

POLITICAL MEMO

# Stakes High for Both In Bush-Gays Meeting

By RICHARD L. BERKE

WASHINGTON, April 12 — On Thursday morning Gov. George W. Bush of Texas will meet at his campaign headquarters in Austin with a handful of representatives of what may be the tiniest sliver of his party's electorate: gay Republicans.

While the votes of gays will probably not tilt the election, the gathering is shaping up as one of the more remarkable events of the current campaign. That is in part because many gay leaders have repudiated Mr. Bush's political agenda and, from the other direction, many of the governor's conservative allies have accused gays of promoting a lifestyle that the conservatives condemn as an assault on family values.

But what at first glance seems like an unlikely decision by Mr. Bush to meet with about a dozen gay supporters — this is the first time a Republican nominee has convened such a session — the event underscores new realities about Republican politics and about the maturation of gays as a force in that party.

Even as they conceded that they expected to draw little support from gays in November, strategists for Mr. Bush said that they considered building relations with gays an important way to appeal to moderate voters, much as Mr. Bush did with his recent criticism of the National Rifle Association. A national survey of self-identified gay voters in the 1998 election — who made up 4 percent of the electorate — found that 56 percent were Democrats, 20 percent Republicans and 24 percent independent.

"I don't think this election is going to be decided by the gay vote — it's not going to be that close," said Fred Steeper, a pollster for Mr. Bush. "But by meeting with groups like gay Republicans, you appeal to those voters who highly value diversity and toleration. The trade-off is there are others who would say you are promoting the wrong type of lifestyle. It will help with some voters and hurt with others."

Indeed, the Bush camp is ambivalent about how aggressively to court gay support. Fearful, perhaps, of incurring the wrath of conservatives, Bush campaign officials this week contacted prominent conservatives to assure them that Mr. Bush was not about to cave in to the agenda of his visitors on Thursday.

"They said they felt they needed to do it," Michael Ferris, a leading conservative home school advocate, said of his call from a Bush campaign official. "I've been assured that there would be no change in policy."

Still, Mr. Ferris expressed some concern about the meeting, saying, "Someone demanding a right at the table because of their homosexuality — that's what bothers me."

While some gay Republicans applaud Mr. Bush's efforts, the closed-door gathering has intensified a roiling fight in their ranks over political strategy in general and, specifically, over how much they should cozy up to Mr. Bush.

Leaders of the Log Cabin Republicans, a national organization of gay Republicans that says it has 11,000

members, have taken a combative approach: for months, the group criticized Mr. Bush's stands on issues of consequence to gays. During the primaries, the group helped Mr. Bush's opponent Senator John McCain, who had met with the Log Cabin group but whose positions on issues important to the organization were similar to Mr. Bush's — and unacceptable to many of the group's leaders.

But other prominent gay Republicans, including members of some Log Cabin branches, have pressed for a more pragmatic, and conciliatory, strategy of working on the inside by backing Mr. Bush and trying in a non-threatening manner to persuade him to embrace their positions. They accused the Log Cabin group of thriving on publicity at any cost.

By criticizing Mr. Bush, the Log Cabin leaders have found their influence in the Bush campaign diminished. The meeting on Thursday includes gay Republicans who are committed to supporting the governor. Bush advisers said the national

## An effort to deal with twin fractures within the Republican Party.

leaders of Log Cabin were not invited because they have been unfriendly to the campaign and intent on capturing publicity at Mr. Bush's expense.

"Some people are Republicans first; others are gay first," said former Representative Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin, a gay Republican. "Some people believe that a seat at the table is always progress no matter where a candidate stands. Others believe that for the interest of integrity you have to have some kind of gesture from a candidate before you can be there."

Mr. Gunderson said he would attend the meeting because it was a good first step, but "no candidate ought to expect support from gays and lesbians just from recognizing our existence."

The executive director of Log Cabin, Rich Tafel, who has criticized Mr. Bush and who was excluded from the meeting, warned that the participants should not be "boosters of the candidate irregardless of specific policy issues." Mr. Tafel questioned whether the participants would press the governor on matters like his position on discrimination on the job.

"It's tempting when the governor says, 'Come to the mansion, you're a supporter.' That's exciting," Mr. Tafel said. "Some of these people are thrilled at the idea of being power brokers."

He said that since gays sometimes felt rejected by society, being invited to meet with Mr. Bush was "a huge affirmation."

But, Mr. Tafel added, "it's dangerous to get involved in gay politics if you have an underlying desire to be liked."

Mr. Tafel said that his organization was specifically concerned about Mr. Bush's mixed signals on whether he would appoint openly gay people to his administration. And he said he expected Mr. Bush to repudiate efforts by his supporters to attack homosexuals when his campaign was seeking support from conservatives in the South Carolina primary.

Sounding at times supportive and at other times dismissive about the session in Austin, Mr. Tafel said that "they'll try to lay the ground work to get a real meeting set up" that would include Log Cabin officials.

Carl Schmid, a former president of the Log Cabin club in Washington, who will attend the meeting, said it was a mistake for Mr. Tafel and others to criticize Mr. Bush publicly.

"You cannot attack one day and expect to be invited the next day to meet with the candidate," Mr. Schmid said. "The way you act determines how you make progress. Do you want to do it through the headlines or do it through hard work and positive, constructive dialogue and patience?"

Scott E. Huch, a vice president of the Log Cabin Club of Northern Virginia, who will take part in the meeting, also preached patience among those who are critical of Mr. Bush.

"We expect Bush to be an expert on public policy issues that affect gay and lesbian people," Mr. Huch said. "But Bush is probably right about where you'd expect somebody to be if they were an ordinary person who never had to deal with this issue on a personal level."

While the disputes among gay Republicans might reflect their growing influence, several said the strains were troubling.

"The gay political movement has matured in this country," Mr. Gunderson said. "But we're not very good at practicing the same tolerance and respect that we preach."