

Can 'tolerance' be enough for Gay America?

"I think our position should be toleration," says House Speaker-elect Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) of the Republicans' policy on homosexuals. "It should not be promotion and it should not be condemnation." At other points in the interview, conducted last spring by free-lance writer Chandler Burr and published Nov. 25 in the *Blade*, Gingrich fleshes out his concept of toleration.

Hastings Wyman Jr.

"We want to have an explicit bias in favor of heterosexual marriage." And he means heterosexual — "It is madness to pretend that families are anything other than heterosexual couples." But despite a reference to celibacy as an option for Gays, he says, "Where we're moving towards as a society and in our party's position is that consenting adults can have private relations without in any way the political system being involved."

Gingrich also lays out his party's political strategy toward Gay voters, who may have given as much as one-third of their ballots to Republicans this year. For voters for whom Gay rights is primary, "that person is a Democrat and will stay one ... But I absolutely think we can be a comfortable party for folks who share a lot of other beliefs with us but happen to be homosexual."

Republican officials have a tough time with Gay issues. On the one hand, many of the upper-crusty sorts who tend to vote Republican don't approve of homophobia. One poll, for example, shows the most support for Gay civil rights among voters earning more than \$75,000 a year — the GOP's natural base. Moreover, closer to home, so many family members of the GOP's high-and-mighty have turned out to be Lesbians or Gay men that

the get-togethers of the Schlaflys, the Mosbachers, the Haldemans, and the Goldwaters must be a hoot. Now we must add the Gingrichs to that charmed circle — according to *Washington Post* writer Kevin Merida, the House Speaker-elect's half-sister is a Lesbian.

On the other hand, the Christian Coalition and its allies, riding a wave of public discontent over a near-collapse of the social order, have energized a mass of voters who helped substantially in delivering the Congress to the Republicans. These Christians are a great addition to the Grand Old Party. There are a lot of them. Many of them have Democratic roots and might not convert to the GOP without their fundamentalist church's encouragement. And they're energetic — they knock on doors, telephone voters, and contribute to the party. However, these fundamentalist Christians take the Bible — especially St. Paul — mostly literally, and are hostile to Gays.

That leaves GOP leaders in a bind. The Christians' social agenda offends the party's old core, the so-called Country Club Republicans, the very circles — family and social — in which the Republican leadership moves. Indeed, the antipathy of secular conservatives for anti-Gay politics was exemplified in the defeats of homophobic initiatives in Idaho and Oregon last month. But if the GOP climbs on the Gay civil rights wagon, they risk losing their fastest-growing, most energetic wing. The result is the tergiversations that Newt Gingrich treated us to in Chandler Burr's interview — a little something for family, friends, and the old GOP mainstream (tolerance, not condemnation), a little something for the Christian Right (considering Gay couples families "is madness").

Whether this fence-straddling will work for the GOP now that the party is in

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a more powerful position remains to be seen. More important for readers of the *Blade* is whether the Gingrich stance holds any promise for the nation's Gay men and Lesbians.

My own guarded judgment is that, yes, the Gingrich position — summed up as tolerance, with neither promotion nor condemnation — does offer something positive to the Gay movement. I say guarded, because much depends on whether Gingrich will — or can — hold the House Republicans in line when "condemnation" amendments are offered by the party's homophobic wing. Indeed, Gingrich laid the groundwork for supporting some such proposals in his interview: "I am in very direct conflict with most of the Gay rights movement and the underlying social agenda which says that at age nine we have to identify where your biases are and help you cope with yourself."

So tolerance presumably includes prohibiting school programs designed to help young Gay men and Lesbians cope with the stress of their differentness.

Moreover, Gingrich is likely to find himself pressured to go along with other anti-Gay proposals. Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council says that his group will work for passage of proposals to stop Gay groups from "feeding at the

public trough to produce sexually explicit materials ... in the name of fighting AIDS" and other Gay-hostile legislation. If Gingrich stands up for his belief in tolerance, then he'll stand up to Bauer, and our community will benefit. If he caves, then we'll know his advocacy of tolerance was a public relations sop to friends and family.

Assuming, however, that Gingrich and other GOP leaders prevent anti-Gay legislation from passing Congress, is tolerance enough for America's Gay men and Lesbians?

Most Gay people would probably feel more secure if discrimination against Gays in the workplace were illegal everywhere — not just in some jurisdictions. Some government measures might make life easier for Gay adolescents, who still commit suicide at higher rates than other youngsters. And I, for one, believe legal same-sex marriages would benefit both the Gay community and society at large. None of these are going to come to pass under Gingrich's tolerance-only prescription.

But in the final analysis, and perhaps more intensely than for racial and ethnic minorities, solving the problem of acceptance of Gays in the larger society depends greatly on essentially private attitudes, many beyond the reach of laws. How we are treated by our families, our friends, and our neighbors, whether we are given the room to grow and develop in ways consistent with our nature — these are at the heart of the Gay movement. Gay-friendly legislation might expedite the positive trends of the past 25 years, but it isn't necessary. Left alone — call it benign neglect — we can and will continue to improve our lives, and, in the process, society at large. If Speaker Gingrich can make his tolerance stick, we can continue our forward movement.