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Tinseltown Conservatives Come Out of the Closet in 'Wednesday Mornning Club'

By Garry Abrams

It is high noon at the Beverly Hills Hotel, fabled setting of countless clandestine Hollywood intrigues. Today, though, the action is exuberantly overt.

Several dozen members and guests of the **Wednesday Morning Club** are brazenly gathering for a lunch of chicken and politics. Everyone seems starved for big helpings of the latter. The menu promises a tasty speech by CNN political analyst William Schneider on how Bill Clinton cooked Bob Dole's goose during this year's presidential race. At last, the mood suggests, someone who can make that dreary campaign palatable.

Despite the group's rather cryptic name, the event would be pretty standard fare almost anywhere else in the country. A Kiwanis Club meeting in the room next door adds to the heartland air. But way out here on the wild and wacky Pacific Rim, many of the well dressed, affluent members of the Club see themselves as Left Coast iconoclasts, especially by the standards of the entertainment industry in which most earn their livings. Wryly named for a bleak post-election dawn, the **Wednesday Morning Club** meets when time and circumstance permit — usually in the p.m.)

The Club, these mavericks say, is a different kettle of fish in a town as politically conformist as a can of sardines. The group's aim, they explain, is to bring bipartisan — even multipartisan — politics to Hollywood, which some Club members insist is smothered in high-profile, knee-jerk liberals.

Among those who have signed on for the mission are a conspicuous smattering of attorneys, including some who are pillars of Hollywood's infrastructure.

One is Bruce Ramer of Gang, Tyre, Ramer & Brown. Ramer serves on the Club's steering committee and is best known for representing Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood and Quincy Jones. Ramer's affiliation with the group is a rare foray from backstage by a lawyer with a reputation for personal

reserve and professional discretion. Last summer, for instance, the ultra-low-profile Ramer kept mum when the *New York Times* reported — incorrectly, as it turned out — that he was a candidate to head up Sony's troubled studio operations.

Ramer himself says his participation in the 300 member Wednesday Morning Club is motivated by a desire to enlarge political discourse within the entertainment business. But he frames his participation carefully, stressing that the Club must be even-handed in its choices of speakers. "I am vigorous about keeping this thing nonpartisan," he says, adding that if the Club "turned into an arm of the Republican Party" he would be out the door pronto.

The Club was launched four years ago by former leftists David Horowitz, a co-founder of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture, and Lionel Chetwynd, once a law student and now a writer-producer-director whose screen credits include *Hanoi Hilton*. It was Chetwynd who called and asked for his help, Ramer says. The Club is an offshoot of the Center and functions somewhat like a debating club. Sometimes speakers from two sides of an issue share the podium. Or, as is the case today, Club members lob questions at Schneider, seeking to plumb the soul of the country's electorate. The Club's pronounced goal is to "encourage diversity of thought and broaden debate within the entertainment industry."

"Even Albania has a two-party system, said Horowitz "Dialogue is what we're about," he added. I actually believe in it, having been on both sides.

Horowitz continued that Ramer's participation is a big plus. "I am amazed and impressed that Bruce Ramer is willing to come out and help us," Horowitz said. One other attorney, George Vradenburg, head of Latham & Watkins' entertainment division, serves on the Club's 15-member steering committee that also includes writers, producers, directors, entertainment executives and a lone literary agent.

Five other attorneys also sit on the 17-member board of the Center, including David West, a partner at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, and Shawn Steel of Steel and Associates, who is treasurer of the California Republican Party. Two other Center board members are traditional values crusader William Bennett and conservative author PJ. O'Rourke.

The leavening of attorneys, particularly those in entertainment, may be especially helpful at this juncture in the politics of Tinseltown. Lawyers, he says, are increasingly key players in the more business and bring with them broad networks of contacts, the mother's milk of the film business. Horowitz also believes that attorneys may be relatively bolder and more independent than others in show business who adopt their politics as camouflage.

Robert M. Rosenthal an entertainment attorney and a board

member of the Center, echoes Horowitz's opinion. Rosenthal explained that he often tells clients, "Look, sport, if you're making a million dollars a year, you're a Republican whether you know it or not. He asserted that some of his clients "claim to be democrats only because their agent told them to be Democrats"

Using those arguments, Rosenthal said he has invited clients and friends to attend Club function. Rosenthal, a former president of the Beverly Hills Bar Association, also agreed that attorneys are well represented in the Club and at the Center. "I think one of the reasons we're well represented h that we're willing to get involved...I'm always willing to talk I'm an inveterate letter writer.

Such energy may be paying off. Lately the Wednesday Morning Club seems to be flirting with trendiness. Partly because of its cachet for stylish heresy, the Club has received a modest amount of media exposure recently. President Clinton's swing to the right and the renewal of the Republican hold on Congress probably hasn't hurt either, Horowitz and others said, explaining that Hollywood may be taking note of the rest of the country's political mood.

Moreover, the Club's balancing act on presenting issues seems to have made it politically and socially acceptable to show up at the Club's affairs, if not become active members. This day, for instance, Attorney-activist Gloria Allred arrives just in time to catch Schneider's talk.

Indeed, Club leaders cited the appearance of Schneider, who is paid to objectively examine campaigns and elections, as an example of the Club's carefully crafted, democratic eclecticism. (In his talk, Schneider offers some comfort to the Club's Dole supporters. During the final days of the election, the Republican candidate closed the gap with Clinton to single digits, he notes.) Other speakers have included representatives of the Clinton administration as well as a roster of Republican politicians including U.S. Sen. Fred Thompson of Tennessee, a former Senate Watergate Committee counsel whose second career as an actor included roles in the movies *Die Hard 2* and *Patriot Games*, and former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.

Meanwhile, the Center, which looms in the Club's background, defies pigeonholing. Although it is often described as a conservative think tank, the Center, an early critic of political correctness, has been an energetic defender of free speech. It recently has campaigned against the V-chip and censorship on the Internet. Opposition to both perceived threats to the first Amendment crossed political lines and made strange bedfellows of an assortment of conservative and liberal groups and politicians.

Attorney Rosenthal is a non-pigeonhole type, too, noting that he is that rare animal, a Jewish Republican." He lamented that his party is "too dominated by the far rights and that

elections.

Veteran entertainment attorney Ed Blau said he joined the club because it gives me a good balance of perspectives" on current issue. But he added that the Club partly serves as an antidote to the Democratic functions he attends.

Thus the impression persists among many that the Wednesday Morning Club is, at one level essentially a refuge for Republican-Libertarian types who feel endangered in Hollywood.

It is an impression that is partly true. "The mission of the Wednesday Morning Club is to make it acceptable for conservatives to come out of the closet in Hollywood, said one Club member on condition of anonymity. Behind this statement lies the perception that conservatives in Hollywood are less likely to succeed because of bias against them by the entertainment industry's largely liberal movers and shakers — a perception that Horowitz and others bolstered anecdotally with tales of withheld opportunities and gratuitous insults.

But the truth apparently contains other elements, too. Perhaps because it seeks to span the political spectrum while offering haven to those who perceive themselves as outsiders, the Wednesday Morning Club seems to possess a duality that is almost theological.

In the course of an interview, Horowitz said he hopes the Club will make it possible for people to disagree politically in Hollywood and "not feel they've ruined their careers in the process." Yet he expressed distaste for the incredible ambivalence" the Republican party has shown toward Hollywood recently, an attitude manifested by candidate Dole's attacks on movies and programming he saw as objectionable.

Horowitz gave President Clinton credit for criticizing Hollywood and at the same time drawing substantial support from the film industry. Clinton attacked Hollywood but he knows how to attack and woo at the same time," Horowitz said.

Horowitz also acknowledges that the political atmosphere of the entertainment business today is nothing like the repressive days of the 1950s when people were blacklisted for political nonconformity. Then liberals stood up to the forces of McCarthyism that controlled the studios. Now, Horowitz said, I do not feel Hollywood is controlled by anybody... It's a kind of Darwinian environment. It's not like Oliver Stone was elected by a committee."

Ultimately, he says, one role of the Center and the Club in Hollywood is "to defend the town."