

Ashcroft hosts Log Cabin

Gay GOPers go to DOJ for meeting with attorney general

by Lou Chibbaro Jr.

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft met in his office at the Justice Department Thursday morning, February 22, with five leaders of the national Gay group Log Cabin Republicans.

Log Cabin Executive Director Rich Tafel called the meeting an important step in Log Cabin's effort to become a source of information for Ashcroft and the administration of President George W. Bush on issues of particular relevance to the Gay community.

"To sum it up," said Tafel after the meeting, "we talked about a lot of things. But the fundamental thing is we are going to be a resource for this attorney general when civil rights issues come up."

"It was very positive," said Log Cabin communications director Kevin Ivers. "The attorney general is eager to reach



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Log Cabin members Bob Stears, Bob Kabel, Kevin Ivers, Rich Tafel, and Bill Brownson met Thursday with Attorney General John Ashcroft.

out to all people. He's very much committed, as he said in his [confirmation hearing], to enforcing all civil rights laws. He's very committed to opposing discrimination under the law. And it's clear he wants to be someone who unites people rather than divide them."

The meeting took place less than a month after the Log Cabin group issued statements of support for Ashcroft during his highly contentious Senate confirmation hearing. At the time, many national Gay leaders joined other civil rights groups in opposing Ashcroft's nomination to be attorney general.

In the days following the hearing, Ashcroft took the unusual step of submitting a statement to Log Cabin Republicans pledging to uphold all laws and policies prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination. He told Log Cabin officials through an intermediary that he wanted to meet with members of the Gay GOP group after the Senate confirmed his nomination. The Senate voted to confirm him on Feb. 1.

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Ivers and Tafel said they consider it especially significant that Log Cabin was the first civil rights group — Gay or straight — that Ashcroft invited to meet with him.

"This was yet again a reiteration of what he has been saying since the beginning of the confirmation process — that he is dedicated to enforcing the law," said Ivers.

"I think he wants to send a message out to people who may be concerned that they're going to be left out that, in fact, he is going to enforce the law and that no one is going to be left out."

Ivers declined to disclose Ashcroft's specific comments, saying only that the attorney general made it clear he welcomes the group's opinions and plans to meet with Log Cabin officials again.

In addition to Tafel and Ivers, the other Log Cabin officials attending the meeting with Ashcroft were Bob Stears of New York,

chair of the group's board of directors; Bob Kabel of D.C., chair of the Liberty Education Fund, Log Cabin's tax-exempt educational arm and a longtime Republican Party activist in D.C.; and Bill Brownson of Columbus, Ohio, vice chair of the Log Cabin board.

Several national Gay groups, including the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said they opposed Ashcroft's nomination because of his longstanding record opposing civil rights issues in general and Gay civil rights in particular. During his six years as a U.S. senator from Missouri, Ashcroft voted anti-Gay on virtually all Gay measures that came before the Senate.

Ashcroft surprised some of his critics in the Senate last month when he stated during his confirmation hearing that, if confirmed, he would put aside his personal views and would strictly support and enforce all civil rights laws and policies, including policies and regulations banning discrimination against Gays.

Those statements prompted Log Cabin Executive Director Rich Tafel to break ranks with other Gay leaders by supporting of Ashcroft. Tafel said Ashcroft's statements on Gay-related issues at his confirmation hearing sent "a very strong message that sexual orientation won't be an issue for hiring and firing" at the Justice Department and in the U.S. government.

"I will vigorously enforce the non-discrimination policies of the Department of Justice which protect Gay employees," Ashcroft said in his statement to Log Cabin. "Sexual orientation alone shall not be a bar for qualified appointees to public office under my jurisdiction or in FBI security clearances," he said, adding, "I

will also vigorously enforce laws barring discrimination against people with HIV under the Americans with Disabilities Act."

Ashcroft also denied in his statement that he was one of three senators who placed a hold on President Clinton's nomination of openly Gay philanthropist and businessperson James Hormel for the post of U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg. Ashcroft acknowledged that he opposed

Hormel's nomination, but he insisted it was based on reasons other than Hormel's sexual orientation. Hormel and Gay activists familiar with the Hormel nomination have said they believe Ashcroft did, in fact, base his opposition to Hormel on the fact that Hormel is Gay and played a role in the past as an outspoken advocate for Gay civil rights.

But they also acknowledged that Ashcroft's

decision to declare his strong support for upholding Gay civil rights laws and policies represented a dramatic recognition by Ashcroft and the new administration of President George W. Bush that it is no longer politically expedient to be perceived as being anti-Gay.

Ashcroft's decision to meet Log Cabin officials also will likely be viewed as another indication that the administration recognizes that Gays — and Gay Republicans in particular — have emerged as a significant constituency and a significant force in national politics. Log Cabin members say Bush administration officials have acknowledged privately that they are keenly aware of election day exit poll results showing that more than 1 million voters identifying themselves as Gay declared that they voted for Bush. The same exit poll data showed more than 60,000 Gays voted for Bush in the state of Florida, which Bush won by a margin of less than 1 percent, enabling him to win the presidency.

After the meeting with Ashcroft on Thursday, Tafel explained Log Cabin's objectives in building an ongoing relationship with Ashcroft.

"The [things] we expect [are] really setting a tone for the attorney general to enforce the law and the constitution that protects every American citizen," Tafel said. "When those laws have to be enforced, we want to make sure the issues of particular concern to the Lesbian and Gay community [are voiced] because there [are] fears particularly in our community that we sometimes get left out of civil rights issues. And we just want to articulate that. And that was something he was very receptive to." ▼



John Ashcroft's meeting with Gays was "a reiteration... that he is dedicated to enforcing the law," said one Log Cabin member.

Ashcroft 'will vigorously enforce' anti-bias policies

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apparently in response to news last week that a job applicant, Paul Offner, told the press that, when Ashcroft interviewed him for the position of director of Missouri's health department, the first question Ashcroft asked him was, "Do you have the same sexual preference as most men?" The *Washington Post* reported that several friends and colleagues of Offner corroborated his recollection, saying they remembered Offner telling them about Ashcroft's question at the time.

Two people who worked on Ashcroft's gubernatorial staff released their own statements last week disputing Offner's allegation, saying they were present during Offner's job interview and did not hear Ashcroft ask about Offner's sexual orientation.

Offner was single and in his 40s at the time of the 1985 job interview. He is now married.

"Sexual orientation was not raised as a factor in the interview with Mr. Offner or any other job applicants I interviewed," Ashcroft said in his statement to Log Cabin Republicans. "I will vigorously enforce the non-discrimination policies of the Department of Justice which protect Gay employees." Ashcroft added, "Sexual orientation alone shall not be a bar for qualified appointees to public office under my jurisdiction or in FBI security clearances. I will also vigorously enforce laws barring discrimination against people with HIV under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"I have hired Gay people to work for me throughout my career, and I welcome qualified individuals to work at the Justice Department regardless of their sexual orientation," he said. "I look forward to working with you and Americans from all walks of life to enforce the laws of the United States and promote the common good of all Americans as your attorney general."

Ashcroft also added that he did not place a hold on the nomination of openly Gay businessperson and philanthropist James Hormel at the time President

Clinton nominated Hormel for the post of ambassador to Luxembourg in 1998. But Ashcroft did not respond to Hormel's charge that Ashcroft provided "erroneous" information about his relationship with Hormel when Ashcroft testified under oath before the Senate Judiciary Committee two weeks ago. In his testimony before the committee, Ashcroft strongly denied that he voted against Hormel's confirmation to be ambassador because of Hormel's sexual orientation.

"I had known Mr. Hormel for a long time," Ashcroft said, in response to a question by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.). "He had recruited me ... to go to the University of Chicago Law School." Ashcroft testified that he voted against the Hormel nomination based on the "totality of the record."

In a letter to the committee, Hormel said he could not recall ever having a conversation with Ashcroft when Hormel served as dean at the University of Chicago Law School. Hormel said he has had no contact with Ashcroft since he left his post at the law school in 1967, nearly 43 years ago.

"For Mr. Ashcroft to state that he was able to assess my qualifications to serve as ambassador based upon his personal long-time relationship with me is misleading, erroneous, and disingenuous," Hormel said.

Ashcroft said the purpose of his statement to Log Cabin was to "reiterate" the points he made on Gay issues in his testimony two weeks ago before the Senate Judiciary Committee. But he expanded the scope of his testimony when he asserted in the Log Cabin statement that he would enforce non-discrimination laws protecting people with HIV and would abide by a policy barring sexual orientation discrimination in the issuance of security clearances.

"We appreciate that Senator Ashcroft has taken the opportunity to address these allegations of discrimination, to restate his intention to uphold and enforce the laws of the United States, and to specifically address the concerns of Gay Americans



by Clint Steib

HRC's David Smith said his organization welcomes Log Cabin's efforts to work with the administration, but it also hopes the Gay GOP group will hold Ashcroft "true to his newfound support for non-discrimination policies regarding sexual orientation."

once again," said Rich Tafel, executive director of Log Cabin Republicans. "We will be meeting with Senator Ashcroft at the Department of Justice to discuss working together on a range of issues, including concerns of Gay Americans and people with HIV/AIDS, and we look forward to it."

Log Cabin spokesperson Kevin Ivers said aides to Ashcroft sent Ashcroft's statement to the Log Cabin organization following discussions between Log Cabin officials and members of the Bush transition team. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said Wednesday that the transition team was coordinating the Bush administration's efforts to secure Ashcroft's Senate confirmation. Fleischer said transition team director Mindy Tucker, an official with the Bush-for-president campaign, was in charge of working out details with Log Cabin over the statement. Tucker could not be reached by *Blade* deadline.

Ivers said that, while Log Cabin has not officially endorsed Ashcroft's nomination

to be attorney general, the group was impressed with what Ivers called Ashcroft's "strongly worded" pledge before the Senate Judiciary Committee that he will uphold non-discrimination laws and policies concerning Gay people and people with HIV.

"We felt that much of what Mr. Ashcroft said was positive," Ivers said.

Some press commentators and Gay activists, including a spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign, said the Ashcroft statement to Log Cabin was significant because it could not have happened without the behind-the-scenes approval of the Bush White House.

"This appears to be the first time the new administration has chosen to work with a Gay group to advance an important political goal," said HRC spokesperson David Smith. Smith said HRC welcomes Log Cabin's efforts to work with the administration, but it also hopes the Gay GOP group will hold Ashcroft "true to his newfound support for non-discrimination policies regarding sexual orientation." ▼

Ashcroft to Log Cabin: Orientation not a factor Senate OK appears certain at deadline

by Lou Chibbaro Jr.

The U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee voted 10 to 8 this week to approve the nomination of former Sen. John Ashcroft (R-Mo.) to be U.S. attorney general. As the *Blade* was going to press yesterday, eight Democrats had already cast their votes for Ashcroft, essentially sealing his confirmation.

The committee vote came one week after Ashcroft took the unusual step of submitting a statement to the national Gay group Log Cabin Republicans. In his statement, Ashcroft pledged to uphold all laws and policies prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination. He also strongly denied an allegation that he asked a job applicant to disclose his sexual orientation during an interview at the time Ashcroft was governor of Missouri in 1985.

Ashcroft's statement to Log Cabin was

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Rich Tafel: Log Cabin will meet with Ashcroft "to discuss working together on a range of issues."