



Purging the gays, McCarthy style

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By David K. Johnson

The scapegoating of gay people in light of the scandal surrounding disgraced former congressman Mark Foley is nothing new. It is a tactic honed in the dark days of the Cold War during the McCarthy-led "purge of the perverts."

Conservative Republicans are scapegoating gay Americans again. Though their outrage over former congressman Mark Foley is recent, it employs tactics they honed in the dark days of the Cold War during the McCarthy-led "purge of the perverts."

Only a few days after Foley resigned in disgrace and news spread of a possible high-level congressional cover-up, Gloria Borger of CBS News reported that some Republicans blamed "a network of gay staffers and gay members who protect each other and did the speaker a disservice." Though Borger initially said it was a story that "rank and file Republicans [would] only talk about privately," they quickly grew bold.

Before long, Family Research Council president Tony Perkins was asking, "Has the social agenda of the GOP been stalled by homosexual members and/or staffers? When we look over events of this Congress, we have to wonder."

Even *The New York Times* ran a front-page article revealing that "the presence of homosexuals, particularly gay men, in crucial staff positions has been an enduring if largely hidden staple of Republican life for decades, and particularly in recent years." Underscoring their alleged power and influence, the *Times* noted how gay Republicans "have played decisive roles in passing legislation, running campaigns, and advancing careers." Members of this "Velvet Mafia," the *Times* noted ominously, were "holding their breath" in anticipation of more fallout from the Foley scandal.

The resignation of Kirk Fordham, openly gay former chief of staff to Foley and current chief of staff to New York Republican congressman Thomas Reynolds, seemed only to whet conservatives' appetites to boot out the gays. Labeling them "operatives" who had managed to "infiltrate and manipulate the party apparatus," right-wing author Cliff Kincaid demanded that "the secret Capitol Hill homosexual network must be exposed and dismantled."

Calling them "subversives" thwarting the will of the people, the American Family Association's Don Wildmon told *The Nation*, "they ought to fire every one of them." The Traditional Values Coalition issued an ultimatum to their party: "Republicans need to make a simple choice between the innocent children and radical homosexuals who prey on them."

Charges of a powerful gay network, a subversive fifth column that has "infiltrated" the party, are nothing new. In 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy charged that Harry Truman's State Department had been "infiltrated" by subversives, a category that initially included both communists and gays. However, McCarthy quickly discovered that the charges of homosexual infiltration were more effective at stirring up indignation among voters.

Truman's advisors warned that "the country is really much more disturbed over the picture which has been presented so far of the government being loaded with homosexuals than it is over the clamor about communists in the government," and the State Department's admission that it had fired 91 homosexuals seemed to substantiate McCarthy's charges. With a midterm election approaching, Republicans attacked the Democrats for "harboring" homosexuals. They followed the advice of New York *Daily News* editors who wrote, "If we were writing Republican campaign speeches, we'd use the word 'queer' at every opportunity."

Though histories of the McCarthy era rarely mention it, a "Lavender Scare" accompanied and abetted the better-known "Red Scare." When a Washington, D.C., official testified that "5,000 homosexuals" lived in the nation's capital and three quarters worked for the federal government, headlines throughout the nation warned of a perversion menace. Local police began a crackdown on gay bars and cruising areas, and the FBI investigated federal workers and job seekers.

The State Department alone fired one suspected gay person per day, more than twice the rate at which they fired suspected communists. In the government-wide purge that followed, thousands of civil servants suspected of homosexuality lost their jobs.

Just as today's conservatives speak of an elite cabal of gay staffers, McCarthy spoke of "nests" of homosexual civil servants. During the Cold War, politicians feared that the bonds of loyalty between homosexuals were so strong—a sort of freemasonry—that those in sensitive government positions might betray national security secrets. A 1950 congressional committee that investigated McCarthy's charges concluded that "the homosexual tends to surround himself with other homosexuals.... If a homosexual attains a position in government where he can influence the hiring of personnel, it is almost inevitable that he will attempt to place other homosexuals in government jobs."

Frank Kameny was one civil servant who lost his job in 1957 for suspected homosexuality. Despite his Ph.D. in astronomy from Harvard, the Civil Service Commission fired him at the height of the space race with the Soviet Union. One of the few to fight his dismissal, Kameny went on to become a gay rights activist, a founder of the Mattachine Society of Washington and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, leading the first gay picket in front of the White House in 1965.

In an ominous parallel with the McCarthy era, federal prosecutors in Arizona announced in the midst of the Foley scandal their investigation of Rep. Jim Kolbe, the only openly gay Republican member of congress, for a camping trip he took a decade ago with a group that included former pages. Though the details varied markedly from the Foley scandal—Kolbe was not in the closet, and the men were neither still in the congressional program nor underage—the story served to further the connection in the public mind between gay politicians and sexual predators. And because Kolbe had come forward with early knowledge of Foley's misconduct, it further raised the specter of gays "protecting each other." Pointing to the trip, conservative author Kincaid even warned of a "homosexual recruitment ring that operated on Capitol Hill."

In the 1950s conservative Republicans used the charge that the administration was "honeycombed with homosexuals" to take back the White House from the Democrats. Their campaign slogan was "Let's Clean House." This new rush to "clean house" victimizes the same people it did decades ago: gay men and women who serve their country in the federal and congressional bureaucracies.

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