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They Won't Know What Hit Them

THE SOFTWARE MOGUL TIM GILL HAS A MISSION: STOP THE RICK SANTORUMS OF TOMORROW BEFORE THEY GET STARTED. HOW A NETWORK OF GAY POLITICAL DONORS IS STEALTHILY FIGHTING SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION AND RESHAPING AMERICAN POLITICS

By Joshua Green

A tough loss can be hard to swallow, and plenty of defeated politicians have been known to grumble about sinister conspiracies. When they are rising stars like Danny Carroll, the Republican speaker pro tempore of Iowa's House of Representatives, and the loss is unexpected, the urge to blame unseen forces can be even stronger—and in Carroll's case, it would have the additional distinction of being justified. Carroll was among the dozens of targets of a group of rich gay philanthropists who quietly joined forces last year, under the leadership of a reclusive Colorado technology mogul, to counter the tide of antigay politics in America that has generated, among other things, a succession of state ballot initiatives banning gay marriage. Carroll had sponsored such a bill in Iowa and guided it to passage in the state House of Representatives, the first step toward getting it on the ballot.

Tim Gill outside his home in Denver

Like many other state legislatures last year, Iowa's was narrowly divided. So all it would take to break the momentum toward a constitutional marriage ban was to tip a few close races. If Democrats took control of the House and Senate, however narrowly, the initiative would die, and with it the likelihood of further legislation limiting civil rights for gays and lesbians. And, fortuitously, Carroll's own reelection race looked to be one of the closest. He represented the liberal college town of Grinnell and had won the last time around by just a handful of votes.

Over the summer, Carroll's opponent started receiving checks from across the country—significant sums for a statehouse race, though none so large as to arouse suspicion (the gifts topped out at $1,000). Because they came from individuals and not from organizations, nothing identified the money as being "gay," or even coordinated. Only a very astute political operative would have spotted

the unusual number of out-of-state donors and pondered their interest in an obscure midwestern race. And only someone truly versed in the world of gay causes would have noticed a $1,000 contribution from Denver, Colorado, and been aware that its source, Tim Gill, is the country's biggest gay donor, and the nexus of an aggressive new force in national politics.

Carroll certainly didn't catch on until I called him after the election, in which Democrats took control of both legislative chambers, as well as Carroll's seat and four of the five others targeted by Gill and his allies. Carroll was just sitting down to dinner but agreed to talk about his loss, which he attributed to the activism of Grinnell College students. A suggestion that he'd been targeted by a nationwide network of wealthy gay activists was met with polite midwestern skepticism. But Carroll was sufficiently intrigued to propose that we each log on to the Iowa Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board's Web site and examine his opponent's disclosure report together, over the telephone.

Scrolling through the thirty-two-page roster of campaign contributors revealed plenty of $25 and $50 donations from nearby towns like Oskaloosa and New Sharon. But a $1,000 donation from California stood out on page 2, and, several pages later, so did another $1,000 from New York City. "I'll be darned," said Carroll. "That doesn't make any sense." As we kept scrolling, Carroll began reading aloud with mounting disbelief as the evidence passed before his eyes. "Denver ... Dallas ... Los Angeles ... Malibu ... there's New York again ... San Francisco! I can't—I just cannot believe this," he said, finally. "Who is this guy again?"


Photo by Stephen Ramsey

Tim Gill is best known as the founder of the publishing-software giant Quark Inc., and for a long time was one of the few openly gay members of the Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans. He was born in 1953 to one of Colorado's well-known Republican political families. (The town of Gill in the north-central part of the state is named after them.) After earning a degree in applied mathematics and computer science from the University of Colorado at Boulder, Gill founded Quark in his apartment in 1981, in the manner of other self-made computer magnates like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, with a $2,000 loan from his parents.

While Gill participated in gay activism in college, his passions ran more toward differential calculus, and he didn't feel particularly beset by his homosexuality. He had come out to his parents when he was a teenager and been accepted. It was the very ordinariness of his upper-middle-class upbringing, in fact, that made his political awakening such a shock. In 1992, a ballot initiative approved by Colorado voters altered the state constitution to prohibit laws aimed at protecting gays and lesbians (it was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court). Gill noticed bumper stickers supporting the measure on the desks of some Quark employees. Not long afterward, he set up the Gay & Lesbian Fund for Colorado, through which he donates to "mainstream" charities—libraries, symphonies, vaccination clinics, even a *Star Trek* exhibit at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science—to spread the message that gays and lesbians care about the same things as everyone else. In 2000, he sold his interest in Quark for a reported half-billion dollars in order to focus full-time on his philanthropy.

Even as he has shied from the spotlight, Gill has become one of the most generous and widest-reaching political benefactors in the country, and emblematic of a new breed of business-minded

donor that is rapidly changing American politics. A surge of new wealth has created a generation of givers eager to influence politics but barred from the traditional channels of participation by recent campaign-finance laws designed to limit large gifts to candidates and political parties. Like Gill, many of these figures are entrepreneurs who have made fortunes in technology. And like Gill, many turned first to philanthropy, revolutionizing the field by importing strategies from the business world and largely abandoning the old dispositions toward moneyed dilettantism and gifts to large foundations in favor of creating independent charitable enterprises that emphasize innovation and accountability. The Gates Foundation, founded by Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda, is a prime example of this new results-oriented philanthropy.

Gill's principal interest is gay equality. His foundations have given about $115 million to charities. His serious involvement in politics is a more recent development, though geared toward the same goal. In 2000, he gave $300,000 in political donations, which grew to $800,000 in 2002, $5 million in 2004, and a staggering $15 million last year, almost all of it to state and local campaigns. Gill, who considers himself a "pathological introvert," normally shuns media attention, but he agreed to meet with me in his Denver office last November, on the eve of the election, to explain what he is trying to accomplish.

"My goal is to see that all Americans are treated equally regardless of sexuality," he told me when we met. Tall and lean, Gill is a vigorous fifty-three years old, a sci-fi buff and an avid snowboarder (he runs a social networking site for gay snowboarders, called Outboard). He was dressed in the manner of a successful Denver businessman—casual, but not overly so, in jeans, a sports shirt, and Italian leather shoes. In our conversations, he gave the impression of someone who feels he has been picked on and now, having acquired the means, fully intends to do something about it.

Gill led me through his evolution as a donor. For years he gave generously to gay organizations and dutifully supported gay-friendly candidates. His guiding ambition was helping to teach other donors and nonprofits how to operate more efficiently, and he had organized a series of major-donor conferences toward that end. But several years ago, a growing number of his peers began to sense that they were playing in the wrong arena. "A lot of [gay donors] are driven, cycle to cycle, by the notion that there's going to be an epiphany—that one day they'll wake up and accept us," he said. "But this group had spent millions of dollars on philanthropy, and yet woken up the morning after the election to see gay-marriage bans enacted all across the country."

Gill decided to find out how he could become more effective and enlisted as his political counselor an acerbic lawyer and former tobacco lobbyist named Ted Trimpa, who is Colorado's answer to Karl Rove. Trimpa believes that the gay-rights community directs too much of its money to thoroughly admirable national candidates who don't need it, while neglecting less compelling races that would have a far greater impact on gay rights—a tendency he calls "glamour giving." Trimpa cited the example of Barack Obama: an attractive candidate, solid on gay rights, and viscerally exciting to donors. It *feels good* to write him a check. An analysis of Obama's 2004 Senate race, which he won by nearly fifty points, had determined that gays contributed more than $500,000. "The temptation is always to swoon for the popular candidate," Trimpa told me, "but a fraction of that money, directed at the right state and local races, could have flipped a few chambers. 'Just because he's cute' isn't a strategy."

Together, Gill and Trimpa decided to eschew national races in favor of state and local ones, which

could be influenced in large batches and for much less money. Most antigay measures, they discovered, originate in state legislatures. Operating at that level gave them a chance to "punish the wicked," as Gill puts it—to snuff out rising politicians who were building their careers on antigay policies, before they could achieve national influence. Their chief cautionary example of such a villain is Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, who once compared homosexuality to "man on dog" sex (and was finally defeated last year, at a cost of more than $20 million). Santorum got his start working in the state legislature. As Gill and Trimpa looked at their evolving plan, it seemed realistic. "The strategic piece of the puzzle we'd been missing—consistent across almost every legislature we examined—is that it's often just a handful of people, two or three, who introduce the most outrageous legislation and force the rest of their colleagues to vote on it," Gill explained. "If you could reach these few people or neutralize them by flipping the chamber to leaders who would block bad legislation, you'd have a dramatic effect."

Gill's idea was to identify vulnerable candidates like Danny Carroll and move quickly to eliminate them without the burden of first having to win the consent of some risk-averse large organization or board of directors. Another element of this strategy is stealth. Revealing targets only after an election makes it impossible for them to fight back and sends a message to other politicians that attacking gays could put them in the crosshairs. Independence also allowed Gill to pursue an element of his philosophy that chafes many national gay organizations: the belief that enduring acceptance can be won only with Republican support. "If you want a majority, you have to change people's minds," he said, noting that in Colorado, Republicans outnumber Democrats. "Just because you're conservative doesn't mean you're antigay."

With that in mind, he assembled a bipartisan team of political operatives and tested his theory in 2004, quietly targeting three antigay Colorado incumbents; two of them went down. Through the combined efforts of a host of progressive interest groups, including many supported by Gill, Democrats captured both chambers of the legislature for the first time in forty years. Gill's decision to back Democrats in Colorado was the only choice that would produce the gay-tolerant leadership he's pursuing. But ten years from now, he told me, he hopes he'll be able to give evenly to Republicans and Democrats.

Convinced his approach was sound, Gill decided to go big. When I visited his headquarters last fall, liberals were working alongside conservatives on a list compiled by his top consultants—one a national Democratic consultant, the other a former Karl Rove protégé—of seventy races in which a key antigay candidate was vulnerable or the outcome of a race was likely to affect control of the legislature. The list included state legislators, governors, and judges, not just Republicans but Democrats as well—like Philip Travis, the Democratic legislator leading the push to overturn gay marriage in Massachusetts.

From the standpoint of an entrepreneur, Gill saw opportunity and believed he could amplify his return on investment. Last spring, he sponsored another conference for wealthy gay donors, only this one designed to steer money to the right political races instead of the right nonprofits. His pitch was simple: Instead of waiting for a political savior to fix everything, consider donating to these races, where you'll have more effect at a fraction of the cost. As Trimpa later characterized the rationale for such an approach: "We live in a post–*Will & Grace* society. Americans believe and understand that

gay people are everywhere, and most view them in a mainstream context. But this is a recent development, and the political world has not yet caught up—it's lagging behind. The day will come when all of this is aligned, but we're not there yet."

In the 2006 elections, on a level where a few thousand dollars can decide a close race, Gill's universe of donors injected more than $3 million, providing in some cases more than 20 percent of a candidate's or organization's budget. On Election Day, fifty of the seventy targeted candidates were defeated, Danny Carroll among them; and out of the thirteen states where Gill and his allies invested, four—Iowa, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Washington—saw control of at least one legislative chamber switch to the Democratic Party. (In Massachusetts, Travis decided to retire rather than seek reelection.) The national climate, which was strongly anti-Republican, helped bring about this transformation. But Gill's stealth campaign was both effective and precedent-setting. For the first time, in a broad and organized way, gays had taken the initiative in a sweeping multistate strategy and had mostly prevailed.

The history of gays as open participants in American politics is a relatively brief one, though it contains clear antecedents for what Gill is attempting to do. In the 1950s, the homophile movement first sought social acceptance for gays and lesbians through a handful of small, politically cautious organizations like the Mattachine Society, which sponsored newsletters and discussion groups and lobbied to end police raids targeting gay activities. The Stonewall riots and the gay-liberation movement of the 1960s and '70s worked toward securing the legal protection afforded by federal minority status, to diminish discrimination and blackmail. The devastating rise of AIDS in the 1980s halted momentum toward the political mainstream and helped solidify gays' status as victims in the public mind. The failure of state and federal government to respond to the crisis, however, prompted gays for the first time to organize to provide the care and services others would not. Explicitly gay philanthropy grew from a few million dollars a year in the early 1980s to around $100 million in the early 1990s, as independent, privately funded organizations came into being.

When AIDS finally did register as a national pandemic, political acceptance of homosexuals remained limited even in the most liberal spheres. In 1988, Michael Dukakis declined gay contributions to his presidential campaign after deeming them too politically risky. Bill Clinton's candidacy, four years later, appeared to change that. Clinton openly accepted millions of dollars from many rich activists, promising a broad federal assault on AIDS, a federal antidiscrimination statute, and, most famously, an executive order lifting the military's ban on gays. "When Clinton was elected, everyone thought there would be this epiphany on gay rights," said Patrick Guerriero, a former Republican state legislator and mayor in Massachusetts who runs Gill's political team, the Gill Action Fund (which operates independently of his foundation). "Instead, the only two major pieces of legislation were a disaster: 'Don't ask, don't tell' and the Defense of Marriage Act. The experience of the '90s taught us that there is no magic president who's going to fix everything."

The Clinton presidency is one of the major fault lines dividing gay politics, and disappointment with it was one of the motivating forces behind Gill's move away from national politics. But his is a controversial view. Jeff Soref, an heir to the Master Lock fortune who became a prominent philanthropist during the AIDS crisis and was later appointed to the Democratic National Committee, vigorously disputes the notion that Clinton's presidency was a failure and doubts that Gill's response

to it is the appropriate one.

“Clinton broke the silence about the AIDS epidemic,” Soref says. “He told gay people we were part of his vision for America. He directed federal money to AIDS research. He gave us an AIDS czar and a liaison in the White House and an executive order banning discrimination in the federal workforce. He invited us to the table and gave us a place in the Democratic Party. One of the problems with Tim’s strategy is that he’s turning people away from national politics at a time when Democrats have just achieved a big victory—one that we weren’t as big a part of as we might have been, perhaps because of his steering gay money away from the national level. I’ve personally gotten calls, pre- and postelection, from Democratic leaders who feel the gay community has not been as supportive in this election as in previous ones. There’s a tangible downside to disengaging. In a competitive environment, our issues may not get the attention we want them to get.”

Soref cited the possibility that the new Democratic Congress may soon consider a long-desired national employment nondiscrimination bill as one reason not to abandon Washington. “I can understand Tim’s frustration,” he says. “But his way, state by state, will take years. There’s nothing like passing national legislation that benefits everybody equally.”

As the amount of money in politics continues to grow, against a backdrop of deep Democratic frustration over the party’s narrow losses in the last two presidential races, the momentum of the Democratic world is moving in a direction closer to Gill’s than to that of traditional Washington insiders. Well beyond its gay facet, Democratic politics is increasingly dominated by rich donors who share Gill’s dissatisfaction with traditional methods of party politics. This group believes that conservatives were able to reshape American politics because they built, over the last forty years, a broad movement independent of the Republican Party to support conservative candidates and espouse their ideals—an achievement liberals now wish to match. Beginning in 2004, many of these rich Democratic donors lavished tens of millions of dollars upon new independent enterprises, like America Coming Together and the Democracy Alliance, meant to impose accountability and tactical discipline on the liberal movement, expressly to improve Democrats’ performance at the polls.

What came into being instead were large, cumbersome outfits—technically independent, but hardly nimble—comprising many of the same strategists and warring interest groups that had collectively lost the election in 2000, and again in 2004. (In frustration, several of the party’s biggest donors, including George Soros and Peter Lewis, severely curtailed their giving last year.)

Gill’s decision to shift away from national politics seems dictated even more by his philosophy about how to engage most effectively in politics than by the mediocre gains chalked up during the Clinton years. “If your objective is to innovate and take risks, you move faster with a small group,” Gill’s political director, Guerriero, told me. “If Columbus had needed a conference call before setting sail for America, he’d still be at the dock.” (This kind of gridlock has long hampered the Human Rights Campaign, the country’s largest gay political organization.) Though Gill, too, has suffered disappointments, his grand experiment is, for better or worse, more consistent with the pragmatic direction of twenty-first-century politics than anything else on the Democratic horizon. Whether that achievement derives from the unique frustrations within the gay community or from the history and ability of that community to organize to help itself, it is changing gay politics, and it could change Democratic politics as well.

A large part of Gill's credibility stems from the ex- ample of his home state. His influence on Colorado's politics has been much more public than his recent national efforts. For years a reliably old-conservative Mountain West enclave, Colorado had a political culture that tended toward libertarianism until, in the 1990s, the Republican leadership turned hard to the right. Before he became active in national politics, Gill had been spurred to action locally by the 1992 ballot initiative prohibiting laws to protect gays and lesbians, and his involvement intensified several years later after he was deeply offended by a Republican legislator's introduction of a bill banning any discussion of homosexuality in Colorado's public schools. Since then, Gill has become the top political donor in the state. Aided by his record as a community leader, he has managed to achieve limited victories for gay equality, most notably getting Colorado's socially conservative Republican Governor Bill Owens to agree in 2005 to a bill protecting gays under the state's hate-crimes law.

During this time, Gill formed an alliance with three other major donors (two of them tech moguls, one of them gay) to find a way to moderate the state's politics and loosen the grip of Republican social conservatives. Working in conjunction with progressive groups throughout Colorado, "the Four Millionaires," as they came to be known, built a kind of information-age political machine that enabled Democrats to outspend Republicans for the first time in years.

On Election Day 2004, as George W. Bush carried the state handily, Democrats captured both chambers of the legislature. "There's no doubt that Tim Gill and some of the other wealthy funders contributed mightily to the takeover," Andrew Romanoff, the Democratic speaker of the House, told me. Romanoff believes that voters perceived Republicans as caring more about marginal social issues like gay marriage than about the economic woes hampering the state economy. "The difference between our agenda and theirs was the difference between the kitchen table and the bedroom door." Last fall, Democrats extended their gains in the legislature and captured the governorship as well.

One component of Gill's strategy includes courting that element of the Republican Party that's open to compromise, while at the same time making clear that gay bashing will now come at a price. "You have to create an atmosphere of fear and respect," said Trimpa, "and set up the proper context for them to do the right thing." But neither Gill's checkbook nor the Republicans' woes have stopped social conservatives from pressing their agenda. Last year, when it became clear that Colorado Republicans intended to back a ballot initiative banning gay marriage, Gill and his allies moved first to frame the debate by pushing Referendum I, a bill endorsing domestic partnerships, and spending $5 million to promote it.

This effort also included some shrewd inside maneuvering. Colorado is home to a prominent Christian-right movement, centered on James Dobson's Colorado Springs organization, Focus on the Family. Gays held no realistic hope of defeating the marriage ban. So to create a more favorable environment for domestic partnerships to become law, Gill's operatives worked to divide their opponents into two camps: those conservatives who wanted to ban only marriage but would countenance partnerships, and the rest, like Dobson, who wanted, as Trimpa put it, "to ban the whole ball of wax." They reached an informal truce with the moderate element of the conservative movement to back only the marriage ban and to not oppose the referendum on domestic partnerships. Among this faction's leaders was an adversary of Dobson's within the evangelical community, the Reverend Ted Haggard of the New Life Church.

As I arrived in Denver a week before the election, Haggard's life became a national sensation. He first denied, but later resigned because of, a report that for years he had paid for sex with a gay prostitute through whom he had also bought crystal meth. The story exploded across the state, yielding full-banner headlines for four days running in *The Denver Post* and wall-to-wall footage of Haggard's awkward semi-denial to a local TV news crew.

While the pundits predicted that the scandal would demoralize conservative voters and benefit the state's liberals, Gill's organization held no such illusions. Its polling showed that the vote on domestic partnerships had been running near even, but now this development seemed certain to tip things against them. Trying to explain why, Trimpa characterized it best by grimly invoking "the gay ick"—his rueful term for the tendency of well-meaning and fair-minded straight voters to become turned off when gay issues focus explicitly on sex. The Haggard episode, which fed right into the Mark Foley congressional page scandal then in full bloom, created, Trimpa believed, the worst possible environment in which to put gay-rights issues on the ballot. On Election Day, the initiative failed, 53–47.

To date, twenty-seven of the twenty-eight state ballot initiatives banning gay marriage have been approved, including those in three of the four states last year where Gill funded efforts to oppose them (Arizona voters, with Gill's help, defeated one last November). The losses seem to have neither dulled Gill's resolve nor prompted him to rein in his spending. "As an engineer, I like experiments," he explained. "The only way you find new tools is to take one out and try it, and I'm perfectly happy to be in this for the long haul." His general success in state races has already stimulated plans for a larger target list in 2008 and a seminar, scheduled for next March, to brief interested high-net-worth donors. The challenge, he believes, will be expanding the ranks of donors while maintaining the focus of those who participated last year and now face the ultimate temptation in "glamour giving," the 2008 presidential race. "You hope that the forces of darkness will be the ones distracted by the shiny bauble of the presidency," Gill said. Then he excused himself to continue mapping out a state-by-state conquest that already has advanced gay interests in politics, even as the need for his surreptitious methods suggests how far they still have to go.

Photograph by Stephen Ramsey

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