



EXAMINER

Foley Scandal Investigations Heating Up

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By ANDREW TAYLOR, The Associated Press

WASHINGTON - House Speaker Dennis Hastert is getting backup from President Bush and other Republican Party luminaries after vowing not to resign over his handling of the unfolding page cybersex scandal.

"He really ought not be a sacrificial lamb," former Secretary of State James Baker III said Friday.

President Bush called Hastert late Thursday to reassure him amid allegations that the House speaker did not do enough to protect the teenage House pages from former Rep. Mark Foley's advances.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., issued a statement supporting Hastert Thursday night. And Bush's father, the former President Bush, spoke up for him during an ABC News interview.

The boost comes after a week of wavering support from House Republicans in the wake of revelations that Foley, R-Fla., had been sending inappropriate e-mails to teenage pages for years.

Hastert had blamed Democrats for the election-season revelations, but on Thursday abruptly changed course and took responsibility for the matter.

Hastert vowed not to resign over his office's handling of the scandal - "I haven't done anything wrong," he said - but it has cost Republicans in public opinion polls.

"I'm deeply sorry this has happened and the bottom line is we're taking responsibility," Hastert said at a news conference outside his district office in Batavia, Ill.

That seemed to quiet rumblings about Hastert's resignation as the week drew to a close and House and Justice Department officials launched separate investigations.

On CBS' "The Early Show," Baker said Hastert deserves credit for urging a probe of a sex scandal in the shadow of the midterm elections. And he offered a pragmatic reason for the party to stand by him.

"If they throw Denny Hastert off the sled to slow down the wolves, it won't be long before you'll be crying, 'Hey, you've got to throw somebody else over because they knew about it too,'" Baker said.

The bipartisan ethics panel met Thursday for the first time, approving nearly four dozen subpoenas for witnesses and documents regarding improper conduct between lawmakers and current and former pages and who may have known about it.

Ethics committee chairman Doc Hastings, R-Wash., would not say whether Hastert was among those subpoenaed.

The ethics committee's senior Democrat, Rep. Howard Berman of California, said the investigation should take "weeks, not months."

Hastings and Berman will conduct the investigation along with Reps. Stephanie Tubbs Jones, D-Ohio, and Judith Biggert, R-Ill., whose district is next to Hastert's.

While the committee - officially the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct - is investigating potential violations of House rules, the Justice Department appeared to be moving with dispatch in its criminal investigation.

There's plenty to investigate.

ABC News reported that three more pages, one each from 1998, 2000 and 2002, have come forward detailing sexual approaches from Foley over the Internet.

The FBI has contacted a former congressional page from Kentucky as part of the burgeoning investigation, said Daniel London, chief of staff to Rep. Ron Lewis, R-Ky., who sponsored the teen.

Attorneys for the Justice Department and the House negotiated on how to give investigators access to Foley's files without inciting a legal battle like the one after the FBI raided the office of Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., earlier this year.

Ex-Foley chief of staff Kirk Fordham met with the FBI. Fordham emerged as a key figure Wednesday when he told reporters that he had talked three years ago with top aides to Hastert about Foley's conduct with pages.

Fordham's version directly contradicts an account issued by Hastert's office on Saturday, saying the speaker's staff only learned of an "over-friendly" e-mail exchange between Foley and a single page. Hastert's top aide, Scott Palmer, denies that Fordham warned top GOP aides of Foley and inappropriate conduct with other pages.

Foley, 52, stepped down Friday after he was confronted with sexually explicit electronic messages he had sent teenage male pages and promptly checked into an alcohol rehabilitation clinic. Through his lawyer, he has said he is gay but denied any sexual contact with minors.

Hastert, meanwhile, is holding to his assertion that he did not know about messages sent by Foley to a former House page until the scandal broke last week.

He issued a less than ringing endorsement of his staff and Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., chairman of the board that oversees the page program.

Shimkus admonished Foley to cease contact with the former page, a Louisiana teen. The matter ended there instead of being pursued in a way that might have led to the far more lurid messages sent to other former pages.

"Could we have done it better? Could the page board have handled it better? In retrospect, probably yes," Hastert said. "But at the time what we knew and what we acted upon was what we had."

Added Hastert: "I don't know who knew what when. ... If it's members of my staff that didn't do the job, we will act appropriately."