

SOVO BLOG

Don't blame the closet

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It's déjà vu all over again, or so the fractured saying goes.

Just as the frenzy over former N.J. Gov. James McGreevey's tell-all memoir began to ebb last week, the media got a new closeted gay politician to obsess over: U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, the six-term Republican from Florida, abruptly resigned as ABC News prepared to expose damaging e-mails and instant messages sent from the 52-year-old lawmaker to male congressional pages as young as 16.

But unlike McGreevey, who called a press conference to announce his resignation and admit he cheated on his wife with a man, Foley offered only a terse written apology for actions he declined to specify.

"I am deeply sorry and I apologize for letting down my family and the people of Florida I have had the privilege to represent," Foley said in statement released Sept. 29, announcing that he had resigned from Congress effective immediately.

It was a far cry from McGreevey's Aug. 12, 2004, speech, which — allegedly with help from the gay Human Rights Campaign — was scripted to turn what amounted to a confession of bad behavior into a stirring civil rights moment.

"At a point in every person's life, one has to look deeply into the mirror of one's soul and decide one's unique truth in the world, not as we may want to see it or hope to see it, but as it is," McGreevey said.

"And so, my truth is that I am a gay American."

In reality, McGreevey's truth was far more than that he was a gay American.

In fact, he was a gay American who now acknowledges that he came out only because he was being blackmailed by the male lover to whom he had given a high-paying state government job (though the man in question, Golan Cipel, maintains he was sexually harassed by the Democratic governor).

Still, by admitting his unethical behavior in the context of a coming out story, McGreevey earned praise from national gay rights groups, which issued a flurry of press releases lauding the governor's "courage."

"Coming out is a deeply personal journey and Governor McGreevey today showed enormous courage," HRC effused.

McGreevey showed "a great deal of courage to be so honest and straightforward," agreed Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Lesbian & Gay Task Force.

In contrast, the same gay rights groups were conspicuously silent when Foley's scandal broke. They waited until early this week — an eternity in news time — to issue press releases condemning GOP responses to the allegations and insisting that Foley's actions were completely unrelated to the fact that he is gay.

"If the Republican leadership cared about the well-being of our country they would level with the American people and call this what it is, inexcusable behavior that has nothing to do with one's sexual orientation," HRC President Joe Solmonese said.

"Given similar past sordid situations in the page program perpetrated by male members of Congress against female pages, it's absurd to blame the Foley spectacle on his being gay, closeted or otherwise," said NGLTF's Foreman.

But Foley seems to have a different opinion, taking a belated turn toward McGreevey's tactic by cloaking a controversy in coming out after years of outrage any time a reporter dared broach the subject of his glass closet.

With Foley holed up in an alcohol treatment center, his attorney offered an admission Tuesday that he said is part of Foley's "recovery": "Mark Foley wants you to know he is a gay man."

Gay rights groups now understandably try to distance themselves from Foley, but his own confession simply echoes the explanations these groups offered for McGreevey's bad behavior.

Defending McGreevey in an interview with Southern Voice last week, Foreman said gay people who criticize the former governor are forgetting their own past.

"The closet warps people, and I challenge anyone who's been in the closet to say they haven't hurt, or deceived someone, or let someone down because they were terrified of coming out — that's what the closet does," Foreman said.

Apparently, Foreman is willing to say that the closet warps people into cheating on their pregnant wives and giving patronage jobs to their lovers, but not hitting on underage teens.

Other gay sources were less reluctant.

"I do believe that he had unhealthy sexual advances to these guys because he was living his life as a closeted gay man," gay activist Mike Rogers, a proponent of outing gay politicians, told ABC News.

But the closet is insufficient as an explanation for either McGreevey's or Foley's transgressions — and it's an explanation invoked at our own peril.

There are plenty of closeted gay men who do not hit on teens, just like there are plenty of married gay men who don't have leave to have sex with their boyfriends while their wives are still hospitalized after giving birth to their children.

This urge to pathologize the closet, to use the shame it creates as a pop-psychology answer to why gay people sometimes act shamefully, risks backfiring on gay rights advocates.

To suggest the closet causes this kind of behavior is to suggest that all gay people are capable of

it if not allowed to live openly. Better let those gay men marry, it tells our fellow citizens, or they'll betray our women and come after our sons.

It's impossible for any of us to know exactly what factors caused Foley or McGreevey to behave the ways they did. But both men had far more means at their disposal than many gay people who do the hard work of coming out every day. As openly gay U.S. Reps. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.), Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.) show, even their political ambitions would not have been completely impossible.

Like Foreman suggested, all of us probably told some lies, and maybe even hurt some people, when we were closeted. And while most of our actions were a far cry from Foley's and McGreevey's, we may even feel somewhat sorry for them.

But there's a difference between offering empathy and enabling an excuse.