

America's Fidelity Crisis: Politics, Hypocrisy and Family Values

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What is "Cage aux Foley" really about and why has it captivated the imagination of every spin-doctor and comedian? Well, the GOP (now known by the acronym "Gay Old Pedophiles") has promoted itself as the family values party. And according to the latest polls a majority of American voters are disgusted with the Republicans. Considering that upwards of 15 congressional seats are now believed to be up for grabs, pundits everywhere are speculating whether Mark Foley's racy emails and text messages might have the power to bring his party down.

What are the actual facts? Since 1995 Republican Congressman Mark Foley has been hitting on some of the studly young pages that come to DC to learn about government. A page who was interviewed by the LA Times reported that Foley was known as "Triple F" – Florida Fag Foley. This particular page after leaving the page program and turning 21, eventually hooked up for a tryst and simply assessed that that Foley is both a legislator and a sexual being. No different than the rest of us, huh? He did marvel over how long it took for Foley to get caught.

One question I've pondered is whether Foley's behavior is really that different than many other beltway politicians? Was he not using his power and station to gain sexual access? Clearly this is hardly extraordinary. So why is House Speaker Dennis Hastert suddenly under fire for not protecting the pages from Foley's alleged predation? What is the political/sexual culture of Capitol Hill that caused complaints to be shelved and investigations to come up empty? Perhaps it is because conservative Republicans have gained political office due in large part to the support of evangelical Christians who view homosexuality as unnatural and homosexual acts as sinful, they may feel especially uneasy drawing attention to their own erotic appetites and behaviors.

What did this predation actually involve? Well, I felt it my responsibility to track down some of these exchanges. To me they read as exchanges between Foley and at least some young men who apparently enjoyed receiving them. If they didn't it would not have taken 10 years for a complaint to be filed. Ironically that complaint, made by the parents of a 16-year old former page from Louisiana was simply intended to cause Foley to leave the boy alone. It wasn't for public consumption. And it wasn't supposed to lead to an FBI investigation, the dismantling of the page program, or the media frenzy we've seen this last week.

So why does the media so fan the flames of sexual impropriety and do voters really care? Conservative Republicans voted for George Bush not for his brilliant mind, clever wit, and amazing vocabulary, but largely to save our country from Gay Marriage and to reverse *Roe v. Wade*. If it appears to them that their leaders really won't go to bat for them over preserving their notions of sexual propriety and the furtherance of the patriarchal nuclear family, then the last decade of manipulation by strategist Karl Rove may completely unravel.

What we do know is that Americans love these media frenzies. We love to hear Jon Stewart explain that Foley "spent most of his career protecting children from Internet stalkers so he could have them all to himself."

Or when Jay Leno clarifies that STUD actually stands for "Strong Teenagers Utilizing Democracy."

Or when Bill Maher surmises: "I think this whole thing could have been nipped in the bud if somebody pulled Mark Foley aside at some point and showed him nude photos of Dennis Hastert."

It appears that an investigation will come up empty in that Foley was careful to avoid sexual activity with current pages and with minors. While he really did draft Internet safety legislation...perhaps his personal engagement in cyber flirting may have provided his committee with valuable insights.

Social scientists have observed for years that powerful men frequently have much appetite for multiple partners and kinky practices. And the impact these appetites and proclivities have on the ability to govern seems miniscule. (The main one may be weathering the consequences of investigations and retributions.) It is likely that the maintenance of the high serotonin levels, a brain chemical found to be elevated in "Alpha Males," requires frequent ego feeding. A sure way to kick up serotonin is through the dopamine-enhanced interest of a new lover. Considering that new lovers are largely interesting while they're new, maintaining high serotonin levels demands sexual variety.

In Medieval Europe the powerful lords and kings would dominate all the fertile women in the region, making them into their wives and concubines. Men of wealth and power in the Middle East keep harems and in nearly 84% of the world's cultures, prestigious men have the option of polygyny (marrying more than one wife.) We might easily surmise that for many leaders there are clear connections between lust, lasciviousness, adultery and political acumen. Certainly, male wealth and power function as aphrodisiacs to many women.

As for the Man-boy paradigm this can be traced back in Western cultural history to the Greeks and Romans. Valuable mentoring occurred in such relationships. While the boys were clearly the sexual receivers in these relationships, they may have functioned more as rites of passage rather than mutually pleasurable erotic relationships. Ultimately the boys were being mentored to be statesmen themselves, thus their receiver state was temporary and neither expected to be long term nor enjoyable.

This older-male/pubescent male paradigm occurs today amongst Papua New Guinea tribal societies including the Etoro and Sambia . Here it is believed that a boy needs to orally ingest semen (administered by means of a blowjob) to be able to grow into a man. If he doesn't receive the requisite amounts it is believed that he has no chance of gaining needed male secondary sexual characteristics including chest and pubic hair and the ability to ejaculate. For these tribes semen is considered a substance more nourishing and potent than mothers milk for the transformation of youth into adults. Ultimately these youth-transforming acts have absolutely no link to an adult homosexual identity. In fact boys who consider fellating each other are tormented with stories that the receiving boy will grow too fast while the delivering boy's growth will be stunted. Thus proper maturity can only be achieved by fellating an appropriately aged man.

The engagement of a gay sexuality in which men date and fall in love with other men and women with women does not occur in many non-Western parts of the world. Fafaine males of Polynesia participate in receptive sex with males whose identity is squarely that of penetrator males. And these penetrator males might as easily engage in sexual activity with women as they would the Fafaine males. Likewise in Latin America it is only the males who engage in receptive sex with other males who adopt a gay identity. Males who penetrate other males are considered to be heterosexual males. The same pattern occurs in Thailand where Lady Boys dress in feminine attire and only engage in receptive sexual activity. For all of these cultures the thought of two masculine males mutually giving and receiving pleasure from each other would be regarded as an absolute conundrum.

Native American tribes such as the Cheyenne readily allowed Berdache or Two-Spirit men to marry masculine men. To them a marriage required someone playing the masculine role being the breadwinner/protector and someone else playing the feminine role of housekeeper/cook and mother. When a two-spirit/berdache sought to become a mother, arrangements would be made for a biological female to carry a baby for her. Beyond that small technicality, she would become a full social mother for her child as well as a full wife for her husband.

Interestingly, Gay Marriage only became a popular idea in the Western world when Heterosexual marriage had transformed into two breadwinners who both work full-time, both have professional identities and with neither having much time for housework or childcare. Once heterosexual marriage became a union amongst equals, it was actually a small conceptual step

for marriages involving two biological men or two biological women to be acceptable. Today complementary masculine and feminine roles are no longer required for family life, and children can be either generated through fertility technologies or acquired through adoption.

Back to the sex scandals. Why does our news media play morality police? Prior to the late 1970's the sexual affairs of those in power were kept private. Today the media is no longer inhabited by an old boys network of reporters who maintain station and decorum by keeping secrets secret. Then, the extra-marital romances of Thomas Jefferson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower were indelibly concealed from the general public.

As we entered the 1980s, the collision of sex and politics fueled our media. Several U.S. congressmen were exposed for paid liaisons with pages and mistresses, often resulting in the loss of their credibility and power. Papandreaous, the President of Greece, like most men of his stature, had a mistress. When the European press exposed this, his wife, who was fully aware of the existence of this other woman, was forced to publicly denounce her husband and ask for a divorce. She was expected to defend her pride to the world despite that her husband's mistress never detracted from her own marital relationship. The public appetite for sex scandals grew as even straight-laced Jimmy Carter admitted in Playboy Magazine that he lusted in his heart.

It all blew open when Colorado Senator Gary Hart gave up his 1988 bid for the U.S. presidency after being exposed for having an affair with Donna Rice. The media had changed; it was no longer the media from the days of Kennedy and FDR. Suddenly there was a larger cadre of female journalists who had no sympathy for the old boys' network. The voraciousness in which the Hart affair was reported paled in comparison to what Bill Clinton would subsequently weather.

Bill Clinton may have been buoyed into the lead during the 1992 Democratic Primary because of the name recognition he achieved for his (then) alleged adulterous affair with Gennifer Flowers. Suddenly there was an interesting man running for President and Americans wanted to know who he was. The daytime soaps and talk shows had already made the discussion of clandestine liaisons normal fare for Middle America; prime time was just around the bend. When Bill and Hillary appeared before the nation on "60 Minutes," viewers got their first look at a real couple with real life dilemmas. Bill Clinton became "every man;" or better yet, every man's fantasy of what he might do if he had a bit more wealth, and a lot more power. That act and that dilemma may have enabled Clinton to stand out from the crowd and ultimately be elected as the first baby boomer President of the United States.

Sex, money and power drew women to Clinton and triggered the media to chase titillating (and mindless) stories. Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky attained worldwide name recognition and substantial profits from their association. If the President's alleged sexual proposition in that inimitable Arkansas hotel room had truly offended Paula Jones, and she had truly wanted to remain anonymous, she would have best kept that memory to herself. Her handlers, however, fueled with resources from Clinton's political enemies' coffers, strategized her into an \$850,000 settlement and a psychic phone line network.

Meanwhile, Gennifer Flowers, who apparently had gotten to know Bill Clinton's proclivities inside and out, profited little from her liaison. In 1998 she published *Sleeping with the President*, with a small publisher and realized little of the financial success that Monica Lewinsky garnered the following year with *Monica's Story*.

In my Southern California subculture, when we first witnessed Hillary covering for then presidential candidate Bill Clinton about his ten-year affair with Gennifer Flowers, we presumed they had an "understanding." Perhaps they'd faced that each of them savored the passion, stimulation and attention of outside lovers and they perhaps had a "don't ask, don't tell" agreement. When Bill called in a cadre of religious leaders to publicly repent for his sinful behavior with Monica Lewinsky, we presumed that this was all staged for all the Middle Americans who weren't ready to hear that the President and First Lady embraced an alternative lifestyle. Some of us fantasized that he'd take the opportunity like Roy Romer, currently the Los Angeles superintendent of public schools did when he was the Governor of Colorado. Then when his opponents "caught him" in a limousine with another woman, he let it be known that he and his wife have an open relationship.

Ultimately, the scandal dissipated when the "shameful" exposure had no sticking power.

Monica Lewinsky's affair with the President captured the imagination of America. Inquiring minds wanted to know how they met, how she accessed the Oval Office, how she captured his interest, what they did in private, what they saw in each other

and what went on with that infamous cigar. America got a look into the psyche of a 20-something woman whose sensuality was clearly tied to her self-confidence. When Barbara Walters interviewed her, we listened intently to a woman who values her feelings, strong passions and excitement. What she exuded was a very far cry from what those of us who came of age with feminism and its austerity campaign, had ever accessed. Part of me shuddered to think that feminism made it safe for young Monica Lewinsky, who is clearly not a dim wit, to flash her thong underwear at the president. (A giddier part of me was intrigued by her zaftig sexiness and did consider buying her cool shade of lipstick.)

While the Starr Report and the subsequent congressional investigation focussed on ways in which the President had deceived the country and was thus unfit to be a world leader; the public consumed a very different story. As far as the public was concerned, "every man Bill" had been set up to lie about something that just about every mainstream American man would lie about. The more he was harassed by Kenneth Starr, and the congressional investigators, the higher his approval ratings rose. When the President gave lip service to being contrite, including commissioning a team of spiritual leaders to offer him guidance, his approval ratings probably dropped. When Penthouse publisher Larry Flynt offered up to a million dollars to anyone who'd be willing to divulge the sexual secrets of the nation's high ranking Republicans, the phones rang off the hook. American sexual hypocrisy was blaringly being exposed. Former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who spearheaded the campaign to impeach Clinton, quickly dodged the scandal-filled limelight when his own long time dalliance with Callista Bisek, a 30-something congressional aide was about to be exposed. When elder statesman Henry Hyde sat on the House Judiciary Committee investigating Bill Clinton's indiscretions, those who remembered his mid-1960s affair with beauty stylist Cherie Snodgrass saw him as an absolute hypocrite. Snodgrass recalls that when they first met he presented himself as single while he was in fact married. Moreover, in recent years he has attempted to brush off what she remembers as a passionate nine-year romance off as a "youthful indiscretion."

We are a culture that struggles to make monogamy work...and is rife with anxiety over any and all sexual impropriety. We fear untoward impulses in ourselves, fear getting caught if and when we actualize these impulses and we tremble at the thought of discovering our own partner's infidelity. We measure goodness/morality by staying faithful. Then when faithfulness leads to boredom, some of us devour repairing-your-relationship books and workshops. Ultimately sex-relationship boredom is a very difficult thing to repair. Even the Cadillac of such workshops offered through the Masters and Johnson Institute reports a meager 15% success rate.

The Monica-Bill Zippergate scandal became a lens for the dissection of America's ambivalence about sexual infidelity. While Monica proclaimed that she would never again have an affair with a married man and Bill solicited the help of a cadre of religious leaders to keep him "faithful," many Americans continued to engage in multiple partner connections. Perhaps the biggest moral hypocrite was Clinton's principle spiritual advisor, Reverend Jesse Jackson. During the very time Jackson was praying with the President he was also fathering a love child with Rainbow Push Coalition aid Karin Stanford. Unlike Clinton who attempted to deny and Hyde who tried to diminish their indiscretions, Jackson refreshingly admitted, "This is no time for evasions, denials or alibis... I love this child very much and have assumed responsibility for her emotional and financial support since she was born."

I was doing field research in East Africa when Zippergate began to unfold. It was an amazing placed to witness a completely other world's reactions. My Nairobi friends avidly commented that Bill Clinton should simply add Monica Lewinsky on as a second wife. They noted that he only had one daughter and that a man with his wealth and power ought to have more wives...and more children. They could not understand the American Press' preoccupation with behaviors that were so private and so ordinary.

During much of summer 2001 both tabloid and mainstream media were literally parked outside the Modesto home of Congressman Gary Condit when it became clear he was more than "just a good friend" to missing intern Chandra Levy. Despite that he was in no way party to her disappearance, his reluctance to openly discuss the extent of his involvement with Levy made him fair game. Ultimately, Condit's lack of both candor and contrition figured strongly in his failed bid for re-election. What finally caused the media vans to leave Modesto were the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Ironically, much of what motivated Osama Bin Laden's network of hijackers to destroy what they could of America was their utter discomfort with our blasphemous ways. Suicide bombers dreamed of a hedonistic afterlife replete with 72 goddess-virgins. As for multiple partners, the Qur'an allows Muslim men up to four wives only if they can establish that they will be fully responsible for them and all of their children. It is not an uncommon belief amongst Islamic fundamentalists,

that in order to make the world safe for Islam, the perceived immoral and free wheeling sexual culture in America must be destroyed.

From a Middle Eastern Islamic perspective, Americans do look wildly free. Our Internet abounds with pornographic sites where images of barely legal sexy young women are available at swipe of a credit card. Statistics documenting partner infidelity range from a careful 10% to a bacchanalian 70%. Despite these temptations, our marital culture tells us that the “morally monogamous” way is to channel our wanderlust impulses into work, parenting, sports and dancing. And for the most part we do.

In the late 90’s Zippergate became a stage for America to expose her contradictions. Powerful men, who had themselves taken mistresses, were scrutinizing the extra-marital affairs of the President. Bob Livingston who was next in line to become Speaker of the House, quickly bowed out because his many affairs were about to be exposed. Clinton’s personal political strategist, Dick Morris, stepped aside when his own tryst with a call girl was documented by a tabloid newsmagazine. While Morris had earlier ascertained that Americans would accept presidential adultery more than they would presidential perjury, nonetheless the President went ahead and perjured himself over adultery and suffered the consequences of Impeachment by the House of Representatives. Clinton contended that he was too ashamed to tell the truth. He was embarrassed for his wife, his daughter and his country to reveal what had really happened in the recesses of the Oval Office. Even his closest associates were kept in the dark, which to his benefit, revealed that he’d created no conspiracy to cover things up. The Senate ultimately vindicated him which seemed right to the majority of Americans in that he certainly he did not compromise national security by these lies about clandestine sex with young intern Monica Lewinsky.

Considering the steep consequences, it is no surprise that most Americans readily lie about sex and relationships. We lie to preserve the status quo in our lives. We lie when telling the truth would make things messier than they need to be. We lie when we tell someone they look good when they really don’t. We claim we are “involved with someone else,” when we’re truthfully not interested.

Lying is deeply embedded in our culture. We wrap gifts to disguise (and possibly enhance) their true nature. Women routinely apply make-up with names like “concealor,” “mask” and “rejuvenator.” Girdles that hide large tummies and padded bras that make small breasts look larger are routinely sold in lingerie departments. Plastic surgery, a more permanent means of lying about the state of one’s body has so grown in popularity that it is no longer a secret. Plastic surgeons stage botox and collagen parties where groups of women gather to collectively smooth away the signs of chronological age.

Meanwhile, we enculturate our children with the veneer of truth telling. Nonetheless, beginning about age three, children learn the survival value of lying. They learn to lie about sweets they were not allowed to eat but did, messes they made and could be punished for, and zillions of other things that they weren’t supposed to break and weren’t supposed to do. Soon they learn that to access good things like toys, attention and candy, they need to give adults the impression that they are obedient, well behaved and truthful. To function in our society children quickly learn to distinguish between real and “make believe.” They easily understand that their favorite cartoon characters can survive crashes and bangs that live action characters cannot. Even after they come to realize that there is no Santa Claus and no Easter Bunny, they still relish the fun of “making believe.”

Our country’s “moral crisis” over pardoning the President for lying about his personal conduct was a bit absurd. When Congress was in a quandary about setting a bad example for the children, they weren’t considering the range of ways we save face for the benefit of our loved ones. Ultimately, truth telling is something our culture celebrates publicly through our justice system, but dismisses privately to smooth the wheels for normal social intercourse.

Anthropologists know every culture has a huge gap between what one ought to do and what one actually does. No exception, our own culture has a mythology about moral social heroes. Somewhere along the line we began to expect our political leaders to be moral leaders as well. As the (undocumented) legend goes, George Washington admitted he chopped down a cherry tree...and proclaimed, “I cannot tell a lie.” Of course in his day there weren’t satellite communication systems and zillions of reporters trying to make names for them selves by exposing the private activities of men with power. Still, some Americans were troubled by the loss of the dignity of the office of President. To them, the presidential ought to be a living example of impeccable behavior and personal conduct. Ever since Gary Hart taunted some wily reporters to catch him with Donna Rice, that mythology was doomed.

What America is actually suffering from is a reality crisis. We are hypocrites. We expect the “Truth” (with a capital “T”) even though to successfully survive in our multi-dimensional culture, lying is de riguer. There are capital “T” Truths and there are truths. No one wants to hear that they look like shit, though we all want to know that our money is safe, our air is breathable and our water is drinkable.

Zippergate ultimately forced America to come full circle with another piece of our moral hypocrisy. Now we must accept (and openly admit to our children) that there are many moralities. In 1992 we witnessed the freeing of the police officers that savagely beat up Rodney King, despite what the public came to believe was convincing videotape evidence. In 1996 O.J. Simpson was freed from criminal prosecution despite a preponderance of implicating DNA evidence. And in 1999 we watched Bill Clinton be pardoned by the Senate despite the telltale evidence on Monica Lewinsky’s semen stained dress. We have been forced to accept that there are many truths, some more believable and some more relevant than others. And Zippergate informed the children of America that there are many kinds of sex, some closer to a legal definition of sexual intercourse than others.

Moral hypocrisy aside, American men and women still battle a fidelity crisis. While our church and state expect monogamy, we know that this is an ideal rather than the nature of our real lives. We witness men in power ride the waves of temptation, get caught, proclaim contrition and eventually catch more waves. Advertisers brashly use the possibility of sex with someone other than our own spouses to sell products and anyone whose taken Anthropology 101 knows humans are not by nature a monogamous species. Long time couples readily agree that the thought of sex with the same person year after year isn’t as interesting as sex with someone new. Thus our internal non-monogamous “demons” duke it out on a regular basis with what our culture tells us will keep our families intact and our reputations secure.

What’s really behind the sex scandals? Obviously politicians have the privilege and power to live very different lives than most Americans. Most Americans simply want their country to be a safe place to raise their families. If you plug into mainstream media, you’d think that there’s a sexual predator lurking in every schoolyard and that the Internet is rife with predators as well. It has only been since the post-war 1950s that childhood in America has become so intensely precious that parents have become 24/7 obsessive to ensure their children’s happiness and safety. Adolescence, too, is another recent American cultural invention as is the idea that women and children have sexual rights. Putting all of this in perspective leads us to the realization that we live in fortunate times. It took ten years to catch an allegedly predacious Congressman whose escapades were apparently legal and consensual. If the evangelists sit out the next election in disgust over the sexualities practiced in Capitol Hill and if the voting machines aren’t horribly tampered with, the Democrats may very well win more Congressional seats.

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