The press releases that have poured from the Manhattan NGTF headquarters since their formation outline a history of a group that for some time seemed to promise a challenge to the gay community's problems. The group's long-standing and successful leadership in the American Psychiatric Association's long-standing ruling that homosexuality represented an illness—a change, that has had profound implications on the way gay people are viewed in society.

The group's vigilance over the media has had a major impact on how gay people are depicted on television and in the news. NGTF has also been represented at the Democratic National Convention and the International Women's Year Commission. Most significantly, NGTF was able to wrangle an invitation to the White House to discuss gay concerns with the top presidential aide, Midge Costanza.

The headlines could go on. Whenever anything happens that could generate a gay comment, the NGTF is there commenting. Effective public relations have made the group the highest-profile homophiles ever in the United States—if not the world. Quotes from executive directors Bruce Voeller or Jean O'Leary regularly appear on the pages of Newsweek, Time, The New York Times and in broadcast media around the world. Now the group is a quarter-million-dollar-a-year operation with 8,000 members, pushing forward for regional offices and at some point even state offices—allegedly modeled after the American Civil Liberties Union regional chapters.

Such high profiles and ambitious plans also have drawn the group more than its fair share of critics. The NGTF, critics say, is more concerned with creating a press-released illusion of its own importance than it is with forging substantial changes for gay people in the United States. Moreover, critics say, the group is run by a strong-minded staff acting with little in-put or financial control from the board of directors who are supposed to direct the organization.

These criticisms, however, must be weighed against the reality that in the gay movement, success brings as many enemies as friends. No matter how it is finally evaluated, the honeymoon that the NGTF long enjoyed with the gay community is clearly over. No accurate assessment of the organization can be made without hearing from critics, many of whom refuse to comment on the record, fearing, so they say, Voeller and O'Leary's sharp tongues.

Paul Hardman, a San Francisco leader of the National Committee for Sexual Civil Liberties, is one outspoken critic. "They have this knack for making themselves look so big—and actually there's only six of them sitting in an office in New York," Hardman complains. "They're more concerned with self-aggrandizement than with gay rights."

Much of the other criticism runs in the same vein. Gary Van Ooteghem, the Houston businessman who once was NGTF national co-chair, worries that the group is the gay movement. "They have this knack for making themselves look so big—and actually there's only six of them sitting in an office in New York," Hardman complains. "They're more concerned with self-aggrandizement than with gay rights."

Others say that the group's high ambitions aren't all that bad. "The point is that they are just six people in an office in New York," says Seattle NGTF board member Charlie Brydon. "And they're doing a helluva lot of work—and not making a bad job of it."

Concerns from the Beginning

If NGTF now is suffering the attacks of being considered a victim of the "spokesperson syndrome," then it is a problem that has been with the group since it was organized in October 1973 when Bruce Voeller and the late Dr. Howard Brown called the press conference that was to launch a new type of gay organization. Writer Martin D'La Gamba—one of the gay leaders at that news conference and an NGTF board member for three years—says he was "confused and uncertain" about the group's goals at the press conference—and still is today. "I was wor-
ried it might be a superstructure without a constituency," says Duberman. "It seemed like it might be viewed as a group of self-appointed leaders. That casted a lot of hard feelings at first."

Hard feelings also came from the way in which the group was organized. NGTF was born out of an intense political battle in the rough-neck gay liberation movement of New York in the early 1970s. Bruce Voeller, then on a sabbatical at his Rockefeller University professorship, spent much of 1973 as president of the radical Gay Activists Alliance—and was having a tough time of it. "One week a bunch of people at a GAA meeting would vote in one set of programs. Then another group would come roaring in the next week and vote on an entirely different program," says Voeller. Such procedures might be fine for an ad-hoc committee, but GAA then was a $100,000-a-year corporation—with a membership best on full participatory democracy.

Hours of debate would be devoted to $15 appropriations for the bulky treasury. Voeller complains that a blue-denim elitism dominated the organization. "People who came in without a beard and in slacks or a sportshirt—let alone a tie—were made to feel like outsiders," he says. "That alienated a lot of good people."

Voeller pushed the GAA to institute a board of directors that would run the group in lieu of the full membership. His advocacy of this—and the strong resistance he met from many GAA leaders—ended in a stormy meeting in which he and a number of GAA executive board members abruptly resigned their offices. Within days, Voeller was joined by Dr. Brown and a group of other GAA dissidents at the press conference forming NGTF.

Their group presented an entirely new concept in gay organizations. Rather than being an amorphous home to a grab-bag of radical philosophies, the organization would be done on one simple issue—gay civil rights. The group was to take a professional work-within-the-system approach and draw its members from the giant, untapped population of gay professionals.

To a movement long dominated by 1960s confrontational radicals who espoused a punchy oratory of causes, such an organization was viewed by some to be a part of the establishment they were fighting. To these radical critics, the NGTF was considered a suitable venture from the start.

The NGTF soon adopted a corporate board of directors structure that Voeller says was modeled after the American Civil Liberties Union. Columnist Arthur Bell became the first members of the original NGTF group of organizers to quit when he feared the corporatist structure could turn into a rubber stamp in the hands of a strong staff.

Martin Duberman feared the same end, but stayed with the organization. "I remember being reassured that every effort was going to be made to turn it into a democratic organization," says Duberman. "Frankly, I never believed that this was achieved, though I believe it was the sincere intentions of those involved."

Bruce Voeller, who started as the group's executive director, later came to share that title with Jean O'Leary, says the strong staff was a prerequisite to success. "Our basic belief was that if you had good people, you had to give them responsibility and scope," he says.

Impressive Staffing

Indeed, the six-member staff working out of NGTF's Fifth Avenue offices have amazed both responsibility and scope. They are:

- Bruce Voeller, co-executive director, is an Oregon State University evolutionary biologist and the father of three. Voeller, 43, started his political activism in the anti-war movement and joined his first gay organization, the GAA, after being impressed by gay activists he had seen on an early David Susskind show. His current role in the group: fund-raising, recruiter and one-man clearhouse of information.

- Jean O'Leary, also co-executive director, a 30-year-old former nun from Cleveland (Ohio) who came to NGTF via her leadership role in New York's Lesbian-Feminist Liberation group. While Voeller remains the prolific letter-writer of the pair, O'Leary can usually be found on the telephone, jwabbing a favor or pressuring a New York pol. Her political skills won her a delegate's seat at the 1976 Democratic National Convention and an appointment by President Carter to the International Women's Year Commission. O'Leary currently is serving as the NGTF's "New York City Desk," from which she is lobbying for the proposed New York City gay civil rights ordinance.

- Ginny Vida, a 31-year-old former English teacher from Macomb (Illinois), serves as the NGTF media director and is responsible for much of the press the NGTF regularly receives. She started her political activism in 1970 when she became a "born-again lesbian" at a feminist conference. She later became a GAA vice-president, but left that group with Voeller when NGTF first was formed. Her most recent project was editing Our Right to Love—A Lesbian Resource Book.

- Bob Herrick, 35, is the nuts-and-bolts thinker of the office and handles the NGTF's financial resources. He has solid experience in the field. As an Episcopalian priest, Herrick handled the finances for one of the world's largest churches, a Philadelphia native, Herrick shifted to NGTF from GAA in 1973. He's intrigued with business-process—he is fond of quoting the latest thinking in the field from Fortune magazine—and is proud of the fact that the group generally comes within two per cent of its budgeted annual expenses.

- Scott Anderson's mild mannered, soft-spoken personality differs tremendously from Herrick's business-like demeanor and is well-suited for Anderson's role as volunteer coordinator. Anderson keeps track of the pool of 100 regular NGTF volunteers who do the bulk of the group's envelope stuffing and office tasks. The 27-year-old Charleston (West Virginia) native started volunteering for the task force three years ago when he first came to New York. "I was just amazed that there was an office somewhere that had anything to do with being gay—that people would spend day-time hours on it," says Anderson.

- Ron Gold, a former film reviewer for Variety, perhaps cuts the most colorful profile of the group. A Brooklyn native, Gold has spent much of his life on the social conscience circuit—participated in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), union demonstrations, anti-war protest and even the Attica prison cause—when he became involved with the GAA, like Vida and Herrick, Gold made the move to NGTF at its founding. Gold does the group's writing—endless pages of essays, op-ed pieces and testimony hearings—that Voeller and O'Leary subsequently sign and deliver.

- In April 1978, NGTF was able to add five new persons to its staff through a grant administered by the Congress of Neighborhood Women under the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA). The five salaried positions included an education officer, group development officer, people resources coordinator, research aide and secretary. All positions are salaried. The CETA grant provides federal funds to employers to give jobs to unemployed persons for a period of one year. The new staff members will concentrate their efforts on a project aimed at educating the gay and non-gay communities about homosexuality.

- Many on this staff worked without pay for months while the early NGTF leaders raised the first money for the organization. Most work in excess of 50 hours a week for identical salaries of $1,000 a month. Few have excused them of ever taking any financial advantage of the gay movement. Indeed, Voeller's salary is about one-third of what he made as a biology professor. But some say that this staff—particularly co-directors Voeller and O'Leary—run the organization, leaving the board of directors to be directors in name only. Thus comes the frequent charge that the NGTF is undemocratic.