

## What about Bill?

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By Laura Kiritsy

Concord, N.H. — “He’s actually been wonderful. He’s kept every promise he’s ever made to the community.” Anyone remember the last time you heard an LGBT political activist say that about a candidate for the White House? It certainly can’t be said about Bill Clinton, whose 1992 campaign pledge to let gays serve openly in the military resulted in the disastrous “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Ditto for John Kerry, whose reputation for being a longstanding champion of gay civil rights went bust when he came out for anti-gay marriage amendments in Massachusetts and Missouri in the heat of the 2004 campaign. But that’s how Alexis Blizman, the executive director of Equality New Mexico, sums up Democrat Bill Richardson’s record on LGBT issues as governor of her home state.

The governor recently announced his intention to seek his party’s nomination for president in 2008, an announcement that was overshadowed by Sen. Hillary Clinton’s headline grabbing entry into the race on the same day, a symbol of the uphill climb Richardson will have in competing with the likes of top-tier candidates like Clinton, Sen. Barack Obama and John Edwards, who seem to be sucking up all the air on the campaign trail — not to mention their early grabs for gay support. But Richardson, a two term governor, former U.N. ambassador, former U.S. Secretary of Energy and former congressman, is worth getting to know.

And you can get to know him. The aforementioned candidates are packing large venues to overflowing in high schools and on college campuses across the Granite State, thus prohibiting the personal contact that can propel a no-name candidate to frontrunner status (Bill Clinton anyone?). Richardson, however, seems to understand that his strength lies in retail politics. On a trip to New Hampshire last weekend, the governor spoke to a group of less than 100 at the IBEW hall in Concord, and charmed the crowd by acknowledging his low poll numbers, while also taking care to note that the primary is still a year away. “I get all these questions, ‘Well governor, you know, how does it feel to be [polling] at three percent?’ I said, Wait a minute. Six percent. I’m at six percent and I’m moving up.”

“I know the buzz is elsewhere, the glamour,” said Richardson, who at the start of his speech recognized local elected officials in the room, such as New Hampshire state Senate President Sylvia Larsen. “I don’t come in and do one event with a bunch at a gym and then leave. I’ve been here for two days. I’m thinkin’ of moving here,” he added, drawing laughter from the crowd. Already well on his way to being late for his next campaign stop in Portsmouth by the time the event ended, Richardson all but ignored the aides who repeatedly tugged on his sleeves, patted his shoulder and otherwise tried to steer him toward the exit as he stopped to chat, pose for pictures and talk to reporters.

Dean Spiliotes, the director of research at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at St. Anselm College, says Richardson is on the right track. “He’s a real kind of people person,” says Spiliotes. “That’s certainly not going to hurt him.” But in order to transcend the din surrounding the three frontrunners, Richardson has a lot of work to do. “He wants to push as hard as possible to get increased name recognition, get his biography out there, get his credentials out there — particularly on foreign policy — but just work to get people more familiar with his name,” says

Spiliotes. Retail politics that put Richardson in the media spotlight, like his haircut at a Concord hair salon, is the type of “counterprogramming” that will help Richardson boost his name recognition. The rest, says Spiliotes, is “a waiting game” — waiting for the initial buzz surrounding better-known candidates to wane, or waiting for them to simply screw up (an ill-timed scream, perhaps?) and give him an opening.

Richardson certainly makes a compelling case for his candidacy, emphasizing his foreign policy credentials — his stint as President Bill Clinton’s U.N. ambassador from 1997 to 1998 is notable for his negotiations to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons — and his track record as Clinton’s energy secretary and as governor of New Mexico in implementing policies to increase energy efficiency. He’s also the only candidate calling attention to the crisis in Darfur; last year he successfully negotiated with Sudanese President Omar al Bashir for the release of Paul Salopek, a Chicago Tribune journalist and fellow New Mexican who was being held on charges of spying. His stated plan for ending the Iraq war involves setting a one-year timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops and “a reconciliation of all the religious and ethnic groups in Iraq. The three of them, led by the United States,” Richardson explained. “Sit them down in a room and say, there’s going to be a sharing of power. A coalition of government, a sharing of oil resources, a sharing of cabinet ministries in a way that somehow coalition governors build with territorial boundaries — not three nations — but a loose confederation overseen by an Iraqi federal government.” In response to an audience member’s question about what to do with Guantanamo Bay prison, Richardson elicited applause when he promptly replied, “Close it down.” He added, “I’d close it down the second day because the first day we’ve got to get out of Iraq.”

The governor appears to be gearing up to make his support for LGBT rights more widely known on the presidential campaign trail. Though he didn’t mention it on the stump in Concord, at the Democratic National Committee’s annual winter meeting earlier this month Richardson was the only speaker on the roster — which included other presidential contenders Sen. Joe Biden, Clinton, Sen. Christopher Dodd, Edwards, Rep. Dennis Kucinich, Obama, and Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack — to raise the issue. “I want to tell you, too, in New Mexico, our fight for equality extends to sexual orientation,” he told attendees, touting the state’s LGBT-inclusive civil rights laws and its domestic partner benefits for state workers. “Some call New Mexico the land of enchantment. I now like to think that we live in a state of enlightenment.” On top of that, he’s scheduled to deliver the keynote address at a Human Rights Campaign dinner in Los Angeles on March 24.

He certainly has a few things to talk about. In 2003, Richardson followed through on campaign pledges to sign into law LGBT-inclusive hate crimes and non-discrimination bills, making New Mexico one of just a handful of states to include transgender people in state’s civil rights laws. Not only did he sign the legislation, said Blizman, “he actively helped work the legislators to make sure it passed.” Richardson also issued a 2003 executive order providing domestic partner benefits to gay state employees. In 2005 he came out in opposition to proposed state DOMA legislation, unless it contained a civil unions or domestic partnership provision (the bill eventually died); he has also spoken out against a federal anti-gay marriage amendment. Blizman, who is supporting Richardson in his quest for the White House, says that Richardson is behind Equality New Mexico’s push to pass a comprehensive domestic partnership bill that would provide two “non-familial” adults with all of the state-level rights afforded to married couples.

Richardson’s support for LGBT rights extends back to his years in Congress, where he represented New Mexico’s 3rd Congressional District for 14 years until 1997. He opposed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and supported a range of other gay-friendly legislation.

Now, for the downside: In 1996, Richardson voted in favor of the federal DOMA; he continues to oppose same-sex marriage. Asked if he stood by his DOMA vote in a brief interview after the Concord event, Richardson replied, “Yeah. I do.” He went on to add that, “I think that New Mexico has the most pro-gay rights legislation because of me and I’m going to continue that. We have domestic partnerships, we have a hate crimes law, we’re the first state to recognize transgender [people] and as president I would continue that.” But on the issue of gay marriage, said

Richardson, "I'm just not there. I want to be honest."

Will Richardson's DOMA vote hurt him with LGBT voters? After all, with the exception of Kucinich, who is on record in support of marriage equality, his position doesn't differ from any of the other Democratic candidates, all of whom oppose civil marriage but support either civil unions or domestic partnerships for same-sex couples. That's why Blizman doesn't think it will. "I think he's got the experience on foreign policy, I think he's good on the issues I care about," she says. "Obviously, with the DOMA he's not perfect, but he's better than the other candidates. At least he's willing to be there and take a stand."

**Not so fast, says Matt Foreman, the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). "I think that any candidate's failure to express regret over a vote for DOMA is going to be a serious problem," says Foreman, whose organization is currently in the process of preparing an in-depth report on the positions of all of the candidates on LGBT issues that Foreman expects will be complete within the next month. "My point is the world has changed around marriage equality and relationship recognition since 1996," says Foreman, and candidates whose positions evolve toward marriage equality should be congratulated. "But it's extremely difficult I believe, to say on the one hand that you support state's rights, that you think marriage is a state's issue, that you think LGBT couples should get equal benefits under the law and then say I supported DOMA or I will support DOMA," he adds. "Those two positions are inherently contradictory."**

**That said, Foreman also notes that there's never a perfect candidate and voters perform a balancing act when making their choices. "And in terms of actual accomplishments for LGBT people Bill Richardson stands above the other current candidates because he's actually pushed forward and implemented laws that have helped our community," says Foreman. Clinton, Obama, Edwards — and even Kucinich — "don't have that kind of tangible record for our community," says Foreman.**

Just as he does with the average voter, Richardson appears to have his work cut out for him within the LGBT community as well. Clinton and Obama have already attracted commitments from LGBT donors and staffers (see "Pressing the Flesh," p. 4 and "War Is Top Issue For Gays," page 1).

Foreman, however, suggests that so early in the campaign, LGBT voters should proceed with caution. "Given the positions of the candidates on our issues I would urge folks to hold back and use this time to pressure the candidates to move on our issues and to demonstrate on the campaign trail their actual commitment to our community," he says. "Otherwise we're giving away the store without getting any candy in it."