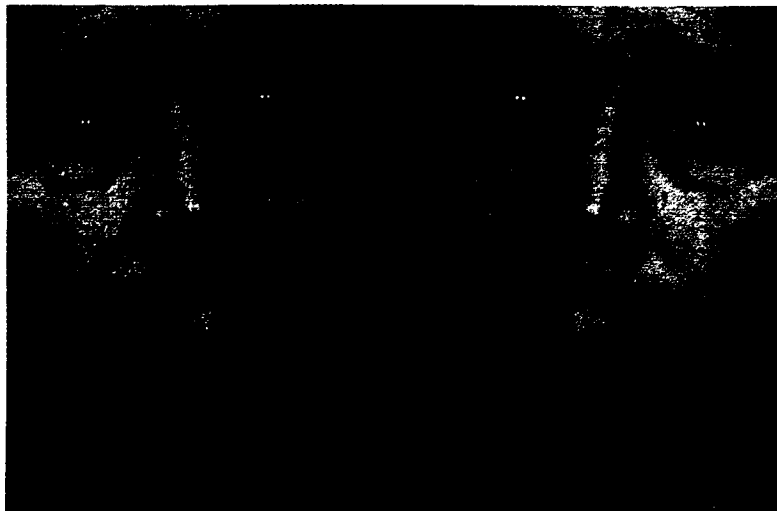


Issue

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POLITICS

The two faces of George

Despite statements to the contrary, Bush's "compassionate conservatism" may stop short of protecting gay men and lesbians

Is the Bush administration publicly supporting existing rights and protections for gays and lesbians while secretly working to eliminate them?

Scott Bloch, a Bush appointee to the head of the Office of Special Counsel, in early February removed references to sexual orientation from the Web site of the agency, which handles workplace discrimination complaints for federal employees. Despite promising during his confirmation hearing to uphold existing federal policy, Bloch said he didn't want to "endorse" protections for

gays and lesbians while he investigated his contention that existing law did not actually cover them. His office later issued a statement saying that discrimination based on sexual orientation is in fact prohibited in federal workplaces.

Bloch was interpreting the word *conduct* as it relates to gays and lesbians in the Civil Service Reform Act, said Nancy Tommelleo of the gay employee group Federal GLOBE. But he has no authority to do so, she says, because "interpretation of the Civil Service Reform Act resides exclusive-

ly with the Office of Personnel Management." It was only after Bloch's move had received widespread media coverage and Bush had received a letter from 70 Democratic congressmen that the White House responded. On April 1 the Administration asserted that it expects federal agencies to comply with "long-standing federal policy" protecting gay workers. But Bush fell short of ordering Bloch to restore the references. "I don't think for one moment that Scott Bloch was acting on his own," argued Rep. Eliot Engel, a New York Democrat, who led the initial letter-writing campaign. Engel is currently circulating another letter that calls on Bush to repudiate Bloch's decision. "Bloch did what he thought the Administration wanted him to do," he said, and the Administration is trying "to see if they can get away with it."

Bloch is not the first antigay Bush appointee to be held at arm's length by the Administration. In January 2003 the president nominated Jerry Thacker to his AIDS advisory council. It was later revealed that Thacker, an HIV-positive straight man, had called homosexuality a "sinful deathstyle" and AIDS "the gay plague." Thacker turned down the post following a rebuke from the White House.

"I think what [Bush] did in the campaign in 2000, how he said he was going to govern, is completely different from the reality," said Gregg Gonsalves, director of treatment and prevention advocacy at the New York City-based Gay Men's Health Crisis. "Whether it's the witch hunt at the [National Institutes of Health] about grants that use the word *gay*, his judicial nominees, or the [proposed] constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, this administration is no friend of gay men or lesbians."

—Benjamin Ryan

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