

# THE PARTY'S OVER

Now that Bush has claimed victory, pundits reassess Washington's political outlook by Bob Roehr

The fear and loathing many gay political organizations expressed during the fall election campaign have mellowed into a cautiously optimistic view of what might occur in Washington during the next two years.

Rich Tafel, executive director of the Log Cabin Republicans, which endorsed Texas Gov. George W. Bush, wants to "downplay any expectations" and fears of a Bush administration. He thinks that conservatives are going to put a lot of demands on the president-elect but that "his instinct is not to go in that direction."

The thin Republican edge in the House and virtual power sharing in the Senate will reinforce that, Tafel adds. "The message from the election is that moderation works."

Tafel says perhaps the most encouraging sign in this delayed transition is that Andrew Card has been appointed White House chief of staff. He is a Massachusetts Republican in the mold of gay-friendly former Gov. William Weld.

Dick Cheney has "a sensibility about homosexuality," Tafel says. That was evident in his support of his congressional aide and later Defense Department spokesman, Pete Williams, who was ousted by the *Advocate*. He also told Congress that being gay did not make one a security risk.

The fact that his daughter, Mary, since has come out as a lesbian only has deepened that sensibility. "It is not something that he is ever going to wear on his sleeve, but he isn't going to take kindly to any kind of anti-gay anything," said Tafel, who cited Cheney's linking of religious right icon Gary Bauer and the Human Rights Campaign as both attacking his daughter this summer.

HRC lobbyist Nancy Buermeyer says, "There is an enormous amount that a president can do that doesn't necessarily make the headlines." This includes executive orders, regulations and inclusive interpretations of existing procedures.

Lower-level political appointees can be crucial in making these types of decisions. Buermeyer says that activists will not have the same access to these people to educate them on gay issues in a Bush administration and fears that some of the appointees will have strong ties to the religious right.

Judicial appointments are a continuing concern. The closeness of the election results might

push Bush to make centrist nominations, which would not be out of character.

As the *New York Times* noted in an article last summer, the appointments he made to fill vacancies in the Texas judiciary brought that body back toward the political center. Buermeyer is taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"The real unknown is what the administration will look like," says Christopher Anders, a lobbyist on gay and lesbian issues with the American Civil Liberties Union, who notices a bit of a split among those close to Bush. "Ironically, it is the Austin people who are the moderates, and the Washington people are the hard-liners."

Anders does not anticipate a rollback of the 1998 presidential executive order on sexual orientation in federal employment. The fact that conservatives tried to overturn it in the House and lost by a margin of 76 votes "basically put a little bit of Congress' imprimatur on it."

Bush told a group of gay Republicans at an April meeting in Austin that he would not seek to change the executive order, Tafel says. According to Anders, the president-elect does not want to be seen as anti-gay "out of concern of losing the votes of our parents and family and friends."



Christopher Anders

## SENATE

Although HRC "had hoped for different leadership in the House and Senate," Buermeyer says the defeat of four conservative Republican senators will make it "much easier for us to move a proactive agenda and fight the kind of anti-gay stuff that we anticipate seeing."

Anders notes that Jim Jeffords, R-Vt., was one vote shy of getting the Employment Nondiscrimination Act out of committee. The changing composition of that panel should make it easier to move the legislation to the floor of the Senate for a vote.

Tafel "expects no huge surprises" in the Senate. He sees Republican moderates gaining influence, and Maine's Olympia Snow is poised to play an increasing role.

## HOUSE

The House has its own set of uncertainties as the Republican leadership seems intent upon enforcing its rule of allowing people to serve only six years as chair of a particular committee. That leaves "a lot of unanswered questions," Anders says.

The Judiciary Committee is the most ideologically polarized in the House, with members drawn mainly from the left and the right extremes of their respective parties. "It is a sad commentary that most of us who work on civil rights issues are really cheering on Henry Hyde" in his efforts to retain the chairmanship, Anders says.

The Illinois Republican "has been able to hold it together" and generally has been protective of civil rights issues, with the exception of his strong pro-life stance. His possible successor does not have such strengths.

The Commerce Committee has jurisdiction over AIDS legislation. Tom Bliley, R-Va., "did keep a lot of bad things from getting through," Anders says.

The Ryan White CARE Act also was reauthorized in 2000 for another five years. It is unclear who will succeed Bliley.

Buermeyer says they are going to have to find "creative ways" to get the Republican leadership to move legislation such as hate crimes and the Employment Nondiscrimination Act. "But once those issues reach the floor, I think that we will do very, very well."


Counterbalancing that, she says that lack of visible presidential support for legislation, or the possibility of a veto, makes it more difficult to ask members of Congress for a vote "that may be a little bit hard back home."

Buermeyer acknowledges the common wisdom that redistricting following the 2000 census will make it difficult for Democrats to gain seats in the House in 2002. Both redistricting and the continued likelihood of minority status will contribute to a number of Democrats choosing to retire.

"We as a community have to be really smart about how we do this," Buermeyer says. "We have to be willing to reach across the aisle and work with both parties. We will never pass anything with only one party." She lays most of the blame for inaction at the feet of the Republican leadership in the House and Senate.

Tafel anticipates "there will be an effort by Democrats, and I include HRC in that, to try to embarrass Bush," quite possibly on gay issues. "The goal will be to label him as an extremist."

Sloan Weisen, spokesman for the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, says the gay and lesbian community saw the 1992 election of President Clinton as a solution to their problems. The far right took it as a reason to mobilize.

"A lot depends on what you make of things," says Weisen, who urged the community to see this change of administrations as "an opportunity to make good things happen. It is a beginning rather than an end point." 

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