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By Patrick J. Kiger

“We’re
We’re Here!
Queer!
We’re Republican!”

The Highland Park section of Dallas, perhaps the most Republican neighborhood in America, is an enclave of mansions and manicured lawns whose owners' politics are as predictable as the gleaming Mercedes or Caddy sporting a faded "BUSH/QUAYLE '92" bumper sticker at the end of every driveway. That makes it the perfect place for young, gay G.O.P. activist Rich Tafel to prove that Republican America is not quite as straight as Patrick J. Buchanan or the Christian Coalition would have us assume.

We are attending a Friday-evening fund-raiser for the Log Cabin Republicans, the national gay-and-lesbian conservative lobby, of which Tafel is the executive director. The setting is a Lakeside Drive villa, where visitors are greeted at the door by twin neoclassic statues of cherubim festooned with strands of costume jewelry. Upstairs, the master of the house, 71-year-old lawyer-turned-interior-designer Eugene Frazier, has been giving us the lowdown on how regular sessions inside a pyramid fashioned from chrome poles, combined with frequent doses of spirulina, give him the vim and vigor to keep up with a lover half his age. "It's 75 percent protein and 95 percent digestible," he

True-blue and bête noire: Rich Tafel, leader of a gay conservative group, offends both liberal gays and Republican mossbacks.

You don't have to be straight to like Bob Dole, free enterprise and small government, say some unwelcome, would-be members of the G.O.P.

explains to Tafel, who nods appreciatively.

Our septuagenarian boy-toy host leads us down the spiral staircase, past a life-size mannequin dressed in a geisha costume—a remnant of one of his legendary dress-up bashes—and gestures toward a couch laden with stuffed animals, suggesting that we take our pick as mementos of the evening. “Thanks. . . maybe later,” responds Tafel delicately. He is a trim, square-shouldered 31-year-old with close-cropped brown hair, clad in New England preppy drag—a navy pinstriped sack suit, a white tab-collared shirt, a blue-and-gold rep tie and brown wing tips—which, in this setting, fits like Lypsinka voguing in Kennebunkport.

Or so I think, until I glance over at the bookshelf and notice that a lovey-dovey photo of our host and his companion is nestled between framed portraits of Ronald Reagan and George and Barbara Bush. “Thanks, Eugene” is the inscription from the former family-values president, who declared in an election-year interview that the homosexual life-style was not “normal,” and the former First Lady, who mysteriously misplaced her AIDS ribbon during the 1992 Republican National Convention, an orgy of homophobic rhetoric.

“Rich, we’re very proud of the great job you’re doing,” our host said to Tafel as he ushered us downstairs, where

form and then repudiated Bill Clinton’s pledge to end the ban on gays in the military. “My friends in the Democratic Party, some are very critical of what I’m doing, but no longer can we say all Democrats are good,” Tafel says. “We can thank Sam Nunn for that.

“The battle will take place inside the Republican Party, where the Christian Right is organized. The place to be on the front lines is in the *Republican* Party. . . . The fundamentalists question, why do I stay in the Republican Party? When you’re challenged, you can run or you can stay and fight. The Log Cabin Federation is going to stay and fight. And I’m hoping that you in Dallas will say ‘We’re going to join the fight. . . .’”

Tafel’s conservative message certainly resonates with this audience, especially the well-dressed studs who crowd around Tafel for a couple of hours afterward. “Those gay Democrats are more left-wing liberals than they are gay,” a slender young buck in a double-breasted blue blazer complains to him. Others clamor for Tafel’s insights regarding a more pragmatic dilemma for young, gay conservatives: What happened when you came out to your Republican parents?

“Well, they don’t dare quote Scripture to me,” responds Tafel, who jokes that his suburban-Philadelphia family was more scandalized when he wanted to seek financial

“The battle will take place inside the Republican Party, where the Christian Right is organized.”

more surprises were waiting. While we’ll never know whether Bush might still be in the White House if he’d forsaken pork rinds and horseshoes in favor of pyramid power and spirulina, acquiescing to right-wing queer-bashing certainly didn’t earn him any points with this crowd of substantial-looking gay Texans, who have paid \$20 apiece to munch cheese and crackers, sip cocktails and mingle amid Eugene’s cages of cooing doves and collection of dog figurines. That is, when they aren’t talking politics or gathering around the TV to watch a videotape of Tafel debating the Reverend Jerry Falwell on *Larry King Live*.

“Do you take the Bible literally?” the televangelist growls at Tafel.

“Should slaves obey their masters?” retorts Tafel, himself an ordained Baptist minister and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School. Pretty soon, though, it’s time for everyone to assemble in the backyard to hear Tafel in person, as he stands on the edge of the lit swimming pool and gives a rip-roaring political sermon.

“The gay-bashing party of Falwell and Pat Robertson will never be the majority party in this country,” Tafel tells everyone. But even as he trashes the family-values platform, he exalts bedrock Republican principles—less government, fiscal austerity, strong national defense. And he gets in a few shots at those other fellows, the “tax-and-spend” party, who condemned homophobia in their plat-

form and then repudiated Bill Clinton’s pledge to end the ban on gays in the military. “After all, they were the ones who sent me to Wednesday-night choir and to Bible school.”

Before we leave, our host pulls Tafel aside and tells him “Rich, you’re a star,” before giving him a few tips: Don’t wear the brown shoes with the blue suit, get the little dimple into the tie, lose the shirt with the long collar. . . . “And I just bought that shirt,” Tafel explains later with a laugh. “That’s the funny thing about gay politics. People don’t think anything of coming up to you and commenting on how you look.”

These admiring gay Texans aren’t reaching for their checkbooks just yet, but Tafel is confident the contributions will flow in time—just as they did in Columbus, Ohio, where Tafel boasts that he pulled in \$10,000 in a single afternoon. Or in Omaha, where a closeted benefactor gave him \$50,000. That cash underwrites Tafel’s quest to become the most unlikely powerbroker in conservative politics. In 1990, he helped found the Log Cabin Federation, a league of gay-and-lesbian Republican clubs that grew from the original eight chapters to thirty-two chapters and 8,000 members in the three and a half years that he served as its first president. Now, as the movement’s Washington, D.C.-based lobbyist, he labors not only to lure gays back to the homo-

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phobic G.O.P. but to convince Republican candidates and elected officials that bucking the party line and supporting gay rights can pay off handsomely in terms of votes and contributions.

True, Tafel's avowed goal of moderating the G.O.P.—whose platform explicitly opposes gay marriages, gays in the military and laws protecting gays from discrimination—may seem quixotic. But Tafel, whom *Newsweek* ranked last year with David Geffen and Martina Navratilova as one of the thirty most influential gays and lesbians in America, is no gadfly. In the 1993 Los Angeles mayoral race, savvy political operator Tafel advised the campaign staff of Republican Richard Riordan on the delicate task of drawing gay votes away from Democrat Michael Woo without alienating Riordan's conservative base. At Tafel's urging, Riordan took the daring step—that is, for a Republican and prominent Catholic layman—of placing ads in gay newspapers. "He made an absolutely valuable contribution," recalls Riordan aide James Vaughn. (Tafel also provided help to Republican Rudy Giuliani's triumphant mayoral campaign in New York City.)

In Washington, D.C., Sheila Burke, chief of staff for Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole, is already touting Tafel as "an articulate, terrific spokesman" for why Republicans should take a gentler line on gay rights. He's even

earned the admiration of gay Democratic activist and Clinton campaign adviser David Mixner. "To be as open and visible and tenacious as Rich requires a great deal of courage," says Mixner. "It's not like you walk into the room and people in the Republican Party slap you on the back and say 'Good job.'"

Hardly. On the *Today* show, Tafel drove Republican fund-raising icon L. Brent Bozell III into a vitriol-spewing fit. "We're standing for family values," the red-haired right-winger barked at him. "And you're just going to have to make up your mind whether you can live with that and support the Republican Party. . . or would you like to join the Democratic Party, Act-Up and Queer Nation."

In a previous television appearance, Tafel had brought up a prickly point: Bozell's longtime professional partner on the National Conservative Political Action Committee, Terry Dolan, was a closeted gay who died of AIDS, in 1986. (Dolan had two memorial services, one attended by his family and Pat Robertson, the other by his gay friends.) For the Republicans, Tafel's activism calls attention to the embarrassing reality that there have been many prominent G.O.P. members for whom the initials could signify the Gay Old Party. Right-wing Congressmen Robert Bauman of Maryland and Jon Hinson of Mississippi both were

forced out of office in the early Eighties after arrests on sex charges involving other males, and another Republican, Representative Stewart McKinney of Connecticut, died of AIDS-related pneumonia, in 1987. Another telling fact: Of the donors to the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a lobby that supports candidates who favor gay rights, about 40 percent identify themselves as Republican. In addition, many prominent conservatives, such as *A Choice, Not an Echo* author Phyllis Schlafly and Bush campaign chairman and former Secretary of Commerce Robert Mosbacher, have gay children.

Until the Religious Right began scrambling in the 1990s for a bogeyman to replace Communism, Republican homosexuals say they were tolerated—as long as they stayed deep in the closet. One man who kept his sexuality under wraps is Marvin Liebman, founder of such anticommunist groups as Young Americans for Freedom and a pioneer in the direct-mail fund-raising campaigns that underwrote the Reagan revolution. In his 1992 book, *Coming Out Conservative*, Liebman recounts his discomfort when, after dinner, Ronald Reagan confided his worries about Ron junior's going into ballet, saying he'd

heard dancers were "funny." "If I'd been openly gay," Liebman says today, "my life would have been different, probably happier and more fulfilling. But professionally, I would have been dead meat."

It's a particularly perverse irony that Liebman's 1990s counterpart, Tafel, whizzing around the streets of Dallas in the back of a long black Cadillac, feels no qualms about pausing, with a reporter scribbling down his every word, to check out a handsome young man posing for snapshots in front of the replica log cabin of Dallas founder John Neely Bryan, in Dealey Plaza. "Hmm, I wonder if he's a Republican," Tafel muses. Suddenly, he becomes mock-serious. "I have a confession to make," he deadpans. "My girlfriend is threatening to 'out' me. I've just been passing for gay because it's good for my career."

In Republican politics, Tafel has been openly gay from the start, since he managed the campaign of his Harvard chum and fellow gay Republican Mike Duffy, who suffered a close loss in an overwhelmingly Democratic legislative district of Boston, in 1990. Tafel's grass-roots organizing for the race played a key role in rallying that city's gay organizations to support Republican gubernatorial candidate William Weld, a maverick advocate of gay rights. Weld eked out a victory with the help of the gay vote and subsequently rewarded Tafel by appointing him as director of adolescent health.

And, unlike Liebman, whose old friends and powerful connections vanished when he came out of the closet in a 1990 letter to the *National Review*, Tafel actually got his



Homo foes: Patrick J. Buchanan, L. Brent Bozell III and Jerry Falwell, from left, contend there is no room for gays within the "family values" party.

big break in national politics thanks to G.O.P. homophobia. In the summer of 1992, a month or so before the Republican National Convention, Tafel was contacted by Tyler Franz, a gay Bush campaign aide who felt he was being pushed out of the reelection campaign to appease Religious Right types. Tafel, head of the embryonic Log Cabin Federation, rushed down to Washington and sup-

ports. What you have now are stereotypes: You see *Queer Nation* screaming at the television camera and that's your coverage of gay people." But at the next stop, talk-radio host David Gold also struggles with the concept of a gay Republican. After explaining that "the problem with a lot of these issues [is that] you people bring it on yourselves," Gold scrambles to find some common ground. "When we

In gay bars, Tafel recalls, some Left-leaning gays taunted him as "a Jew working for the Nazis."

ported the hesitant Franz in going public—joining him on *Nightline*, where Tafel stole the show with his looks and poise. The next night, Tafel found himself in the studio with Larry King, watching queasily as Jerry Falwell materialized, Oz-like, on a big screen, to debate with him. Tafel insists he had no designs on going big-time, but Liebman remembers differently: "Rich leaped when he saw the opportunity. He ran with this thing."

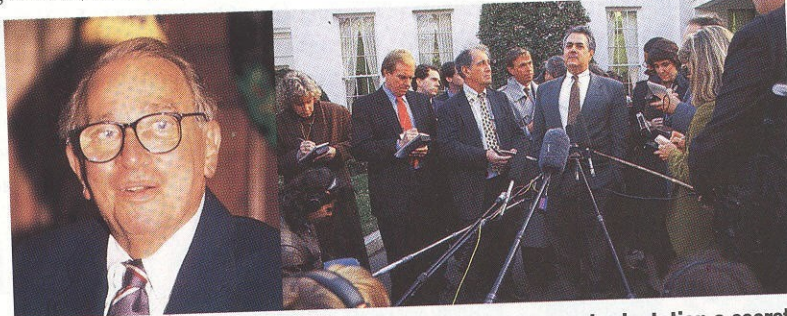
As the unfortunate Franz faded from politics, Tafel's star rose. Back in Boston, he received a visit from Marvin Collins, an Austin, Texas, businessman and longtime Republican who had managed George Bush's unsuccessful U.S. Senate campaign, in 1970. Collins, sickened by his old friend's acquiescence to queer-baiting, had been impressed by Tafel's television persona and wanted him to spearhead a serious nationwide gay-Republican lobby. He offered to pick up the tab for Tafel to fly around the country, soliciting donors. "So many of the spokesmen up to this point have been the liberal type," Collins explains, "...the whole image of gays has been as protesters and demonstrators. This is one way to put a new face on the gay-rights movement, one that is a little more low-key, easier for people to accept."

Here's here, he's queer, and he's Republican, though some clearly perplexed straight conservatives on the editorial-page board of *The Dallas Morning News* are having a hard time getting over it. "Without sounding facetious," a balding, bespectacled newsman asks Tafel during a background interview, "why would you want to be a Republican, as opposed to a Democrat?"

"I'm fiscally conservative, as are most gays," Tafel offers. "I'm the only gay leader in America who supported the Persian Gulf war. . . . The rank-and-file Republican person, if he's educated, is not going to have a problem with

see things like the March on Washington. . . it must embarrass you as much as it does anybody else."

"It sends the wrong message to the American public," Tafel agrees. "People see that and, if they don't know their cousin is gay, think that's what gays are." If that's not



G.O.P. stalwart Marvin Liebman, left, had to keep his sexual orientation a secret, while Barney Frank, right, thinks gay conservatives are oxymorons.

enough to reinforce his message, he adds, "I pay taxes—in fact, I pay more than the average straight person." But before the phones can really light up, Tafel's segment is cut short by a crucial news flash for Dallas Cowboys fans. "Emmitt Smith picked a bad time to sign," the harried producer commiserates as she hustles Tafel out of the studio. Nevertheless, Tafel declares the interview a victory. "See, I connect with conservatives," he proclaims.

Conversely, he doesn't much like the gay press, which he ridicules as "the ghetto echo chamber." "I am concerned about *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*—those quotes are very important. That's my audience." In the "straight" media, he prefers being covered by heterosexual reporters rather than gay ones, whom he accuses of having a liberal bias. One of his least favorite is Donna Minkowitz, a lesbian writer for *The Village Voice* who criticizes the Log Cabin movement for what Tafel sees as its strength—its reflection of the mainstream G.O.P.'s ideology and demographics on everything except gay rights. Minkowitz responds, "It is morally bankrupt to say that, fine, lesbians and gay men can get their rights but all other people can be sacrificed, which is what happens if you support a Log Cabin agenda. It's bad for the poor, bad for blacks."

Predictably, Tafel's drive to liberate gay rights from the liberal agenda, in which they've been included for twenty-five years, pisses off many gays on the Left, the bulk of the politically active, openly gay population. He boycotted last spring's March on Washington, a 300,000-strong rally that was the largest gay-rights event in history. Tafel says gay Republicans objected to the march's sprawling agen-

da, which included too many Left-ish causes. He even blasted one of the march's radical organizers, Billy Hileman, for wearing a T-shirt instead of a coat and a tie when he was invited to the White House. ("I didn't think imitating a heterosexual was what Billy Hileman should do," Hileman responds.)

When Brent Bozell told Tafel to join Act-Up and Queer Nation, he probably wasn't aware that in Boston, gay radicals had "zapped" Tafel by tying up his phones and had once shouted him down when he tried to speak out on behalf of tolerance at a rally against gay rights by conservatives on the University of Massachusetts campus. In gay bars, Tafel recalls, some Left-leaning gays taunted him as "a Jew working for the Nazis." Tafel fanned the flames by having the audacity to engage in an eighteen-month relationship, à la James Carville and Mary Matalin, with one of the leaders of Queer Nation's Boston chapter, Jarrett Barrios.

Tafel's former boyfriend remembers that the pair enjoyed "the taboo-ness of it, that this should not be happening. It was partly libido, but there was more than that. Rich is a very special person, a mélange of somewhat contradictory characteristics. One likes to put Republicans in a box—they want to cut aid to the poor, don't care about social problems—but Rich defies that mold." Among other things, Barrios remembers, Tafel, the suburban Baptist, used to spend his Saturdays working with a Catholic youth group in Boston's poor Roxbury section.

"I think it probably has been more difficult for Rich, and the reaction more vitriolic, within the gay community," explains fellow gay Republican Duffy, who also became a Weld appointee. "It is an article of faith with some gay people that you are a Democrat if you are gay. It's heretical to be a Republican. The amount of emotion it incites is incredible."

Until recently, the gay Republican leader provided an easy target for more-liberal homosexual politicians, such as Congressman Barney Frank (D-Massachusetts), the nation's most prominent openly gay elected official, who has ridiculed Tafel's group as the "Uncle Tom's Cabin Club." These days, though, it's a lot tougher for Democratic gays to dismiss gay Republicans, ever since Bill Clinton—who actively courted gay support during the 1992 presidential race—was forced to back down under pressure from conservative Democrats on his campaign pledge to end the military's ban on gays. That compromise led gay Democrats, such as Mixner, whom *The Wall Street Journal* credits with raising \$1 million in gay contributions to elect Clinton, to get themselves arrested in front of the White House in protest last July. That same day, Tafel—who'd spurned Mixner's plea to endorse Clinton during the election—was a half-mile away in Dupont Circle, conferring with donors to the Log Cabin Republicans.

Tafel sees the military-ban debacle as both a watershed for the gay-rights movement and an opportunity to recruit gays into the G.O.P.—where, he argues, they would have more influence, since Democrats have come to take gay support for granted. He observes, with some glee, that gay Democrats "are reverting back to almost a

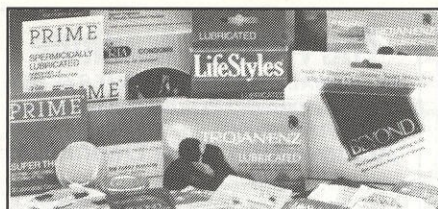
Sixties mentality. They've just given a million dollars, and now they're getting arrested. You know, 'We're out on the outside, victims against the Establishment.' Guess what? Now they are the Establishment."

Lately, in fact, Tafel has become buddy-buddy with angry young gay men such as Michelangelo Signorile, author of *Queer in America*. "I can't say there are many gay radicals who understand the need for us to support gay Republicans," explains Michael Petrelis, a Washington, D.C.-based radical who strives to "out" closeted politicians. "But there is a sense of growing anger against Clinton because he made such promises to us and didn't deliver. There is a sense of a need to pay him back with an alternative." Tafel sees them all as fellow Generation X-ers, at war with the 40- to 50-year-olds in the liberal-gay power structure that enforces a "ruthless orthodoxy" as to how gay people are supposed to dress, where they are supposed to live and how they are supposed to vote. "The first generation of gay leaders came out of the antiwar movement, the Stonewall Riot," Tafel says. "They've romanticized all that, and they don't want to give up power."

As George Bush felt about Saddam Hussein, Tafel so regards Barney Frank. "His power is not just as a congressman from Massachusetts but also to colleagues as the man who can deliver gay votes and money in their towns," Tafel says. "The worst thing that can happen to him is if we don't all live in the same place, so that the vote is no longer concentrated in the gay ghettos. And if we don't all vote the same way, and if there are other openly gay leaders. That threatens to dilute the power of people like Barney Frank." (Frank responds: "Here's a guy who thinks he is a big politico, and he doesn't know what he is talking about.")

Not surprisingly, Tafel concentrates his efforts on Middle America, in locales far from the bicoastal gay power structure he loathes. He loves towns like Biloxi, Mississippi, where they shut down the gay bars so everyone could go hear him speak; where clean-cut, patriotic, God-fearing military lesbians told him how they object to those radical, breast-baring dykes making out in front of the Capitol whom they saw on television.

Nevertheless, "I find that conservatives are wilder in their social lives," Tafel assures me one evening. "It's liberals who tend to be more strait-laced." Indeed, after spending a grueling six hours hobnobbing with potential donors at a big \$175-a-ticket black-tie dinner for the Human Rights Campaign Fund, Tafel has traded his tux for a T-shirt, jeans and cowboy boots, and we've ventured out to the strip of gay nightclubs on Cedar Springs Road in Dallas. As we stroll by Sue Ellen's, an all-girl bar, Tafel the gifted impressionist breaks into a George Bush voice. "Lesbian bar, wouldn't be prudent. Mosbacher's daughter—a lesbian. Didn't help me in the election. Would have loved her if she were my daughter. Would have kicked her out of the house—family values, but. . ." We're heading to meet a bunch of cute Hispanic guys whom Tafel stayed out with until four the previous morning. (continued on page 138)



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GAY REPUBLICANS

(continued from page 85) "Little brown ones, like to put my arms around them," he intones in character as we step into the Village Station.

This is what Tafel often does: long days of politicking, followed by barhopping into the early hours. But the dichotomy between the Baptist minister's somber political rhetoric and the relentless prowling through smoky clubs filled with leather boys, big-haired Texas drag queens and wiggling dick-dancers in loincloths and boots isn't really so hard to grasp. Tafel's obsession with politics, he admits, doesn't leave much room for a relationship. "In the end, what was too hard was that he's so focused on his work, a man with a mission," explains Jarrett Barrios. "More a prophet than a zealot. But he doesn't take care of himself, which would include a partner and family. He's content with his life."

But as Tafel proselytizes Middle America about gay conservatism, he's paid a price in the stolid Republican suburb from whence he came. "Some of his soccer teammates from when he was in school won't even talk to him now," confides Rich Betz, a friend since childhood. "It was tough for Mom and Dad," says older brother Jim Tafel, who didn't find out Rich was gay until a few years after he had come out to their folks. And Tafel himself found the new life a bit confusing. "I'd had plans to be a minister and have a congregation," he recalls. "But it didn't seem to fit much with this new life-style."

Tafel finally spots his friends out on the dance floor, in a pack of men undulating to the throbbing beat, pawing one another's chest and grinding groin to butt. Tafel jumps in at the edge; at first, he's a bit stiff, as if he's getting down at David and Julie Eisenhower's wedding. Before long, though, he's working those less-government, lower-taxation buns to the beat as one of the lithe dancers drops down limbo-style so that his face is momentarily in the young Republican's crotch. It's around 3 A.M. when we all crowd into a cab. Tafel switches back to politics, interviewing 19-year-old Moses and 20-year-old Daniel about their political views.

"I want the same rights as everyone else," Daniel says.

"Special rights?" Tafel asks, employing the Religious Right's negative buzzword.

"The same rights."

"What do you think about me going to Washington and working as a gay Republican?"

"It doesn't matter if you're Republican or Democrat," Moses responds. "What matters is if you're fighting for our life-style."

"Sometimes when I'm out on the dance floor, I leave my politics behind," Tafel says with a laugh. "So you guys are going to

crash at my place, right?"

"I like Rich," Moses explains. "He's taught us a lot about politics. I was shocked when Daniel told me he was a gay Republican leader."

Tafel's guests are still asleep when the gay Republican leader, wearing shades to block the glare of the morning sun, climbs into our rented limo to do a little church-hopping. At White Rock Community Church, we encounter something that undoubtedly would horrify Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell: a gay evangelical congregation, with solidly built gals in Dorothy Hamill haircuts and slim, mustachioed guys in sport shirts, eyes shut, waving their hands in the throes of the Holy Spirit, calling out "Amen!" as the choir's rendition of "Shut the Door, Keep Out the Devil" rocks the cramped, low-ceilinged hall. Next time he's in Dallas, Tafel wants to preach here.

"Now that is the kind of working-class, Republican church I grew up in," he explains after the service. "All I can say is 'Praise the Lord!'... Take the freeway, darlin'." Tafel's still got a brunch in his honor and a gay-pride parade to hit before he can catch a midnight plane back to Washington, where he's got to get up early the next day and have his office phones installed. Already, he's shifting into third gear: The newly formed Log Cabin group in Salt Lake City is clamoring for an appearance, as are the chapters in Las Vegas, Cincinnati, Milwaukee and Fort Lauderdale.

But will he really get anywhere? Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, cites a poll showing that 65 percent of Republicans go to church regularly and that more than half of those voters would leave the party if it backed away from "family values." "No one is trying to exclude the Log Cabin Republicans from the party, certainly not us," he says. "But I don't think they are going to succeed." Marvin Liebman, in contrast, argues that "I would consider gays and lesbians pretty much like African-Americans in the Democratic Party in the Thirties and Forties. Democrats, with the exception of northern liberals, didn't want them. Now they are a major influence. This is what I expect gays to do, and Rich will lead the charge." That is, if our limousine, racing once again at day's end toward the grandiose skyline of Dallas, can avoid the driver speeding blithely into its path.

"I saw my life flashing before my eyes," Tafel exclaims, and for a split second, I think I spot a crack in his relentless aplomb. But I realize I'm mistaken when he quickly adds: "I was played by Matthew Broderick." •

Patrick J. Kiger is a free-lance writer living in Baltimore. This is his first piece for GQ.

FRANK

(continued)

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