

# PRESSWATCH



## HOUSE FOLEYS

by Terry Eastland

In early June the communications director of the Republican National Committee distributed a memo designed to instruct Republicans on how to talk about Tom Foley, who would soon succeed Jim Wright as Speaker of the House. The memo discussed Foley's liberal voting record, comparing it to that of a Democratic colleague, Barney Frank of Massachusetts. The headline on the four-pager was: "Tom Foley: Out of the Liberal Closet." Rumors of homosexuality on Foley's part had for weeks been circulating on Capitol Hill, and because Frank is an avowed homosexual, the memo was widely interpreted as an attempt to say Foley is gay.

You know what happened next: establishment Washington expressed outrage, the man who wrote the memo resigned, and Foley himself was forced to deny he is homosexual (even though no one had offered any evidence to the contrary). Politically advantaged by the resignations of Wright and Tony Coelho, Republicans were suddenly on the defensive as they were portrayed in much of the media as the ones responsible for smearing Foley. *Time* saw it that way, and *Time*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*—among others—published editorials saying Lee Atwater, chairman of the RNC, should step down.

Now for the rest of the story, a remarkable one indeed. This was not simply the story of a Democrat victimized by Republicans but one that also involved Democrats and the media. And even, as Gloria Borger of *U.S. News & World Report* discovered, the office of the House Sergeant-at-arms.

This office handles security, and the man in charge, Jack Russ, told Borger that he had received some "wild and ridiculous accusations" involving Foley. Russ denies spreading the allegations, but he did tell Borger that high-

ranking House members (I'm told they were Democrats) asked him "point-blank [about the rumors] and I told them what we had."

Democrats began trafficking in the Foley rumor as early as the final weeks of Wright's demise. Democratic supporters of the embattled Speaker—my sources point to the Texas delegation—employed the desperate argument that it would be better to have the heterosexual Wright as Speaker than someone who may be homosexual (again, for the record, there is no evidence at all that Foley is homosexual). Once Wright did step down, there were Democrats who traded in the rumor for another reason—"to bluff Tom out of the race," as Barney Frank put it to me.

Meanwhile, Democrats not opposed to Foley but nonetheless worried about the spreading rumor decided to try to track it down. These "self-appointed vigilantes," wrote Borger, the only reporter to capture this part of the story, "thus became rumor-mongers themselves." One was Rep. Jack Murtha of Pennsylvania, who told Borger through an aide that he was interested

in the rumor "in a clarifying sense."

In our conversation, Frank said he told Democrats to knock off the rumor-mongering. It was too late. Republicans had long since joined in. Probably the most egregious gossip was Karen Van Brocklin, an aide to Rep. Newt Gingrich, who told Lars Erik-Nelson of the *New York Daily News*, "We hear it's little boys." She also told him that the *Washington Post* was going to come out with "a bombshell about Foley." Van Brocklin gave this sales pitch to numerous reporters. The purpose was obvious: to induce competitive fears that would cause the rumor finally to break into print, thus giving it the appearance of "news."

Erik-Nelson reported Van Brocklin's comments (though not identifying her) on June 5, a Monday, the day before the vote on Wright's successor. Not coincidentally, the RNC memo attacking Foley fell into reporters' hands on that same day. Stories the next morning made a correctly subdued mention of the memo, reporting it in a paragraph or two, usually far down in the copy.

There was no mention of the "out-of-the-closet" headline, no interpretation of the memo in sexual terms. This seemed to be the end of the memo story. It wasn't. That day, as Foley was elected Speaker of the House, Barney Frank made himself available to reporters, blasting the memo and decrying the use of sexuality as a weapon, even threatening to name gay Republicans whom he suspected of being involved in the rumor-mongering.

This had two consequences. Because someone had finally mentioned the homosexual angle in public, the media felt justified in dealing explicitly with the weeks-old rumor about Foley. Thus, the *New York Times*, after mentioning the memo and Frank's interpretation of it, included this brief paragraph disposing of the homosexual question: "Members of Congress, speaking privately with Mr. Foley, have been told by the Washington Democrat that he is heterosexual. He has been married for 20 years."

The other consequence of Frank's public comments was to reverse the political tide then running so strongly against congressional Democrats. Now reporters asked Republicans and Democrats alike what they thought of the "smear" memo. No one defended the "closet" language. No one could. In stories appearing Wednesday morning it seemed that the Republican party alone was guilty of a dirty deed. This was not the whole truth, of course, but truth was a casualty as reactions poured in Wednesday to the RNC memo, or at least its headline (the text could not fairly be seen as trying to suggest homosexuality). President Bush denounced the memo as Mark Goodin, its author, packed his bags. Democrats not satisfied with his resignation demanded Atwater's as well. The story more or less ended when President Bush, at his Thursday night press conference, said Atwater had looked him "right in the eye and said he did not know about [the memo]."

Arguably, Mark Goodin suffered more heavily than he should have, and



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Karen Van Brocklin less than she should have; Gingrich required merely that she not talk to the media again, else she'd be fired. Meanwhile, none of those Democrats who had been passing the Foley rumor paid any penalty, as Borger alone was correct to see. And no one in the media—not even Borger—reported how Frank, whether intentionally or not, had forced coverage of the memo on his terms, effectively precipitating the almost universal denunciation of the memo, and of Republicans generally, that quickly followed.

Finally, it bears noting that to spread a rumor on Capitol Hill means to mention it to reporters. This of course happened. And many reporters in turn raised it with members and staffers. "What about the Foley thing?" "Have you heard anything new about the Foley stuff?" There are a million ways to say it. This itself was irresponsible, a poking about on the basis of no evidence at all.

At least this poking occurred in private. Dan Rather's did not. On the May 28 Sunday edition of the CBS Evening News, in an interview with Tony Coelho, Rather said he'd been told that Tom Foley was someone "mentioned specifically" as having an ethics problem that might be "the worst of it." Question to Coelho: "[D]o you know of anything of an ethical-character nature that would prevent Tom Foley from being the next Speaker of the House if Jim Wright steps down?"

Coelho said he didn't know of anything. But he also should have emulated George Bush and taken Rather on by asking on what basis he'd ever pose such a question about anyone.

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On June 2, NBC Nightly News began a new segment called "Capitol Watch," which anchor Tom Brokaw described as "a series of reports on how Washington really works these days." Chief congressional correspondent Andrea Mitchell did the first report—a piece on something called the Aspin Procurement Institute. In case you didn't catch it, Congressman Les Aspin of Wisconsin started the institute, staffed it with former aides, and got a Pentagon grant to keep it going. And, oh yes, he named it after himself. Its official mission, as Mitchell described it, is "to help Wisconsin get more Pentagon contracts"—in the past fifteen months some seventy-seven contracts in all, valued at a half million dollars, and creating more than 5,000 new jobs. Its other mission is "not incidentally . . . promoting the political career of Congressman Aspin." Aspin refused to be interviewed for the piece, but Mitchell showed that he is quite

willing to talk about the institute in political commercials, in which he brags to Wisconsin voters that he has helped the state "get out of last place on federal contracts."

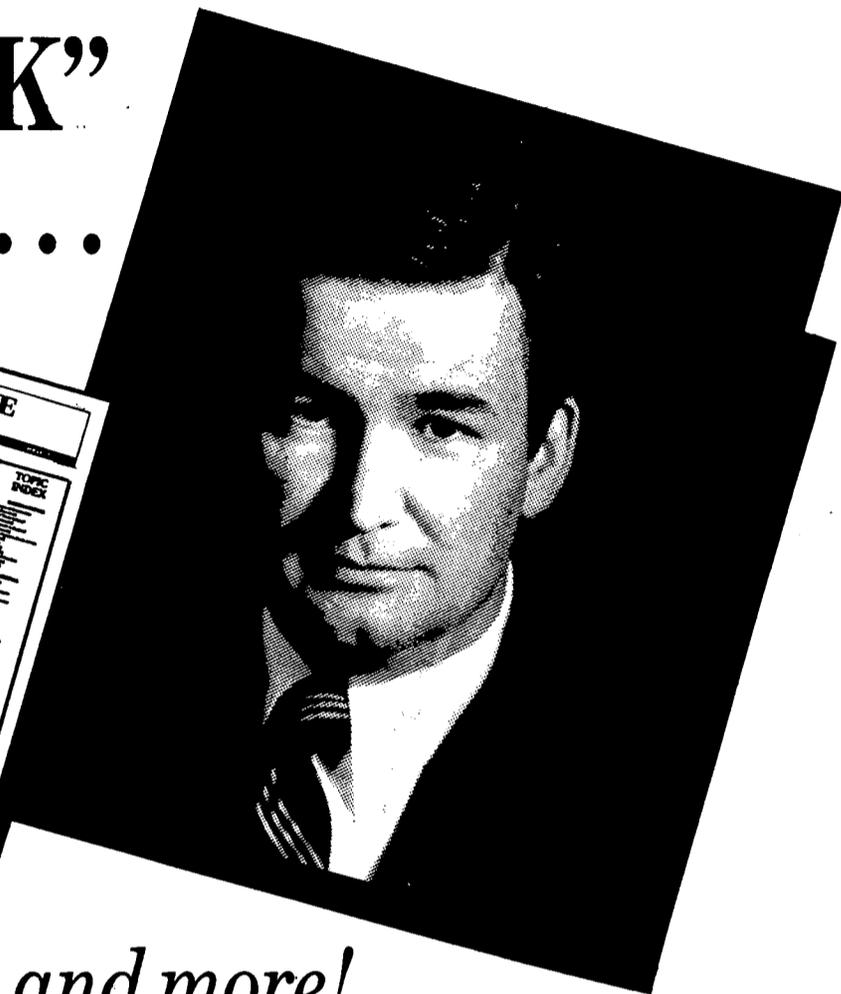
There are sixty-one taxpayer-supported institutes around the country, but only one is named for a congressman. And that congressman is merely the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, which appropriates money

for the Pentagon, the primary supporter of the Aspin Institute. Mitchell reported that the Pentagon denies favoritism in selecting Aspin's entity over others, and that the Pentagon maintains his name "does not make any difference in our evaluation process."

Give Mitchell credit for a job well done in reporting another perfectly legal way of life on Capitol Hill. And give Tim Russert, head of NBC's Wash-

ington bureau, credit for creating the series for his network. Not everything needs a news peg, and showing how Washington works is a worthy goal. Russert tells me the network will do ten or so pieces a year and focus on the other branches of government as well. Given the spotlight on Congress these days, I'll bet the majority of stories come from the Hill, where much of the scandal is 100 percent legal. □

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# AMONG THE EDUCATIONALOIDS



## THE SCIENCE OF BAD SCIENCE

by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Over the last several years, there has been a nationwide alarm at how little our children know of science, mathematics, and technology. The concern is well warranted. In the most recent international comparison, to cite one example, American 13-year-olds scored dead last in math and tied with Ireland and two Canadian provinces for last place in science.

In response, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) decided in 1985 to launch an education reform project. The 132,000-member organization, which has humbly dubbed itself "the world's leading general scientific society," created a special panel called the National Council on Science and Technology Education. Generously funded by the Carnegie and Mellon foundations, it set itself a monumental task: to spread scientific literacy throughout the land. The endeavor was named "Project 2061," referring to the year Halley's Comet is next supposed to swing by. (The date is so distant, the AAAS evidently decided it would be a suitable target for achieving its goal.)

Earlier this year, the first fruit of this planting was harvested, a plump volume entitled *Science for All Americans* that prescribed the essential elements of scientific literacy: the "knowledge, skills and attitudes all students should acquire as a consequence of their total school experience from kindergarten through high school." The initial drafting of the 217-page document was undoubtedly the work of the project staff, a five-man team headed by a refugee from the Carter Administration. Several hundred professional educators and scientists, many with lofty reputations in their own specialties, were then enlisted by the AAAS as consultants, advisers, and reviewers. But the group most responsible for legitimizing and advancing the report is the 26-member

council empanelled by the AAAS specifically for this purpose. Co-chaired by an MIT dean and the former chairman of Bell Labs, it consists almost entirely of prominent scientists and educators, including deans at Columbia, Michigan State, and the University of Washington, Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers, and the newly appointed undersecretary of education, Ted Sanders, then Illinois' school chief. These are the folks who signed the document. Lots of them ought to have known better.

Now, attempting to forge a nationwide core curriculum for science, math, and technology is not in itself a bad idea. The education reforms undertaken thus far in these (as in other) fields have plainly accomplished little. Why not pause, then, and clear our heads about what it is precisely that we want to teach? After all, if we don't know what we expect youngsters to learn, chances are they won't learn much. Besides, the AAAS and its benefactors had big plans for Project 2061: they could scarcely move on to phase II (pilot programs in a half dozen cities), let alone phase III (going national with the programs' results), without first specifying their educational targets.

Unfortunately, Project 2061, for all its funding and planning, has turned into a case study of how readily a de-

cent impulse—once entrusted to the experts and the trendies—can yield something even worse than the *status quo*.

The AAAS panel organized its curricular advice into twelve chapters, purposely avoiding the familiar—but apparently "archaic"—scientific disciplines of biology, chemistry, and geology. Instead, *Science for All Americans* employs such winsome headings as "the nature of technology," "the living environment," "the mathematical world," and so on. Beyond the cute chapter titles the report brims over with its authors' hostility to traditional scientific knowledge and pedagogy and their infatuation with generalizing, "problem-solving," and "thinking skills." The fashion in education nowadays is to despise what the panel calls "specialized vocabulary and memorized procedures," and the AAAS project is nothing if not fashionable: it seeks to create a kind of "new science." And as was true of "new math," the new science won't leave many students with the sense that they actually learned anything.

What the report urges has much more to do with learning *about* science than immersing oneself *in* science. Some of it is unexceptionable; there is a chapter on "historical perspectives," for example, that nicely summarizes in roughly chronological order ten major discoveries in the history of science, from Ptolemy through Newton, Darwin, and Einstein. Yet one searches in vain for a section that looks anything like, say, "chemistry," as that discipline is customarily understood. There are smatterings of physics and biology, of astronomy and geology, but not enough to offer the student acquiring this form of "scientific literacy" any hope of actually being ready for a college-level course.

If students already possessed substantial scientific knowledge, a big dose of conceptualization and interconnecting would be in order. It's the sort of thing scientists do with each other. But when one doesn't know anything to

start with, constructing a curriculum this way is like trying to build a masonry wall with mortar alone. As the *Washington Post* perceptively noted of the AAAS report: "Experts forget what it's like actually not to know math and science already."

Even within its ostensible area of expertise, in other words, the AAAS effort has probably worsened the problem it set out to solve. As with other contemporary reformers of math and science education, they have allowed modernism to supplant common sense, relativism to evict judgment, and progressivism to displace experience. If this were an English curriculum, we'd say they were recommending sophisticated techniques of literary analysis rather than expecting students actually to plunge into great novels, poems, plays, and stories. Doubtless we should be grateful that this crowd has not turned to training pilots or neurosurgeons—yet.

The Project 2061 team did not exactly confine itself to the "science and math" portions of the curriculum; it made a major incursion into the domain of "social studies" as well. That chapter is labelled "human society," and the rationale for including it appears to be that its intellectual substance, so to speak, comes from the social sciences. ("Sciences"—get it?) It is here that we find the truly appalling parts of *Science for All Americans*, a purée of the most banal and ideological kind of anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology.

Today's social studies curriculum already suffers from a dearth of history and geography.<sup>1</sup> That's why so many kids coming out of school haven't a clue when the Civil War was fought (much less what its consequences were) or where the Middle East is. The main reason history and geography are slighted is that contemporary social studies consists overmuch of ethnic

<sup>1</sup>See my "The Social Studies Debacle," *TAS*, May 1988.



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