



Are Gays Scapegoats in Foley Scandal?

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by Peter Cassels
EDGE National News Editor

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Several national gay organizations fear that gays are becoming scapegoats in the scandal over former Congressman Mark Foley's inappropriate contacts with former congressional pages.

The Florida Republican abruptly resigned Sept. 29 after ABC News reported that he sent inappropriate e-mails and salacious instant messages to former pages. Foley had long publicly hid his sexual orientation, but it was common knowledge in Washington and in his home district.

His attorney reported Oct. 3 that Foley is gay, has checked into a residential treatment program for alcoholism and resulting personal problems, and as a youth was molested by a member of the clergy. Foley is Catholic, but his attorney did not indicate whether the alleged molester was a priest.

While initial reports indicated that the e-mails and instant messages were sent to present male congressional pages, who are usually 16 years old, later reports indicated the recipients were former pages 18 or older.

On Oct. 5, both the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay rights organizations, issued statements to the news media expressing fear that members of the community are becoming scapegoats in the scandal, which has caused a firestorm in Washington and jumped to the number one topic in the national political debate just over a month before the crucial mid-term elections to determine whether the Republicans or the Democrats will control Congress in its next session.

The NGLTF condemned what it called emerging attempts to shift responsibility for the Foley scandal by blaming gay Republican congressional staffers for supposedly covering up prior reports of predatory behavior by Foley. It reported that discussions of a supposed network of closeted gay Republicans working on Capitol Hill have swept Internet blogs and been raised on MSNBC and CBS. There are allegations, for example, that gay former Foley aide Kirk Fordham, the recently resigned chief of staff for Rep. Tom Reynolds, R-N.Y., worked to play down complaints about Foley's behavior. Fordham has said that more than three years ago he had "more than one conversation with senior staff at the highest level of the House of Representatives asking them to intervene."

In a statement, NGLTF Executive Director Matt Foreman, said: "The GOP has only one response when it's in trouble-'blame the gays.' First, they floated the excuse that past complaints about Foley weren't pursued because Republicans didn't want to look like they were 'gay bashing.' Then, they dispatched henchmen like Tony Perkins and Pat Buchanan

to offer the blood libel that gay men are prone to pedophilia. Now-in another signal of desperation-it is clear they plan to poison the debate further with allusions to a shadowy network of closeted gay Republicans who closed ranks to protect Foley."

After House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., held a news conference Oct. 5 in which he accepted responsibility for Congress's inaction to respond to the Foley scandal earlier and announced an investigation, but said he would not resign, HRC President Joe Solmonese sent a letter to Hastert expressing concern that gays are being scapegoated. Solmonese wrote, that he is "deeply troubled in recent days to hear voices in the Republican Party publicly scapegoat [GLBT] Americans for [Foley's] inappropriate and immoral conduct.

"This is not a gay or straight issue; it is an issue of inappropriate behavior that regardless of one's sexual orientation, political affiliation or any other characteristic is dead wrong."

Solmonese also told Hastert that as an investigation moves forward, "we call on you to ensure the focus remain on those things important to this matter and not allow extremists within your own party to try and divert attention by furthering their anti-gay agendas.

"Gay Americans have watched this scandal unfold like everyone else, but unlike other Americans, we have found ourselves targeted once again by extremists in the Republican Party trying to shift responsibility. Members of the [GLBT] community are part of the fabric of our country and to demonize them in the name of politics is disgraceful."

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The NGLTF news release listed media coverage of the scandal to illustrate the contention that gays are being used as scapegoats.

In an Oct. 5 editorial, the New York Times wrote: "Conservative politicians frequently try to score political points by railing against homosexuality ... there's reason to worry that the scandal could tempt Republican politicians and their defenders to try to turn it into an anti-gay witch hunt in the Capitol."

On Oct. 4, CBS News reported that it has learned that several other top Republican staffers who handled the Foley matter are also gay. "Their role in this controversy has caused a firestorm among GOP conservatives, who charge that a group of high-level gay Republican staffers were protecting a gay Republican congressman."

In his blog, David Corn (www.davidcorn.com) reported: "There's a list going around. ...It's a roster of top-level Republican congressional aides who are gay. CBS News on Tuesday...reported that there's anger among House Republicans at what an unidentified House GOPer called a 'network of gay staffers and gay members who protect each other and did the Speaker a disservice.' The implication is that these gay Republicans somehow helped page-pursuing Mark Foley before his ugly (and possibly illegal) conduct was exposed. The List - drawn up by gay politicians - is a partial accounting of who on Capitol Hill might be in that network."

In The Corner, a www.nationalreview.com blog, John Podhoretz reported Oct. 5 that the list includes nine chiefs of staffs, two press secretaries, and two directors of communications. If the list is accurate, Podhoretz wrote, "it shows that some of the religious right's favorite representatives and senators have gay staffers helping them advance their political careers and agendas."

Both Republican and Democratic national gay political organizations also expressed concern about anti-gay bias.

"Voters should be appalled by the behavior of Republicans and their anti-gay apologists, who

have attempted to blame all parties but themselves for their own actions," Jo Wyrick, executive director of the National Stonewall Democrats, said in a statement Oct. 5. "It is time for the Republican Leadership, the anti-gay special interests who defend their actions by attacking gay families, and Mark Foley to stop blaming others and finally take personal responsibility for failing the American public and jeopardizing the safety of children."

Log Cabin Executive Vice President Patrick Sammon reported Oct. 4 that Family Research Council President Tony Perkins, Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation, "American Values" President Gary Bauer and Pat Buchanan, among others, "have been using the situation to push their anti-gay agenda."

The Log Cabin statement reported that Perkins said on MSNBC's "Hardball with Chris Matthews" that gay men are more likely than heterosexual men to molest young people and that Pat Buchanan made an identical claim on the program. "These claims are categorically false," Sammon said. "In fact, in 1998 the Journal of the American Medical Association found that 98 percent of male pedophiles are heterosexual."

"Millions of gay and lesbian people go to work, pay taxes, raise families, and make this country a better place to live," Sammon said. "Their lives and character shouldn't be demeaned because of Mark Foley's disgusting behavior or the congressional leadership's response to it."