

Homophobia Reaffirmed Commentary: OutRight

by Dale Carpenter

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There are many things one could say about the scandal involving disgraced former Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.). It is foremost a tale of an individual's misuse of power and trust, a willingness to disregard the vulnerable position and psychology of eager-to-please youths.

It is a tale of self-abasement, a 50-something male trying desperately to sound cool and hip to the 16- and 17-year-olds he's attracted to. The puerile Internet messages allegedly sent by Foley to the pages are painful to read. They make you cringe in embarrassment for the man.

It is a tale of a political party hoist on its own petard of anti-homosexual moralism and opportunism. However, celebration of this irony among gay-rights advocates is misplaced. In the short-term Republicans will lose a seat, Foley's own. But in Foley's Republican-leaning district the likely long-term effect is the loss of a pretty reliable pro-gay vote. Foley consistently scored well with gay political groups, almost certainly higher than his eventual (post-2008) Republican successor will.

It is a tale of closets, of Foley's and of many of the gay Republicans who work in Washington, and of the terrible costs that maintaining these closets can exact on everyone, straight and gay. This is not to say that Foley -- who was really more openly closeted than closeted -- was led to his behavior simply by his shame and fear. But Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) is right that the closet makes these episodes more likely.

It is a tale of what The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Matt Foreman called "blood libels," reaffirmed for those inclined to believe them -- of gays as alcoholics, as damaged and twisted sexual abuse victims, and as child molesters themselves.

Any of those story lines could make a column, but I am interested here in something else. The Foley mess reaffirms some things we have long known about the nature and characteristics of anti-gay prejudice.

William Eskridge, a Yale law professor, has written that anti-gay prejudice has been marked historically by three characteristics. These are: 1) "hysterical demonization of gay people as dirty sexualized subhumans"; 2) "obsessional fears of gay people as conspiratorial and sexually predatory"; and 3) "narcissistic desires to reinforce stable heterosexual identity ... by bashing gay people." The primary historical traits of homophobia are thus hysteria, obsession and narcissism.

We can see the first of these characteristics, hysteria, in some of the reactions to the Foley scandal. "While pro-homosexual activists like to claim that pedophilia is a completely distinct orientation from homosexuality, evidence shows a disproportionate overlap between the two," declared Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council.

There is no good evidence of a link between homosexual orientation and pedophilia. Professional anti-homosexuals, like Perkins, often cite junk science to support their hysterical views of dangerous and hypersexualized homosexuals.

Ken Lucas, a Democrat running for Congress from Kentucky, said that Republican leaders should have closely monitored Foley simply because he's gay. There was no more reason to watch over Foley because he was gay than there was to supervise the other 530 or so members of Congress because they're straight, but hysteria sees no inconsistency.

The second characteristic of anti-gay prejudice, obsession, has been on full display. Some Republicans in Congress told reporters that they suspected a "gay subculture" had infiltrated the party. This "Velvet Mafia," as some have called it, allegedly consists of a number of gay Republican congressional staffers and other personnel. A conservative website asserted that the gay conspiracy included nine chiefs of staff, two press secretaries, and two directors of communications for prominent congressional Republicans.

The conspirators, the story went, included several gay Republican staff members who personally handled the Foley case. An especially irresponsible report by CBS News's Gloria Borger recounted how the scandal had "caused a firestorm among GOP conservatives." Without any rebuttal or fact-checking, Borger reported that conservatives "charge that a group of high-level gay Republican staffers were protecting a gay Republican congressman." Anti-gay websites quickly praised Borger for breaking the "PC barrier."

This baseless fear of a gay mafia wielding enormous power undetected has a certain obsessional quality. It is deeply conspiratorial, fed by fantasies of gays as sexual predators.

Others -- including Perkins, Newt Gingrich, Patrick Buchanan and even the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page -- suggested that Republican leaders were paralyzed from acting against Foley early on by fear of a pro-gay backlash. To believe this of GOP leaders -- who have opposed every measure for gay equality -- requires obsessional and conspiratorial delusion about the power and influence of the gay civil rights movement in America.

Finally, the Foley mess has demonstrated the third characteristic of anti-gay prejudice, narcissism. If the GOP loses one or both houses of Congress in November, one supposed lesson will be that the party was too lenient on homosexuals -- turning off the party's base of religious conservatives. Some thus see the scandal as a chance to cleanse the GOP of the impurity of homosexuality, to reassert the party's stable, pro-family heterosexual identity.

Chances are that most Americans, including most Republicans, will reject the hysteria, obsession and narcissism of anti-gay prejudice this mess has loosed upon us. Most GOP leaders have been careful to avoid drawing any of the "larger lessons" about gay people that professional anti-homosexuals would like us to learn.

The Foley scandal doesn't say anything very important about America's gays. But it says a lot about America's anti-gays.

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