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EDITORIAL

Real Scandals, and Fake Ones

When it comes to sexual scandal, American voters tend to be more rational than American politicians. The House Republicans raced to impeach President Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky episode. But the people, shocked as they were, showed no desire to punish him by upending the national government. Conservative politicians frequently try to score political points by railing against homosexuality, but voters from very conservative areas often support politicians who are living out their private — and often not particularly secret — lives as gay men and women. Lawmakers from both parties have announced they were gay over the last generation, and they were almost always re-elected.

That tolerance obviously does not extend to Representative Mark Foley's e-mail pursuit of under-age Congressional pages, an unforgivable — and very possibly illegal — abuse of public trust. But 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.

The Republicans' fear of the political consequences of the scandal has already caused them to turn on each other with stunning speed. The finger-pointing at Speaker Dennis Hastert became a chorus. The Republicans, who have shown a remarkable degree of patience when it comes to investigating the Bush administration, are fairly racing to investigate their leadership.

The desire to turn Mr. Hastert into a sacrificial victim is self-serving. But the party is right to demand that the people in charge explain why they ignored glaring danger signs for so long. The Republicans, who have the ear of the voters who are likely to be the most disturbed by this scandal, should be equally aggressive in making it clear that none of this has anything to do with the sizable number of gay men who work in the Capitol, both as elected officials and members of their staffs.

Pat Buchanan helped point everyone in exactly the wrong direction when he announced on MSNBC that "there's a proclivity" toward child abuse among homosexuals. "Is it a coincidence that 90 percent of the victims of the priests and the other folks who abuse those altar boys and others, 90 percent of the victims were boys, 90 percent of the perpetrators were men?" he asked.

What Mr. Foley did was not about his sexual orientation. Anyone who imagines that gay men pose a particular threat to American children need only contemplate the grisly crimes recently perpetrated on young girls in schoolhouse assaults by psychotic heterosexuals. The last time Congress went through a page sex scandal, two House members were censured — one gay and one straight.

When one party is humiliated this way, there's a tendency to look for culprits in the ranks of the opposition as well. After the Lewinsky scandal broke, the public was barraged with examples of Republican members of Congress who had committed adultery. While some of the embarrassed lawmakers retreated to private life, virtually none

of them were sent there by the voters.

If there is a Democratic member of Congress guilty of sins similar to Mr. Foley's, it is likely we will hear about it soon. But convincing the public that Mr. Foley's disgusting behavior is widespread in Washington, or trying to create the impression that the presence of gays in the highest levels of government is something to worry about, is not likely to get any Republican elected this fall. What it will do is further degrade an already depressing election year, and create cynicism among a public that really is cynical enough already.

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