

ELEPHANT STAMPEDE

Gays begin planning for GOP convention

by Rex Wockner

The so-called "backlash" to the so-called "Summer of Gay" might not reach its zenith until next August at the Republican National Convention in New York City.

A stunning sequence of gay issues burst to the forefront of public attention in June, July and August—the U.S. Supreme Court's legalization of gay sex; Ontario and British Columbia's legal-

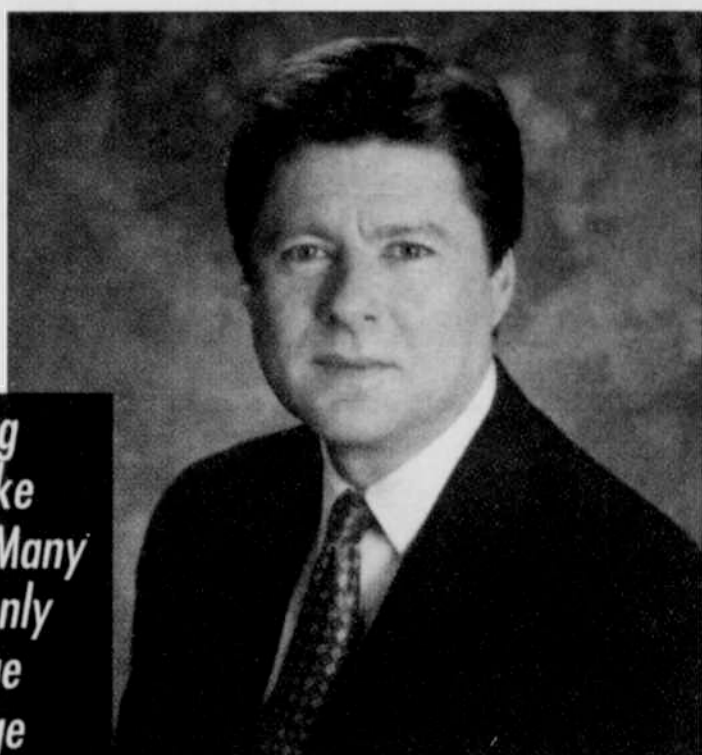
ization of same-sex marriage; the proposed constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage; President Bush's denunciation of same-sex marriage; the Vatican's denunciation of all gay relationships; the Democratic presidential candidates' near-unanimous support for civil unions and gays in the military; Wal-Mart's embrace of gay employees; the Episcopal Church's election of an openly gay bishop; Michael Savage's firing; the smash success of television's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*; the controversy of television's *Boy Meets Boy*; and Madonna, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera's French-kissing at the MTV Video Music Awards.

Then there is the looming earthquake from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, which could legalize same-sex marriage any day now. Given that conservative reaction to this year's huge gay successes might come to a head at the GOP conclave, how are activists preparing for the possible homophobic hurricane?

"There are direct actions being formulated locally by various lefty groups, peace groups, environmental groups...and certainly there are gay people involved in that stuff," said longtime New York City lesbian activist Ann Northrop. "If the constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage is hot, that will increase the participation of gay groups. I would like to see gay groups heavily involved [regardless] because I think Bush and the Republicans are such evil monsters that we have to go after them no matter what."

The head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Matt Foreman, said it's not clear what approach to the convention would best serve the gay cause. Historically, NGLTF has helped execute direct-action protests at the Democratic and Republican conventions. "We've discussed this for hours on end," Foreman said. "Part of the goal is to make the investment of the resources worthwhile in terms of a message that you get out via the media.... The point is to think creatively in a way that will get some attention."

But marching and chanting just for its own sake might not accomplish much these days, Foreman said. "Demonstrations are effective only when you can make a point to a broader audience. If all we're doing is providing an out-



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—David Smith

let for people to vent, to show their rage and anger, that is not what is going to produce a good election result. The real work is going to be getting people out to vote, and voting those bastards out of office."

He added: "The reason we keep losing so many battles is because our side—the people who believe in equal rights, choice, affirmative action—we don't get together.... We need to set aside petty issues, focus on issues we agree on and get people to vote. Fundamentally, the people of America support the core values that all of us on the center-to-the-left believe in."

The Human Rights Campaign also has been involved in organizing convention protests, in addition to press conferences, receptions and other events.

"In 1996, we rented an old theater near the convention site, and various gay organizations came and scheduled events and engaged in activities that were consistent with their message," communications director David Smith said. "In 2003, it's largely going to depend on how this issue unfolds. The right wing is organizing like never before. I've never seen them behave like they're behaving right now. Many of them are openly saying the issue of gay marriage is better than abortion. It's galvanizing their grass roots.... If a vicious, mean-spirited campaign emerges, there will be increased gay organizing."

ACT UP-type groups were active during the 2000 GOP convention in Philadelphia. According to Julie Davids, executive director of New York's Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization for Power, queers and AIDS activists plan more of the same next year.

"It's important that people recognize that protest is important and possible in New York City, and it's going to be extremely prevalent at the Republican National Convention," she said. "We believe it's important to link HIV organizing with queer organizing and with other social and economic justice areas—housing, prison issues, criminal justice issues, welfare, health care, Medicaid, Medicare, immigration, attacks on civil liberties."

A preliminary RNC planning meeting of groups working on these issues took place Sept. 18 in New York, Davids said. "This is also an opportunity to bring our communities together to forge stronger working relationships that will last beyond the convention. We want to rebuild a strong, grassroots base in this country that includes people who support queer rights and understand the importance of continuing to struggle against HIV/AIDS." □



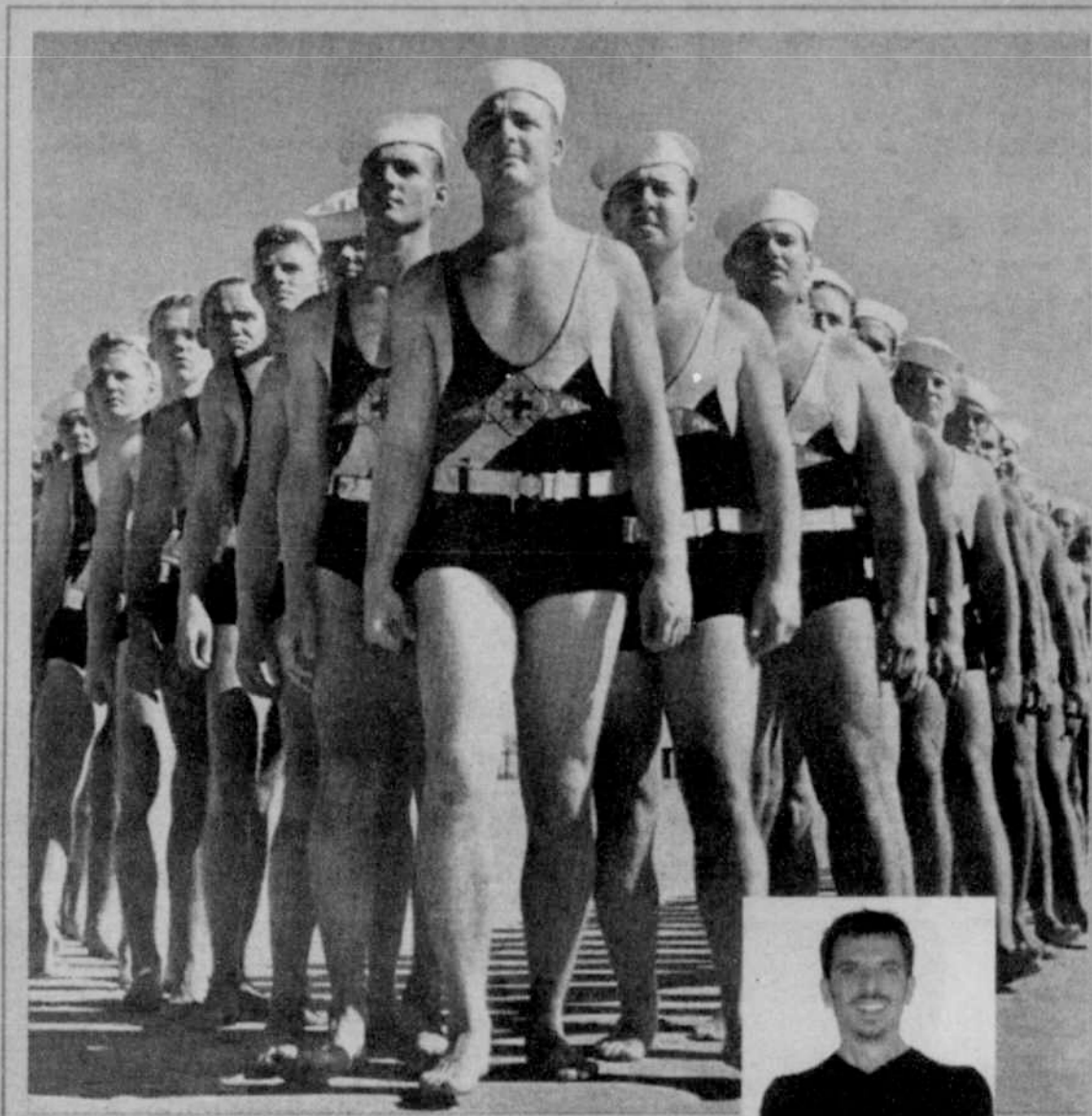
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