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Thank Heaven for Little Boys

The GOP makes a sexploitation play on the Hill.

By David Plotz

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It is, of course, every politician's fantasy to discover that an opponent molests children. But since such pedarastic revelations are (surprisingly) rare, pols sometimes must settle for the next best thing: *pretending* that their opponent coddles child molesters. (Click here for a spectacular example from the 1998 election.)

The political benefits of pedophilia have not been lost on Washington's Republicans, who have ginned up not one but two child molestation controversies during the past few weeks. These tempests do not arise from any actual disagreement over pedophilia. Rather, they are perfect case studies in how politicians fabricate, then profit from, an inflammatory issue. (See also: Democrats and Social Security, Democrats and Medicare, etc.)

The first controversy begins with a July 1998 article from *Psychological Bulletin*, the journal of the American Psychological Association. Researchers Bruce Rind of Temple University, Philip Tromovitch of University of Pennsylvania, and Robert Bauserman of University of Michigan re-examined 59 studies in which child sexual abuse victims had been surveyed as college students. They concluded that victims, especially boys, typically do not suffer "intense psychological harm" from childhood sexual abuse. The researchers also recommended changing the terminology of sexual abuse: An encounter between a "willing" child and an adult should be called "adult-child sex," not "child sexual abuse."

The study and its revolting linguistic suggestion moldered away in the great bibliographic graveyard until it was brought to the attention of radio nag Dr. Laura Schlessinger in March. The article was an easy and

deserving target: It promoted the notion that an 8-year-old child could consent to sex. Author Bauserman, it turned out, had published in *Paidika: The Journal of Pedophilia*, a Dutch journal that favors the legalization of sex with children. And the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) was trumpeting the article on its Web site.

Dr. Laura's crusade against the APA study enlisted the legions of the Christian right: the Family Research Council, the Christian Coalition, Dr. James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and the Traditional Values Coalition. The APA distanced itself from the study, noting the association's long record of fighting pedophilia and insisting that the article does not mitigate the illegality and immorality of pedophilia.

In early May, Hill conservatives deployed the APA article as a political weapon. Led by House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas, 19 Republican members of Congress have introduced a resolution to condemn the article and to demand that President Clinton do the same. The House is expected to vote on the measure in mid-June. Supporters of the resolution say congressional condemnation will discourage child molesters from citing the article in their legal defenses—not that there's any evidence that anyone has done that.

The Republican National Committee saw its opportunity on May 12, when White House spokesman Joe Lockhart skirted a question about the APA study by saying the White House had not reviewed it. (The White House has, of course, denounced pedophilia.) A week later, when Lockhart still had not commented on the study, the RNC blast-faxed a press release congratulating the GOP for its brave stand and slamming Clinton. Its headline: "White House Still Spinning 'Sexual Relations'--As GOP Protects Minors From Pedophiles."

The Christian right's political exploitation of the APA squabble ranges from the Traditional Values Coalition's criticism of "liberal political advocacy ... laying the groundwork for the permissibility of child molestation" to the Family Research Council's loopy accusation that the president is fronting for pro-pedarasty gay-rights activists. "There is an eerie silence from the White House. I think they are afraid of offending their allies in the homosexual ranks, since there is a strong element of support among homosexual activists for lowering the age of consent," says FRC Senior Director of Cultural Studies Robert Knight.

The mainstream press has ignored the pedophilia flap, but Dr. Laura, other talk radio hosts, and Christian activist publications have all trumpeted the GOP's courage to the party's conservative base.

The conservatives have managed to cast themselves as the scourge of pedophiles, insinuate that the president is soft on pedophilia, and link Clinton to a sub rosa campaign to lower the age of consent--and all this is based on a report that no one noticed until the Christian right uncovered it, that no one in the White House seems to have read, and that no one remotely linked to the Democratic Party or the White House has ever endorsed.

The second pedophilia scare has served a more pragmatic purpose: legislative blackmail. During the past few weeks, the Ways and Means Committee has been considering a $2.3 billion bill for the U.S. Customs Service. Federal employee unions, Democratic members, and the White House strongly opposed a provision that would limit certain kinds of overtime pay for customs officers. In the face of this opposition, Republicans played the molester card. They added $10 million to the legislation for customs to investigate Internet kiddie porn traffickers. They also added money for drug interdiction.

Democrats on the committee endorsed the child-porn and drug funding but voted against the bill in subcommittee because of the overtime provision. Trade Subcommittee Chairman Phil Crane, R-Ill., immediately accused the minority party of giving aid and comfort to molesters. "This bill protects our children from drug dealers and pedophiles, and it's unfortunate that the Democrats have put special interest pressures ahead of our children's safety," Crane said.

Democrats, unwilling to take another beating, folded, voting unanimously for the bill in full committee. It passed the House Tuesday by 410-2.

A Democratic staffer gripes, "There is not a single member of the House who objects to the funding to fight child porn, but Republicans constructed the vote in such a way that a vote against the bill can be framed as a vote to say Democrats favor pornography. They added on the child-porn provision and the drug provision simply to force us to vote for them. And we had to."

(Which raises an intriguing notion: Why aren't Republican members of Congress attaching anti-pedophile measures to every bill? What are *they* afraid of?)

Now that they have conquered the House Democrats with bogus pedophile charges, House Republicans are siccing the tactic against the White House, which still objects to the overtime provision. "Our children are under attack by child pornographers who prey on them over the Internet. Couple that with the constant peddling of narcotics to our children and you have a deadly combination that we must do everything we can to stop. This is not a time for partisanship or special interest influence," Committee Chairman Bill Archer, R-Texas, warned the president this week.

The president, who doesn't want to be called squishy on molesters, will probably cave. Once he does, perhaps the two parties can abandon this imaginary controversy and tackle the scourge that actually plagues Washington--not child sexual abuse, but child sexual abuse abuse.

Related in *Slate*

If you missed the link about how bogus pedophilia charges were deployed during one 1998 political campaign, click here.

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The *Psychological Bulletin* study is not on the Web, but you can read the APA's statement about it. You can also read denunciations of the study by Tom DeLay, the Family Research Council, and Dr. Laura. The RNC's pedophilia attacks on Clinton are available in its newsroom: Look for "White House Still Spinning 'Sexual Relations.' " NAMBLA has removed its praise for the APA study from its Web site.

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