

# GAY-BASHING A MISTAKE FOR GOP

BY RICHARD L. TAFEL

The writer is the executive director of Log Cabin Republicans, a group that supports gay and lesbian issues.

**L**AST WEEK was not a good week for the leadership of the Republican Party. With all of the major legislative issues confronting Congress, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and his colleagues were comparing gays and lesbians to kleptomaniacs, drug addicts and alcoholics, inflaming a growing conflict within the GOP on its shaky status as the party of the "big tent."

I'm an ordained American Baptist minister who also was born gay.

Lott claimed to speak for all Christians when he claimed that homosexuality is a sin and an illness that should be treated. But history shows that every time our country has tried to move forward on the issue of equality, large parts of the country oppose it, and invariably, they back up their opinions with their interpretations of the Bible.

Lott is a Southern Baptist, a church that broke with the American Baptists a century ago over the issue of slavery. Just a few generations ago, Lott's church-going relatives were loudly quoting the *Book of Ephesians*, which commands: "Slaves, obey your masters."

People of faith have been polarized on every social debate in our country since its founding, and the most strident have always used the Bible to maintain the *status quo* or to return to a nostalgic view of America. Lott plainly sides with the Rev. Pat Robertson in his view of a vengeful God who curses nations and strikes cities with hurricanes and meteors. I believe in a God of love who counsels humility, forgiveness and a special compassion for society's outcasts. Jesus Christ walked with the lepers, and he was crucified by the religious and political establishment of his day.

So we have two very different ideas of God. The brilliance of Amer-

ica is that we have erected a wall between any particular religious group and the governing of our pluralistic society. If Lott would refresh himself on Baptist history, he'd discover that no group pushed harder for separation of church and state than those Baptists who feared that the other Protestant denominations would persecute them. It is interesting what a little power can do.

Today, Southern Baptists occupy every major office in the U. S. government. The President, the Vice President, the Speaker of the House, the President Pro Tem of the Senate and the Senate Majority Leader are Southern Baptists. And, in the Baptist tradition, they represent diver-

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gent religious views even among themselves. But political leaders are called on to unite diverse people behind broad principles, not to divide them along narrow ideological lines.

I am a full-time Republican activist. Every day, I'm out campaigning for Republican House and Senate members and Republican governors and state legislators who share the vision of an inclusive party. Republican success on Capitol Hill in 1994 was built upon a surge of GOP victories in every region of the country, including the Northeast and the West Coast, where scores of Republicans who support gay rights won in heavily Democratic territory. Many of them are on the ropes this year.

Lott is taking the GOP in a very dangerous direction, and solid mainstream Republicans are left with no choice but to defy him. The Republican Party, from Abraham Lincoln to

Ronald Reagan, has always been a party of diverse people united around the principles of individual rights, individual responsibility, limited government and free markets — not selected literal readings of biblical text and driving out the infidels.

Whether through ignorance or serious political miscalculation, Lott wants to embrace this new, disturbing course. Many Republicans are beginning to wonder if their national leaders have any idea what they are doing.

There is simply no excuse for an educated person to believe that homosexuality is a disease that can be "cured." The American Psychological Association put this issue behind them a quarter-century ago. The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican long ago declared that homosexuality is not a choice and not a disease. If Lott wants to be a leader and speak out on these issues, he needs to educate himself. Log Cabin Republicans exists to educate Republicans on this matter; sadly, Lott remains one of the very few

senators who refuse to meet with our group.

To pander to the most extreme elements of the party, many of whom, like Trent Lott, are Southern defectors from the Democratic Party and seem to have allegiance only to their rigid ideology, is a recipe for disaster. Caving in to this intolerant minority not only demeans and demoralizes other Republicans, it costs them elections and shrinks our party every election cycle.

So the question remains: Will we be the party of limited government, free markets and individual rights, or will we become a group of Bible-debating Southern Baptists? Voters across America are scratching their heads in bewilderment as our so-called leaders stumble toward a decision. And November is right around the corner.