

delegates interviewed in television complained that "Why should we have an AIDS victim up there instead of someone with cancer?" "I feel sorry for her but not for the homosexuals and junkies," and "I wish she had left the stuff about homosexuals out of her speech."

The Republican swing to the far right on social issues, including civil rights, AIDS policy and abortion has been so dramatic that even the national association of gay Republican clubs has refused to endorse Bush's re-election bid. In a clear attempt to shore up support from his own party's right wing and to attract so-called "Reagan Democrats", President Bush is using the theme of "Family Values." While George Bush has refrained from direct involvement in the attacks, the Republican campaign is using surrogates like Vice President Quale, Gringrich, Buchanan and others to inflame the issue. Many political observers cite the use of prejudices around lesbian and gay issues as this campaign's version of the 1988 Willie Horton attack. Some pollsters and political professionals have expressed doubt that the emotional issue will have the impact Republicans seem to be aiming for. "We'd be more worried if there wasn't a recession going on, but the reality is that an autoworker doesn't care about who someone sleeps with if his or her first concern is making sure they still have a job next year," says one national Democratic strategist.

There are signs that the Republicans may be backing off the family values theme after the negative reaction among much of the press and public to the political queer-bashing that took place in Houston. Rumors abound in political circles that the anti-gay message will be downplayed in the general campaign, instead focussing it on targeted audiences. For example, the Bush campaign has radio commercials in development for airing on southern and country western stations claiming that Bill Clinton's election will force schools to hire gay teachers. By concentrating the message on audiences thought to be most hostile to civil rights, the campaign may sway them without the criticism likely to come from sending the same message out to a national audience.

It remains to be seen how much impact lesbian and gay issues will have on the fall campaign, but it is clear that we will be receiving more attention than we ever have in any national campaign in the past. ▼

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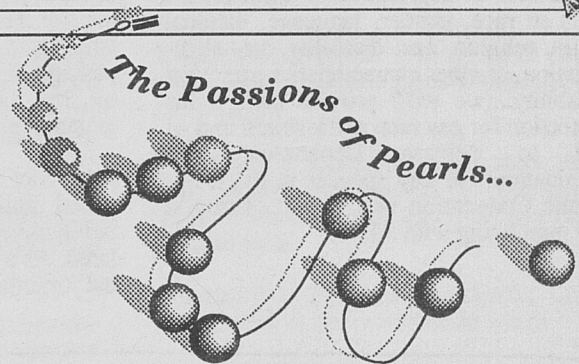
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