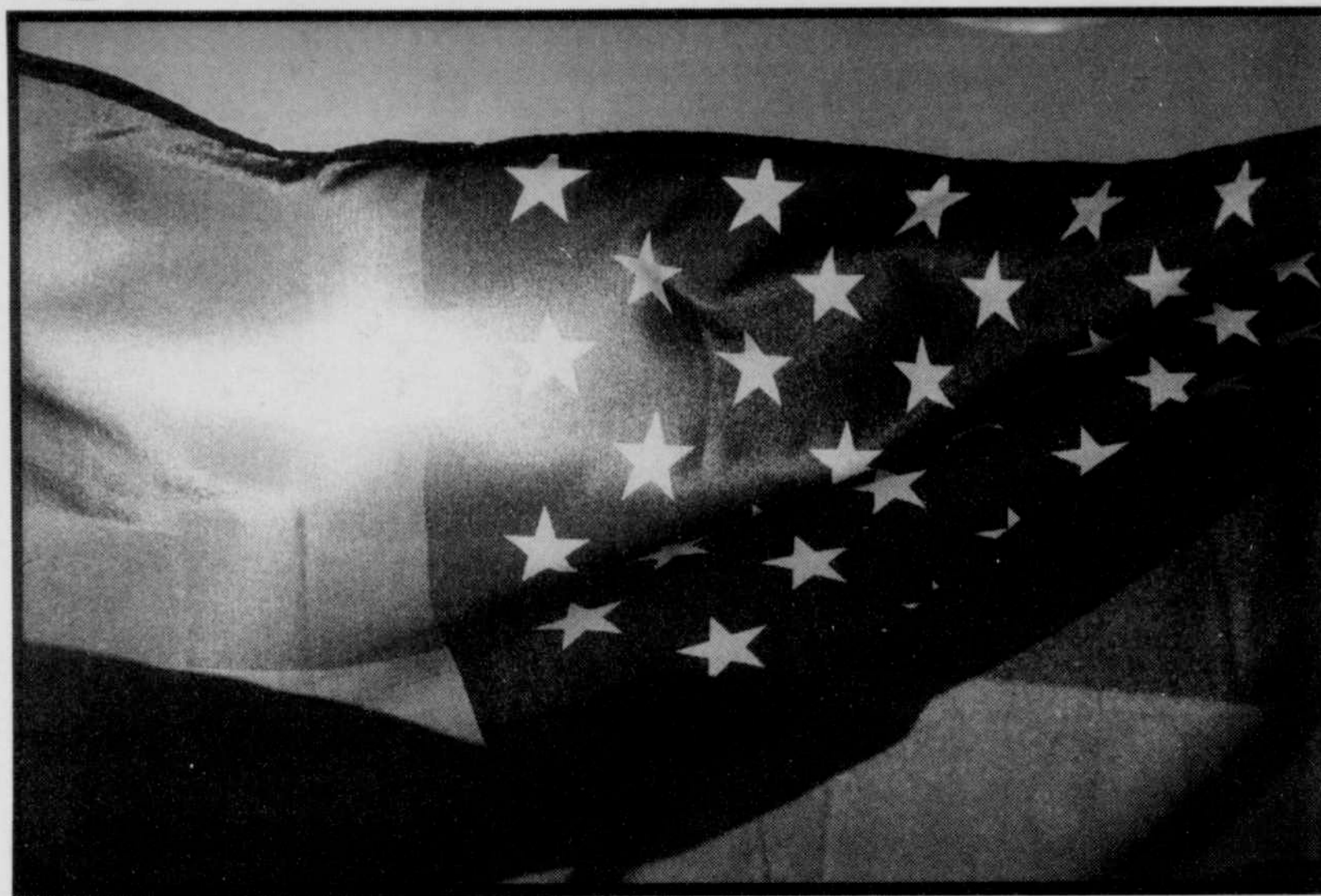


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

guest editorial

God rest ye, merry legislators

The departure this session of sympathetic lawmakers in both parties leaves national sexual minority rights groups with some hard choices

by Bob Roehr

Lesbians and gay men may soon look back at the departing Republican Congress with fondness: The next one has the potential to be much less friendly to their concerns.

The Senate has been the more amicable chamber. But some of the most supportive Republican members will not be there come January, people like Mark Hatfield, Bill Cohen, Nancy Kassebaum and even Bob Dole. While Dole certainly was not a champion of sexual minority rights, he showed little inclination to advance the gay-bashing social agenda of the religious right as the business of the Senate. His successor, Trent Lott, has shown no such reticence, having appeared in an anti-gay video. And the new Republican senators are on the whole more socially conservative than those they replace.

The situation in the House is, if anything, more discouraging. Newt Gingrich tended to limit anti-gay activities because he saw them as distracting from his principle concerns, which have an economic and libertarian bent.

He also had the able counsel of Steve Gunderson (R-Wisc.) both to alert him to anti-gay implications of bills and argue for a different course of action. Gunderson will no longer be there, and it is questionable whether Gingrich will remain as Speaker due to unresolved ethics charges. Believe it or not, Gingrich was a moderating voice among House Republican leadership. Any successor team would likely be more amenable to the programs of social conservatives.

Gunderson's retirement takes away one of the most effective voices on gay and lesbian issues in the Republican caucus, on the floor of the House and in building ties with Democrats. He will be sorely missed. So too will the retiring Gerry Studds (D-Mass.), another effective advocate who could work with Republicans on some issues.

Barney Frank (D-Mass.) remains as an openly gay member of the House, one of its most facile debaters on the floor. But his strength and temperament is that of a highly partisan Democrat,

not a bipartisan consensus builder. The other remaining openly gay member is the newly outed and acknowledged Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.). His past record and legislative interests do not encourage one to believe that he will fill the existing leadership vacuum on gay and lesbian issues.

Compounding these losses is the increased polarization of the two parties along geographic and philosophical lines. House Republicans have become even more dominated by social conservatives from the South.

Two years ago, when Republicans won control of both houses of Congress for the first time in four decades, most liberal and sexual minority groups practiced what many called denial: They decided to "tough it out" until this aberration passed and Democrats returned to power.

Their strategy in 1996 was not to play the interest group game of contributing to candidates of both parties but to place their financial and organizational support overwhelmingly behind Democrats. They lost the bet, however, and now must face the increased irritation of the Republicans.

Perhaps one can "tough it out" for two years, but not forever. History tells us that the party of the president suffers its greatest congressional losses in the second mid-term election, after he has been in the White House for six years. Thus it seems almost inevitable that Republican control of Congress not only will be maintained in the 1998 election, it will be strengthened.

Our national organizations claim to be nonpartisan or bipartisan. In truth, they have worked primarily with Democrats. That will not be enough these next four years. Their options are stark. One is simply to put the national legislative agenda of the lesbian and gay community on hold until Democrats regain Congress. The other is to become truly bipartisan, with a balanced approach representing the interests of the gay and lesbian community before both parties.

It is a daunting challenge, perhaps even more difficult than it would have been two years ago. But there is little choice. The community can demand no less.

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