

Sex Panic! members Jane Goldschmidt, Bill Dobbs, Jim Eigo, and Alison Redick outside a closed New York City sex club

## Falwell, Gingrich...Signorile?

A new group called Sex Panic! claims some gay activists are helping the far right's agenda

By Todd Simmons

**A** new group called Sex Panic! is mobilizing against what it believes is the latest batch of right-wingers to pose a threat to gay life: some of the most influential gay authors in the nation.

Sex Panic! activists say writers such

as Larry Kramer, Gabriel Rotello, Bruce Bawer, Michelangelo Signorile, Chandler Burr, and Andrew Sullivan have abandoned the gay community by calling for an end to promiscuity and advocating government shutdowns of bathhouses and sex clubs. Sex Panic! has been meeting weekly at New York City's Gay and Lesbian Community

Center to mount letter campaigns to the authors' publishers, including *The Advocate*,

and discuss ways to promote sexual freedom.

"We're pretty tired of the focus that has been put on the new gay right. I prefer to call them fundamentalists," says Jim Eigo, a writer and longtime AIDS activist who—along with historian and writer Allan Berube, attorney Bill Dobbs, and author Michael Warner—is among the group's intellectual leaders. "I call them that because they make the fundamentalist argument that AIDS is nature's revenge on gay men." ▶

Some members say the meetings, which have drawn as many as 350 participants and regularly draw 45 to 50, are the most exciting thing to happen to ac-

MARTHA SWOPE



Kramer

tivism in New York since the start of ACT UP about a decade ago. Ironically, most of the writers and many of the Sex Panic! members were partners in AIDS activism in New York in the 1980s, making the recent war of words painful for players on both sides.

"Some of us who are still involved in the AIDS-action world and AIDS-prevention world look with some dismay at some who were once our colleagues," says an almost wistful Eigo, who was scheduled to debate Rotello on August 30 at the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association convention in Chicago. "The arguments they're putting forth seem very reactionary."

Says Dobbs: "In the main they stand for a completely different vision of gay and lesbian life than many of us would like to see. There are a growing number of people who are taking note and asking, 'Who are these people, and what are they saying?' There's a terrible authoritarian trend on behalf of these gay authors."

Rotello and the other writers bristle at the allegations. They accuse Sex Panic! of engaging in a "smear campaign" and

misunderstanding their work, often because they haven't read it. "It certainly is upsetting to me when what I've written in *Sexual Ecology* [Rotello's latest book] is misrepresented," says Rotello, adding that some of the activists accuse him of blaming gay men for the AIDS epidemic. "It's a gross caricature of what I say in the book."

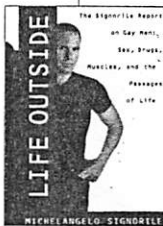
Although the writers have received national attention for their recently published works, their ideas aren't new. While each author has his own spin on gay culture, they collectively argue for a mass movement away from

promiscuous sex, widespread recreational drug use, and emphasis on the physical. They encourage a gay society that embraces monogamy and sobriety—certainly notions that have been advanced before. In doing so, the authors have come out in favor of government monitoring or closing of sex clubs, bathhouses, tearooms, and other places where public sex occurs.

Such ideas have often been advanced by right-wing critics of the gay community and even embraced by many gay leaders in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. In fact, the current controversy has its roots in the bathhouse debates of the mid '80s, when some argued that the facilities

should be closed to help control the AIDS epidemic while others defended them as important havens of gay sexual freedom. Ultimately, scores of bathhouses across the country were closed, setting a precedent that worries many in Sex Panic! They charge that by suggesting to authorities that they crack down on sex establishments, the writers are opening the door to even stricter legal sanctions. They point to a list of shutdowns of gay sex clubs in New York City following a 1995 meeting between the mayor's office and a group supported by Rotello and Signorile that argued for more public action to stop the spread of HIV. And Sex Panic! members say the closures in New York have given rise to more invasive police action across the country. A July 1 story in *The Village Voice* titled "The Crackdown on Cruising" documents incidents of alleged entrapment or other overly aggressive police tactics in Michigan, Ohio, California, New Jersey, Georgia, New York, and Washington, D.C. "Sex clubs have been padlocked," wrote executive editor Richard Goldstein, describing recent actions in the Big Apple. "To some activists, it looks like queer New York is being stealthily shut down."

That's where the line must be drawn, says Dobbs. "It's fine to be pressuring businesses to be part of prevention ef-



Bawer

## What the "neocons" are saying and why Sex Panic! is so upset

"Nature always extracts a price for sexual promiscuity."

—Larry Kramer, *The Advocate*, May 27, 1997

"With the police off their backs, many [gay men] simply did what men have empowered themselves to do for centuries: they became as sexually adventurous and indulgent as they wanted to be, denying any responsibility for themselves or others in the process."

—Michelangelo Signorile, *Life Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men: Sex, Drugs, Muscles, and the Passages of Life*

"Certainly the specter of AIDS has done much to discredit the idea that gay men have a lot to teach others about pleasure, since we appear to be dying from the very pleasure we wanted to educate the world about."

—Gabriel Rotello, *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men*

"Following legalization of same-sex marriage and a couple of other things, I think we should have a party and close down the gay rights movement for good."

—Andrew Sullivan, *Out Facts: Just About Everything You Need to Know About Gay and Lesbian Life*

"There's a vital truth here for the gay rights movement—namely, that we need urgently to put behind us an ideology that quixotically rejects and ridicules everything the average American believes in (God, country, capitalism), that touts diversity while condemning any breach of the party line as right-wing heresy, and that sees the Republican Party as an implacable foe and Middle Americans as unchangeable bigots."

—Bruce Bawer, *The Advocate*, January 24, 1995

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forts," he says. "But it's very disturbing to call for sex police and closures." Eigo doesn't dispute that more responsible sexual behavior could reduce the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. He argues that more HIV testing and education about transmission are needed, pointing to studies that show that the men who behave the most responsibly during sex are the ones who know they are HIV-positive.

Those who argue, however, that the men who carry the virus shoulder the primary responsibility for stopping its spread are advancing the "old bogeyman of the AIDS vampire," says Eigo. "Someone going out to the baths who's HIV-positive can have an unsafe encounter only if the HIV-negative person is having an unsafe encounter too."

While Rotello, who has been writing about such issues for the past several years, disagrees with some aligned with Sex Panic! on the most effective ways to stop the spread of AIDS, he takes particular umbrage at "the deeply personal attacks from people in Sex Panic! and elsewhere against what they perceive to be this clique of supposedly omnipotent gay journalists." Still, he sees great value in the current public conversation. "I've been hoping to start a debate about the issues I raise in my book for a long time," says Rotello. "I think it's incredibly important." ■

DENIS BRACH

Sullivan

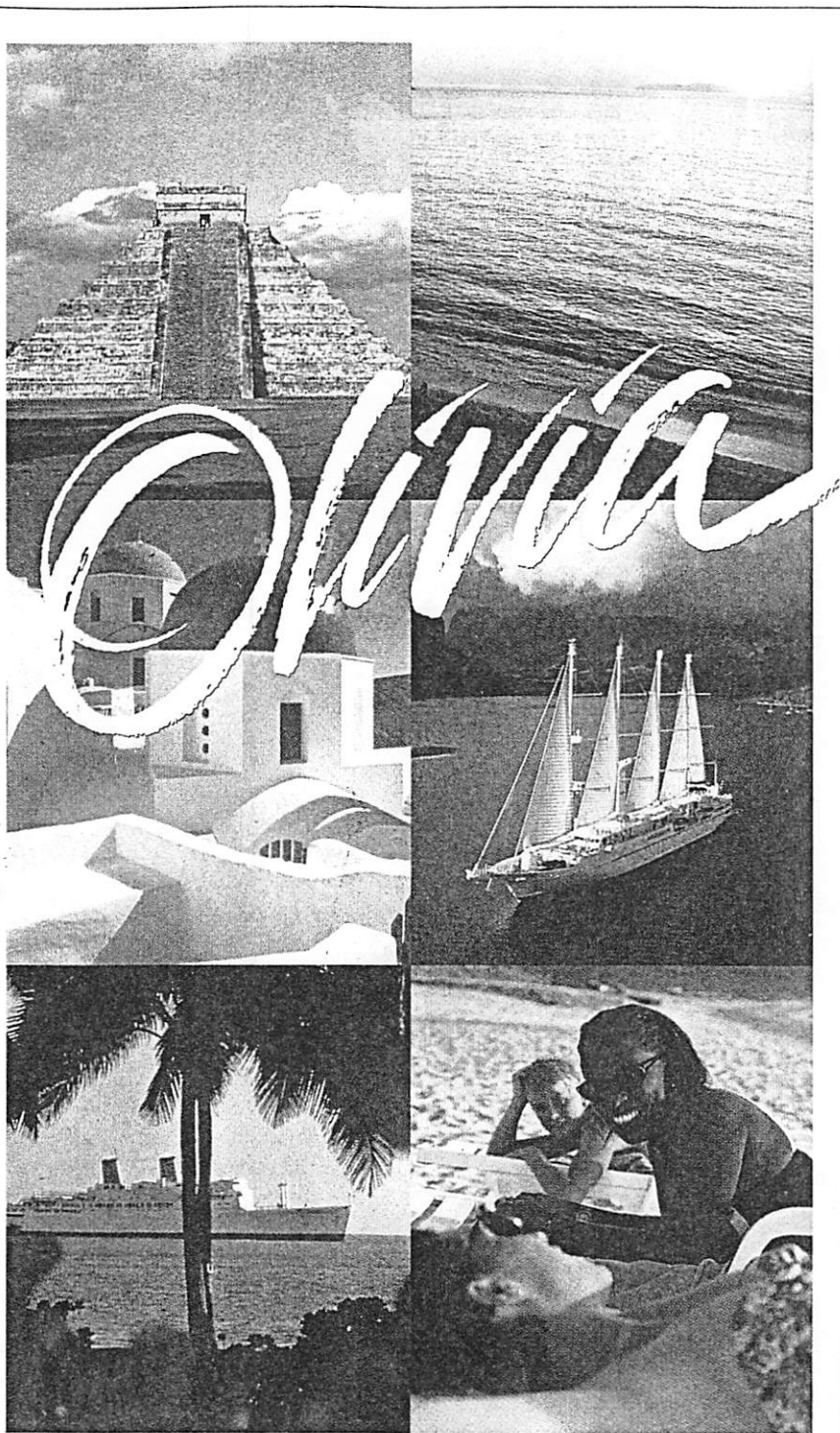
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Advocate,  
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"Rotello points out that the extreme promiscuity of some gay men created an 'ecological niche' in which the virus passed from infected to uninfected. This niche gave rise to the AIDS epidemic, which is what makes it possible for someone like Pat Buchanan to say, 'The poor homosexuals—they have declared war on Nature, and now Nature is exacting an awful retribution.'"

—Chandler Burr,  
*Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*,  
 summer 1997



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