

A Republican Group Demands That Senator Apologize to Gays

By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

WASHINGTON, April 23 — A Republican group whose officials include former President Gerald R. Ford and Mary Cheney, the daughter of the vice president, demanded today that Senator Rick Santorum apologize to gays for his remarks equating homosexuality with bigamy and incest.

It was the latest sign of the storm over Mr. Santorum's comments. The group spoke out a day after Bill Frist of Tennessee, the Senate majority leader, rose to Mr. Santorum's defense.

"Rick is a consistent voice for inclusion and compassion in the Republican Party and in the Senate," Dr. Frist said in a statement issued late Tuesday night, "and to suggest otherwise is just politics."

Mr. Santorum, a Pennsylvanian who holds the No. 3 spot in the Republican leadership, has been buffeted by criticism of his comments about a Supreme Court challenge to a Texas law banning sodomy.

"If the Supreme Court says that

you have the right to consensual sex within your home, then you have the right to bigamy, you have the right to incest, you have the right to adultery," he said, in an interview published on Monday by The Associated Press.

Democrats condemned the remarks, and gay rights groups called for Mr. Santorum to resign his leadership post. Mr. Santorum has said that he does not need to apologize and that he was engaged in a "legitimate public policy discussion."

Today the Republican group, the Republican Unity Coalition, joined the critics. But the coalition, which describes itself as a "gay-straight organization dedicated to making homosexuality a non-issue" did not call for Mr. Santorum to relinquish his leadership position.

"These are false and harmful comparisons," the coalition said in a statement, adding, "Senator Santorum owes an apology to gay men and women who support, build and have loving families all across America."