

news

National Groups Cautious about Bush Presidency

BY BARBARA DOZETOS

Vice President Gore has made his concession speech; George W. Bush has accepted the title of President-Elect. Were there important messages in the speeches for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans? Will there be fallout from the election controversy for gays?

"They struck the right conciliatory tone," said Kevin McGruder, executive director of Gay Men of African Descent, "but I have issues that go beyond the speeches." Problems with the voting process itself concern McGruder. "It isn't just a matter of the right to vote," he said, "but it seems in some cases, our voices aren't heard, even when we do vote. There are systematic ways of eliminating them." To hear these issues brushed aside as technicalities is frustrating, he said.

Bitterness about the process is a common reaction. "This election has made apparent what is common knowledge: our politicians, organizations, and courts no longer speak for us as Americans, but as only for one or another of an endless series of balkanized special interest groups," said GenderPAC Executive

Director Riki Wilchins.

The Log Cabin Republicans' Rich Tafel had little to say about the controversy of recent weeks. Instead, he echoed sentiments heard in both Bush's and Gore's speeches calling for bipartisanship and healing. "It is time," he said, "for the nation to unite behind our next president." He said the close election reflects a nation not bitterly divided as some say, but closely aligned on "sound, centrist principles and beliefs." Tafel called on the Republican Party to "rise to the occasion of this historic moment, ...to reach out to all Americans from all walks of life, including gay and lesbian Americans, with open minds and open hearts."

Daniel McGlinchey, political director of the National Stonewall Democrats, said, "Calls for unity are often fleeting, so we should act." He urged gay Republicans to "use their inside track to the Bush administration to hold them to their word." He promised follow-up from gay Democrats in the form of "vast and overwhelming support to pass public policies that give gay and lesbian Americans their full rights as citizens."

In his speech, Vice President Gore reminded Americans that our similar-

ities are greater than our differences. Acknowledging that, Wilchins says coalition is the key to moving forward now. "It is time for new movements that demand we build bridges to one another in stead of burn them," she said, "that we stress our commonalities instead of our differences." She believes GenderPAC, the national gender rights organization, can play a key role in that movement.

"We believe George W. Bush has little energy of judgment," said McGlinchey, "so we don't expect that he will directly attack gay and lesbian Americans." However, he said, he isn't convinced Bush would help defend gays from political attack or be proactive in their favor.

McGruder believes Bush genuinely wants to be inclusive, and expects to see symbolic gestures, but said more is needed. "Where are the policies? Those need to be articulated," he said. Referring to the high visibility of minorities at the Republican National Convention and the expected cabinet appointments for Colin Powell and Condaleeza Rice, he said, "I don't think these are entirely empty gestures."

In short, McGruder says, "I'm not sure they know how to do what they think they want to do." ▼

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Photo: Max Stroud

Mary Bonauto (right) is an attorney with Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders. She's pictured here with Beth Robinson, her co-counsel in *Baker v Vermont*.

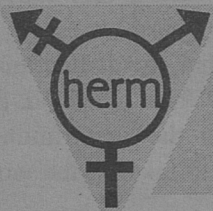
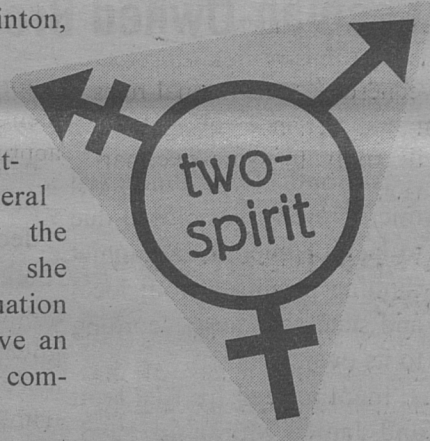
their ability from here on to compromise."

Equally, if not more, important to the progress of gay rights, said Bonauto, will be the appointments Bush, as president, can make to lower federal courts. The District and Appeals courts see many more cases of direct importance to gays and lesbians, she said.

The U.S. Senate's lack of action on many appointments by President Clinton, Bonauto said, has left the federal court system severely understaffed. "Bush is inheriting a crisis in the federal judiciary created by the Senate Republicans," she said, and how that situation gets handled could have an enormous effect on the community.

Although no current Supreme Court justice has

announced plans to retire soon, some analysts have mentioned the possibility of stalemates between the Senate and the Executive branch leading to Supreme Court seats left vacant indefinitely, just as has occurred on lower courts. The frontline in the battle for the judiciary, said Bonauto, will be the Senate. ▼



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itself.

Additionally, Derby said, stemming anti-gay harassment is a key part of one of Wolk's top priorities: making Vermont schools safe for all students. "We believe Outright does good work," she said. "We want to learn from them, not compete."

Elston said he is puzzled by the department's insistence that Outright's work is valuable and well done in the face of the decision. He is also curious about how the department will avoid the same public relations problems Outright has had.

"Why duplicate a service they admit has been effective?" said Elston. "It doesn't make sense for them to go in

and do the same thing we've been doing, because they'll face the same trouble. We've been doing this for 11 years and we've been successful."

Elston said his bottom line is that he and his staff are better qualified than the department to do what they've been doing.

"I don't want to detract from the safe schools program, or from our non-gay allies and supporters," he said, "but they can't speak with the same moral persuasion as gay people can."

Derby said department personnel these and other concerns into consideration as they lay out plans for the program.

Wolk said he will continue

to use Outright to help in teacher trainings, but specific plans will not be in place until later this month.

Despite the situation, Elston continues to have faith in the commissioner.

"In my weaker moments, I've been frustrated and angry," he said, "but if I ever suggested or thought bad things about Dave Wolk's involvement in this, I'd be wrong. He's been an incredible ally to our community." ▼