



When to drop the “H” bomb

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If you're looking for family values hypocrisy in Congress, then Larry Craig is the wrong scandal.

When a conservative U.S. senator with an anti-gay voting record got busted for soliciting sex in a public restroom, it seemed like a classic case of hypocrisy. After all, in the Larry Craig scandal we have a self-righteous Republican who declares us a threat to “family values” when he himself is out cruising toilets.

But something as complex as sexuality rarely permits such a cut-and-dried judgment, as we should know all too well from being on the receiving end of the proverbial pointed finger. In the case of Larry Craig, if hypocrisy means acting in a way fundamentally at odds with your public views, then this time he really ought to plead not guilty.

Ever since Craig has represented Idaho in Congress, he has voted against gay rights measures and allied with those who view legal recognition for gay couples as a threat to “traditional marriage” and family.

When he almost got caught up in a Mark Foley-esque congressional page scandal in the early '80s, he called a preemptive press conference declaring he isn't gay and bemoaned how single men are unfairly suspected. Within a year he had remedied that perception problem by marrying the woman who stood beside him in his press conferences last week.

For Larry Craig, homosexuality did represent a real and present danger to his own marriage and family. His true failing, both personally and politically, isn't an overactive libido. It's something more serious, in fact, a deficiency that ails all social conservatives to one degree or another. He was unable to look outside his own experience and see that other gay Americans were making different choices in how to live.

For those gay Americans, unlike Craig, sexual orientation is an integrated part of who they are. Being gay isn't a threat to their families, it is a building block for creating one, just as sexual orientation is an unspoken fundamental for most happy heterosexuals.

Unfortunately for Craig, who is 62, the option of living an integrated life as a gay person didn't really exist for his generation, especially in places like Idaho, among the reddest states on the U.S. map.

No, Larry Craig isn't simply a "a nasty, naughty, bad boy," as the senator famously called Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Larry Craig is a confused and closeted gay man unable to connect the dots between his sexuality and his belief in marriage and family.

The same can't be said for David Vitter of Louisiana, a Senate Republican who has survived unscathed from his own sex scandal, after his phone number turned up in the records of the so-called "D.C. Madam." He was a regular with a New Orleans escort service as well, apparently.

In Vitter's case, his conduct was in direct contradiction to his loud-and-proud family values rhetoric, and his steadfast opposition to gay rights. Even still, it's hard to draw any meaningful conclusions from such allegations of personal hypocrisy.

Are we arguing that the claims we hear about "family values" are wrong because some of their advocates cheat on their spouses? What if we could establish for a fact that none of them strayed — would we be less entitled to equal rights because our opponents weren't hypocrites?

For some, stories about self-righteous hypocrites like Vitter confuse them into arguing for the lowest common denominator when it comes to values and politics. Since David Vitter and so many other conservative politicians cheat on their spouses and fully half of all heterosexual marriages end in divorce, then no one's got any business telling us we can't get married. We'll do no worse to the institution than they have, it's suggested.

That's just as weak an argument for our equality and implicitly insults both straight and gay couples who are trying to build relationships not based on deception and sexual betrayal. For them, values do matter, whether or not politicians or preachers live up to them in the personal lives.

The real hypocrisy in these GOP sex scandals, as pointed out by Matt Foreman of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, is in the disparate treatment of the two senators by the Republican colleagues.

"Let's see — one Republican senator is involved in soliciting sex from a man and the Republican leadership calls for a Senate investigation and yanks the rug from underneath him," Foreman said. "Another Republican senator admits to soliciting the services of a female prostitute and there's not only no investigation but the senator is greeted with a standing ovation by his Republican peers. What explains the starkly different responses? I'd say rank and homophobic hypocrisy."

This time the "H bomb" is right on target, since Vitter's conduct as an adulterous heterosexual spouse is a much greater threat to "family values" than Craig's as an adulterous closet case.

In fact, Craig's personal story is a cautionary tale in support of gay rights as consistent with marriage and family values. Craig should never have married a woman in the first place, and his scandal is a reminder that legal recognition for gay relationships can help other closet cases see an alternative to attempting heterosexual marriage, with all the collateral damage to unwitting spouse and children.

If Republicans could resist the temptation to play wedge politics on gay issues, they'd see that adultery of the Vitter variety is a much greater threat to family values than Craig's. And even more importantly, they'd realize that gay rights and even gay marriage represent the solution, not the problem.