

The affair of US Senator Craig: Media sensationalism and political hypocrisy

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1 September 2007

It is the political and media furor over Republican Senator Larry Craig of Idaho which should arouse outrage and disgust, not anything Craig may have done in a men's bathroom at the Minneapolis airport three months ago.

Once again, official Washington is focused with hysterical intensity on the *private* conduct of an individual politician, while the great *public* crimes being committed by the Bush administration and abetted by the Democratic-controlled Congress go unpunished.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has no political sympathy for Senator Craig, a typical Republican supporter of militarism abroad and a hard-line defender of the ranching and mining interests in his state, as well as a loyal hand-raiser on the "social issues" of the Christian fundamentalist right, including opposition to gay rights and abortion.

Nonetheless, there is an element of pathos in the spectacle of a 62-year-old man holding a press conference to deny that he is or ever has been gay, and to give an account of his actions so implausible as to arouse more pity than contempt. An individual is being ground up and destroyed by the political and media establishment because of conduct which should never have become the subject of media attention, let alone criminalized.

The circumstances under which Craig was arrested are themselves an exposure of the degraded conditions of life in contemporary America. Police staked out the men's bathrooms at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, placing undercover officers in the stalls in a sting operation targeting men seeking to make contact for gay sex.

Such entrapment tactics against consensual personal activity are deeply repugnant. What "crime" were the airport police preventing with their dragnet? Who were they protecting? The very fact that tens of millions of dollars are expended by police departments all over the United States on such witch-hunts, with relatively little public outcry or even comment, is an expression of the decay of democratic rights in the United States.

This practice provides another exposure of the cynical "war-on-terror" scare-mongering by the Bush administration and the entire US political establishment. Apparently, despite the 9/11 attacks and a series of subsequent alerts about alleged airplane hijacking plots, police at a major US airport have nothing better to do than conduct surveillance of the bathrooms.

The release Thursday of police audiotapes of Craig squabbling with his arresting officer over their precise actions in adjoining bathroom stalls only further pollutes political discourse in this country. For the past 24 hours, the audiotapes have been recycled endlessly on cable television, fueling the increasingly prurient media coverage of the event, while transcripts have been posted on the Internet and excerpted in newspaper coverage.

One bitterly ironic aspect of the present political situation in the US is that Craig, in order to pursue a career in the Republican Party, was obliged to conceal his own sexual orientation, a course that must have cost him dearly on the personal level. Despite his private inclinations, he loyally endorsed the increasing Republican obsession with demonizing homosexuality, including repeated votes for legislation and a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage.

In 1998-99, Craig, who was then in the Senate Republican leadership, played a prominent role in the moralizing campaign over Bill Clinton's sex life, eventually voting to remove the Democratic president from office after he was impeached by the House of Representatives.

The Idaho senator first won political office in 1974, serving in the state legislature before moving up to the US Congress in 1980, the year Reagan won the presidency. This was in the early days of the right-wing campaign to mobilize Christian fundamentalists as the base of the Republican Party (more evangelicals voted for Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976 than for Republican Gerald Ford), and Craig's avowed conservatism was focused on an anticommunist foreign policy and a low-tax, pro-business domestic agenda.

Rumors about Craig's sexual orientation surfaced from time to time. When the media storm broke last fall over a sex scandal involving Republican Congressman Mark Foley and House of Representatives pages, Craig was targeted by a gay activist, Mike Rogers, who advocates the "outing" of closeted gay legislators who vote for anti-gay legislation. Rogers went public on the Internet last October with allegations that Craig had sexual encounters with several men.

In response to Rogers's charges, which Craig's Senate office publicly denied, the local Boise newspaper, the *Idaho Statesman*, began an extensive investigation into Craig's personal life. According to a lengthy account published Tuesday, the newspaper's top political reporter, Dan Popkey, went to extraordinary lengths. He interviewed no less than 41 men who were Craig's fraternity brothers in college, asking each of them what he described as "very unpleasant questions" about Craig's behavior more than 40 years ago. Popkey even traveled to Washington to visit Union Station restrooms and show around photographs of the senator to see if anyone recognized him.

The probe had the effect, as the newspaper knew it would, of spreading rumors about Craig's sexual orientation all over the state of Idaho. This provoked perhaps the most genuine moment of the senator's press appearance Tuesday, when he declared, "For eight months leading up to June 11, my family and I have been relentlessly and viciously harassed by the *Idaho Statesman*."

Both Republican congressional leaders and presidential candidates have rushed to disavow and condemn Craig, for fear that the

revelation that a Republican senator is gay would alienate the fundamentalist elements who exercise such powerful influence over the party, and who regard homosexuality as a criminal, if not capital, offense.

Within 24 hours of the media firestorm erupting, Senate Republican leaders had demanded—and Craig had agreed—that he step down from his leading position as the ranking Republican on the Senate Veterans Affairs committee and two subcommittees.

The four top Senate Republicans signed a letter seeking an Ethics Committee investigation of Craig, something they did not request for Senate David Vitter of Louisiana, who last month admitting frequent use of a Washington call-girl service, or for Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, whose home was raided by the FBI July 31 seeking evidence in a bribery investigation in his state.

Senator and presidential candidate John McCain became the first leading Republican to demand Craig resign, declaring, “When you plead guilty to a crime, you shouldn’t serve.” This is a grotesque distortion, since the driving force of the campaign for Craig’s resignation is that he is gay or bisexual. Vitter publicly admitted patronizing prostitutes, a criminal offense, and many other sitting politicians have been convicted of misdemeanors more serious than the disorderly conduct charge against Craig—for example, the drunk-driving misdemeanor to which a future Texas governor and president pleaded guilty.

McCain was echoed by Senator Norm Coleman of Minnesota, who announced he was donating a campaign contribution from Craig to charity, and Congressman Peter Hoekstra of Michigan, the ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee. Senator John Ensign of Nevada, who chairs the Republican senatorial campaign committee, did not directly call for Craig to resign, but declared, “If I was in a position like that, that’s what I would do.” Ensign is in charge of directing national party funds and support to senators like Craig who face reelection in 2008. If Craig does resign, his replacement would be selected by Idaho Governor Butch Otter, a Republican, thus keeping the seat in Republican hands.

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, who had enlisted Craig as the Senate chairman of his presidential campaign, revoked the appointment and scheduled a series of television interviews to denounce his erstwhile supporter as “disgusting.” Romney has sought to curry favor with the Christian right in an effort to overcome the fundamentalist prejudice against his Mormonism, and he has systematically discarded the more moderate views on gay rights and abortion which he long espoused in Massachusetts.

A White House spokeswoman, Dana Perino, issued a statement that did not openly call on Craig to resign, but declared, “We want this to be resolved quickly. That would be in the best interests of the US Senate and the people of Idaho.” She described Craig’s conduct as “a disappointment.”

There is an obvious double standard in the treatment of Craig and Senator Vitter of Louisiana, the most prominent official named in the so-called “DC Madam” scandal. There have been no calls from fellow Republicans for Vitter’s resignation, a fact which can be accounted for by two political considerations: gay sex is considered more of a “crime” by the Christian fundamentalist right than patronizing a prostitute; and the governor of Louisiana, who would appoint Vitter’s replacement, is a Democrat, so his resignation would cost the Republicans a seat in the Senate.

Contrary to the views of some advocates of identity politics, like the gay activist Rogers, the bringing down of a politician like Craig

through such methods has nothing “progressive” about it.

There is nothing politically positive in the destruction of an individual—even a reactionary senator—because of his evident sexual orientation. It in no way advances the interests of the working class. In the first place, reactionary politicians like Craig are a dime a dozen, and he will simply be replaced by another of similar ilk.

More importantly, such lurid sex scandals do nothing to illuminate the real political and social issues confronting the broad mass of the people, or reveal the class issues that underlie the policies of militarism and social reaction that prevail throughout the entire political system. On the contrary, such media-fueled scandals appeal to the basest instincts and serve to obscure the social and political realities of American society.

In particular, the media uproar over Senator Craig has largely overshadowed any coverage of the series of military court martial decisions this week whitewashing the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib and bloody atrocities by US soldiers in Haditha and other Iraqi towns.

The Bush administration has illegally invaded and laid waste to two countries with a combined population of more than 55 million people. The death toll in the Iraq and Afghanistan as a result of these aggressive wars is approaching one million people.

The election of a Democratic-controlled Congress last November has done nothing to stem the war: it has only given the congressional Democrats, in addition to their Republican counterparts, the job of providing funding and authorization for the continuation of this historic crime.

In the domestic sphere, the Bush administration is trampling on constitutional processes and democratic rights, a policy sanctioned by the congressional Democratic leadership this month as they allowed a bill to become law authorizing much wider federal government spying on the American people. At the same time, the economic and social interests of working people are under increasing attack from the chaos in world financial markets and the budget-cutting policies implemented under Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

The entire Craig affair is a political diversion. Monstrous crimes are taking place in official Washington, and they are being committed, not in public restrooms, but in the White House, Pentagon, State Department and CIA—and in the halls of Congress.



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