By Patrick J. Kiger

"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-interiordesigner 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 moshbaks.
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 bash—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 prep school—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 Lysikina vogueing in Kennebunkport.

Or so I think, until I glance over at the bookshelf and notice that a loydy-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 told to Tafel as he ushered us downstairs, where 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 horsehoes 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-
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 Marina Navaile in the three 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 Vaughan. (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 topped 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 anticomunist 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, whirled around the streets of Dallas in the back of a long black Cadillac, feels no qualms about passing, 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. "Hm, 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
In gay bars, Tafel recalls, some Left-leaning gays taunted him as “a Jew working for the Nazis.”

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e'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..."
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, a 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 illidio, but there was more than that. Rich is a very special person, a melange 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’s 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 gay 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 was 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 Riots," 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’s 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)
GAY REPUBLICANS

(continued from page 85) "Little brown ones, like to put my arm 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 bonthopping 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 rebel. 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 Berta, 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 style-life."

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-governmental, less-regulation huns 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 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 lifestyle."

"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 taught us all a lot about being Republican.

Tafel's guests are still asleep when the gay Republican leader, 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 men in sport shirts, eyes shut, waving their hands in the thrones of the Holy Spirit, calling out "Amen!" as the choir's rendition of "Shout the Lord, Keep Out the Devil" rocks the cramped, low-ceilinged hall. Next time he's in Dallas, Tafel wants to preach there.

"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 bunch 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 Republicans in Group Cabin in Lake City is clamoring for an appearance, as are the chapters in Las Vegas, Cincinnati, Milwaukee and Fort Lauderdale.

But will he really go 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 "considering gay rights 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 grandrose 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." •

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