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Democrats' gay problem

Embarrassing e-mails reveal what DNC really thinks of gay media — and voters

By KEVIN NAFF

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LAST WEEK BROUGHT another example of the consequences of gay rights advocates aligning themselves too closely with one political party.

E-mails written by senior staff members of the Democratic National Committee were leaked to the Queerty blog that exposed what they really think of the gay media, notably the Blade.

In the e-mails, the staff debates whether to give lesbian columnist Deb Price access to Howard Dean for an interview. They decide it would be too risky and expose the DNC to too many "hits."

In another exchange, they complain about the Blade's coverage of the DNC. Spokesperson Damien LaVera writes it is "outrageous" that the Blade didn't adequately cover the DNC's gay delegate training program. To get back at the Blade for this slight, DNC communications director Karen Finney suggests handing an exclusive story to the Advocate or another Blade competitor. Deputy finance director Julie Tagen then adds that she uses the Blade and other gay newspapers for "the bottom of the birdcage."

The reality is that the Blade has covered the DNC and its delegate training program. In addition to two news stories on the subject in the past year, I personally extended an invitation to the DNC to draft an op-ed on its program, which I later published.

The "birdcage" e-mail was leaked from a batch of documents subpoenaed in a lawsuit filed by former DNC gay outreach director Donald Hitchcock. In the lawsuit, Hitchcock says he was the target of discrimination, retaliation and defamation during and after his tenure as director of the Gay & Lesbian Leadership Council. Hitchcock was fired in May 2006, just days after his domestic partner, Paul Yandura, a longtime party activist, criticized DNC Chair Howard Dean in an open letter to gay Democrats.

"For many months, a number of us have made appeals to Howard Dean and party officials to care about and defend the dignity of gay and lesbian families and friends, in the same way they defend the dignity of other key constituencies," Yandura said in his letter.

"All progressives need to be asking how much has the DNC budgeted to counter the anti-gay ballot initiatives in the states," he said. "We also need to know why the DNC and our Democratic leaders continue to allow the Republicans to use our families and friends as pawns to win elections."

But the line that certainly doomed Hitchcock was: "My advice is don't give any more money to the Dems."

Less than a week later, Hitchcock was gone. Don't mess with the Democrats' lock on gay money.

In a less-than-convincing statement released after Hitchcock's dismissal, Finney said, "It was not retaliation. It was decided we needed a change. We decided to hire a proven leader."

Yandura, of course, saw it differently.

“This is retaliation, plain and simple,” he said. “This shows what they think about domestic partners.”

IT PROBABLY SHOWS what the DNC thinks of gay money, more than what it thinks of domestic partners. In any case, we now know what DNC officials think of the gay media. LaVera, in particular, is perturbed that the Blade publishes statements from anonymous sources. The party’s treatment of Hitchcock and this e-mail exchange demonstrate why we allow certain trusted sources to speak anonymously: whistleblowers at the DNC clearly are justified in fearing for their jobs if they dare to criticize Dean or the party.

As for Tagen, who penned the very clever and original “birdcage” line, I won’t go so far as to demand her resignation, as at least one gay activist did.

“If a DNC staffer disparaged black, Latino, or Jewish media the way Deputy Finance Director Julie Tagen did LGBT media, that person would already be out of a job,” wrote Lee Bolin, a former member of the National Stonewall Democrats executive committee.

My skin is a tad thicker; I’m not losing sleep over Tagen’s assessment of the Blade. Her remark, however, was unfortunate in that it cavalierly dismisses the hard work of a dedicated group of journalists working for a newspaper that is hardly hostile to the Democratic Party. We strive to cover the news in a fair way, but certainly Democratic voices are more than fairly represented in our pages.

UNFORTUNATELY FOR THE DNC, this flap over the gay media is just the beginning of the embarrassment. Not only are DNC employees’ e-mails being made public, but there are the gleeful New York Post headlines to endure (“Gays sticking it to Dems”). It’s unfathomable that the DNC hasn’t settled this lawsuit.

And it serves as a reminder of what happens when one party knows it can count on the support of a constituency group, no matter what. We have seen this problem manifest before. When Maryland Gov. Martin O’Malley, a Democrat who once publicly supported gay marriage, changed his position and invoked the Catholic sacraments following that state’s high court ruling upholding a gay ban, our national advocacy groups were silent. It’s a safe bet that if O’Malley were a Republican, the indignant press releases would have been flying and rallies would have been scheduled for Annapolis.

When Democrats like John Kerry and 2004 running mate John Edwards announce support for anti-gay state marriage amendments and gays line up dutifully behind them anyway, we teach the party that there are no repercussions for betraying us.

This doesn’t mean gay voters should pull the lever for any of the Republicans now in the running. Rather, gay voters, donors and campaign staffers need to learn the art of the barter system: you give something, you get something. No one knows that concept better than the evangelical Christians. When they stay home in November and a Democrat wins the White House, you better believe the GOP will take them more seriously in 2012. It’s time for gays to demand more for their contributions to the Democratic Party.