



Sex Panic

By: PAUL SCHINDLER
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The issue began to emerge clearer for me when we posted my editor's letter last week online. Touching broadly on the Larry Craig matter, the letter specifically mocked an absurd question a CNN reporter posed to an undercover Atlanta airport cop about whether pedophilia was involved in any arrests he made and also quoted approvingly a complaint Matt Foreman of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force made about public resources being wasted on this sort of law enforcement.

Before long, vituperative postings poured in. None was more disturbing than the following: "I know a toddler who was surrounded by gay perverts in a public bathroom who licked their lips and said they wanted to help him with his pants. But I guess that's alright too, because they're gay, right?"

The contention is clearly apocryphal. In fact, I would argue, it's delusional. But it is also of a piece - even if in very extreme form - of much of what emerged in the public discourse in the past week.

During then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani's late-'90s zoning and nightlife crackdown targeting sex-related businesses, some gay activists termed his campaign a Sex Panic, branding themselves with that name in a form of self-empowerment. A phenomenon documented repeatedly through history, a Sex Panic is a popular and hysterical reaction to perceived transgressions against public morality out of proportion to any underlying reality. Bound by rigid codes of sexual propriety, people simultaneously demonize those whose behavior they fear and exaggerate or perhaps completely misperceive the reality of that behavior.

An example of a Sex Panic unmoored to any reality began in 1983, when one mother's charge of child sex abuse against a preschool run by the McMartin family in California resulted in 208 criminal charges against eight adults, based on accusations that included stories about hidden tunnels, ritual animal killings, Satanic worship, and orgies. Seven years later, all the charges were dropped.

Sex Panics more typically respond to actual shifts in cultural mores, but do so in a manner wholly out of proportion to the extent of change taking place. Doug Ireland, in this issue, writes about the Great Purge in McCarthy-era Britain that followed a prominent gay diplomat's defection.

In the US, McCarthy himself leveled charges of homosexuality coupled with treason against State Department civil servants, and it was during the 1950s that the Postal Service engaged in a vicious campaign targeting anyone receiving sexually-related materials, particularly those gay-oriented, in the mail. Historian William Wright has documented a secret purge of homosexuals at Harvard during the immediate post-World War I years, a time of considerable social, cultural, and labor unrest nationally.

Anyone following the Craig story online has undoubtedly run across the sort of hysteria I found posted to my editor's letter last week. But, let's face it - most of the reaction was over the top. Mitt Romney termed foot-tapping and hand-waving, unwanted and inept as it may have been, "disgusting." Senate Republicans took the unprecedented step of demanding an ethics investigation. Newsweek featured "The Secret World of Online Cruising" and even added a photo

gallery, "A Brief History of Online Busts," though most of that turned out to be unrelated to sex.

When the response wasn't "disgusting," it was often "outrageous" or simply "creepy." Most of those I saw commenting on TV, online, or in print felt the need to say their reaction had nothing to do with how they feel about gays, and when Craig denied he is gay, that seemed to relieve many of the burden of issuing that disclaimer quite so emphatically.

But underneath all this was an eagerness- amidst vanishing politically correct outlets - to vent a visceral disgust and hatred of gay sexual behavior, something many Americans seem to feel they are forced to think about. Tucker Carlson busted himself on this score, one night clearly relishing the chance to boast of enlisting a buddy to help bash a man who "bothered" him in a bathroom. When the predictable pushback came the next day, Carlson retreated to the cover that the incident had been a sexual assault and voiced solidarity with victims of similar violence. Mention of a bona fide sexual assault story, of course, had no place in a discussion of what happened in that Minneapolis bathroom.

Meanwhile, the real issue forming the indictment against Larry Craig's public service - his consistently anti-gay voting record, especially in the hypocritical light of his private conduct - goes largely unexamined by the media. Those who sought to spotlight the issue pre-Minneapolis are widely dismissed, even condemned, as gay activists with an outing agenda. A society traditionally hostile to the sexual rights of gay men thus suddenly adopts the conceit that privacy above all is sacrosanct.