

**H**ow will the U.S. Senate's impeachment trial of President Clinton impact lesbian and gay rights efforts on Capitol Hill?

If impeachment "drags on and on, that does not bode well for our issues or anybody else's issues," assesses Seth Kilbourn, lobbyist for the Human Rights Campaign, a Washington, D.C.-based gay and lesbian political group. "That is why we are urging our friends on the Hill to get this over quickly."

Former U.S. Rep. Steve Gunderson, an openly gay Wisconsin Republican, meanwhile, says he thinks "Washington will continue to be increasingly irrelevant in the eyes of the American public and their daily lives."

Republican J. Dennis Hastert, elected Speaker of the House on Jan. 6, seems a blank slate to many people. The 57-year-old congressman has relatively quietly represented an Illinois district west of Chicago for a dozen years.

"Other than the issue of health care, he has not even attempted to do a lot of public speaking," says Gunderson.

Hastert is credited with playing a leading role in shaping the 1996 legislation that guarantees access to health insurance for people who change or lose their jobs.

"The strength that Hastert brings is that he has been an insider within the party" who is well liked, says Gunderson. At the same time, he adds, Hastert hasn't been a vocal antagonist of Democrats and, therefore, hasn't been a lightning rod for their opposition.

Still, Hastert's voting record is solidly conservative, with 100 percent scores from the Christian Coalition and the American Conservative Union. The American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Campaign rate him a zero.

Kilbourn also points out that Hastert was the

## OYEZ, OYEZ—OI, VAI

**Brace yourself: The 106th Congress is called to order** by Bob Roehr

driving force behind the ban on federal funding for needle-exchange programs.

"So we have a lot of concerns. His past history suggests that he would not be favorable to our issues," says Kilbourn, "but given the November election results, we are hoping that he will be a fair and bipartisan speaker."

He adds, "We are going to give him the benefit of the doubt for now and take a guardedly optimistic approach."

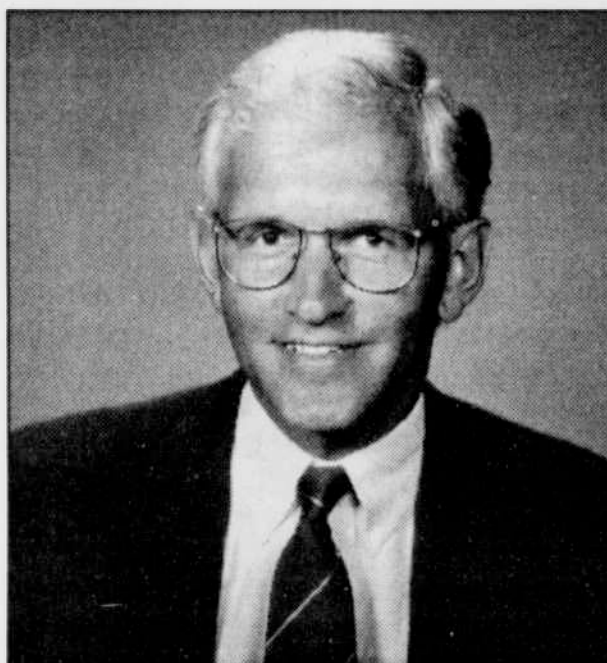
Rich Tafel, executive director of Log Cabin Republicans, a gay GOP group, acknowledges Hastert's poor voting record.

"But we could do a lot worse," he notes, adding that GOP moderates strongly support Hastert. "There is a difference between Southern Republicans and Midwestern Republicans; there tends to be a little bit more moderation. He certainly is not a right-wing ideologue and he seems to have gotten the message that his job is to get things done."

As for sexual orientation-related legislation, Tafel rates passage of a federal hate crimes bill as a "distant possibility" this session.

Kilbourn, however, sees "a lot of momentum on the hate crimes bill." The Democratic sponsor in the House, Charles Schumer of New York, moved to the Senate and HRC is discussing strategies for reintroducing the bill.

In the wake of Matthew Shepard's murder, and if the Republican Party seeks to change its reputation for insensitivity, Gunderson rates passage as "still viable."



Steve Gunderson

Most observers see the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would bar employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, as less likely to advance.

Gunderson says, "We have not done a good job of surfacing enough cases of blatant discrimination to convince certain members of Congress that they have an obligation to override state law."

Increased funding for AIDS programs may be harder to find this year, in part because Clinton is promoting a major increase in military spending and Republicans are supportive, which may mean fewer public dollars for other programs.

"It is going to be an increasingly tough environment to get adequate funding for a whole host of programs," surmises Kilbourn.

## GAY ACTIVIST TAPPED TO BOLSTER PEACE CORPS

Victor J. Basile, the first executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, has been appointed director of the Peace Corps' office of private sector cooperation and international volunteerism. The position does not require U.S. Senate confirmation, and he started the job in December.

"I am what I am, something of a knee-jerk, bleeding-heart liberal from the 1960s who is something of a do-gooder. That's my personality," says Basile, 53.

In his new capacity, he will raise private sector funding in support of Peace Corps volunteer projects around the world.

According to Basile, the U.S. government appropriation for the Peace Corps covers only the stipends and transportation expenses of volunteers. Funding for textbooks, tools, computers and other materials is provided through donations—either cash or in-kind.

The Peace Corps operates in 83 nations. "We have a very large presence in Eastern Europe now, in Russia," Basile says. "And last summer China opened up."

Basile is a gay activist of long standing. His volunteerism turned into a career in 1983 when he was hired as the first executive director of what was then called the Human Rights Campaign Fund.

The group was founded in 1980 as the political action committee of the Gay Rights National Lobby, a group that later folded.

Volunteers and consultants initially ran HRCF, but under Basile's six-year tenure, the group's budget grew to \$2 million and its staff to 20.

In 1991, Basile co-founded the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, a national organization that supports openly gay and lesbian candidates running for office at all levels of government, local through federal.

During the last decade, he has worked as a consultant to gay and political organizations, helping them to raise money and strengthen their fund-raising capacities.

But Basile says he was ready "to do something a little different." The Peace Corps fit the bill.

■ Reported by BOB ROEHR

## BALDWIN PAVES THE WAY

Tammy Baldwin made history when she was sworn into Congress Jan. 6 as the representative from Wisconsin's 2nd congressional district. An out lesbian, Baldwin is the first openly gay nonincumbent ever to serve in the U.S. Congress.

"Tammy Baldwin's very presence on the floor of the House will have a phenomenal impact on breaking down anti-gay barriers across the country," says Brian Bond, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, via a press statement.

The Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund is the



Rep. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., being sworn in by House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert

only national organization whose sole mission is to increase the number of qualified openly

gay and lesbian public officials. It has generated more than \$2.2 million for qualified candidates at all levels of government.

"Thanks to live televised coverage of Congress, millions of Americans will now see an extraordinary congresswoman—who happens to be a lesbian—fighting for things they care about, like health care and education," adds Bond.

Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund officials also hailed Baldwin's place in history as a role model for sexual minority youth.

"Like all young people, gay kids need someone to look up to, something to aspire to and someplace they can feel safe," says the group's political director, Kathleen DeBold. "The opening of Tammy Baldwin's congressional office has given them all three."

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