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FACE THE NATION

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FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
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BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, could the Foley scandal cost Republicans the House? A Newsweek poll out this morning shows that more than half of Americans now believe House Speaker Dennis Hastert knew of Congressman Mark Foley's overfriendly messages to a teenage page and tried to cover it up. If House leaders knew of Foley's actions, why did they urge him to run for re-election? And should the speaker step down? We'll ask two influential Republicans, Congressman Ray LaHood of Illinois, and Tom Davis of Virginia, who is a former page.

How will all this affect the midterm elections, only a month away? We'll talk with two of the best political minds in Washington, Dan Balz of The Washington Post, and political analyst Stuart Rothenberg.

I'll have a final word on, can you believe it, the White House is reminding us of all those mistakes after Hurricane Katrina.

But first, the Foley fallout on FACE THE NATION.

Announcer: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from CBS News in Washington, Bob Schieffer.

SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. Well, from the day this scandal about pages broke, the question among politicians has been, will this have an impact on the coming elections? Well, we have the first indication, a poll out this morning from Newsweek, and the answer seems to be yes. More than half those questioned told Newsweek they believe the Republican speaker of the House was aware of all this and then tried to cover it up. And not just Democrats believe that. Nearly 30 percent of Republicans felt that way.

(Graphic on screen)

Newsweek

52% of all Americans
29% of all Republicans

Now Believe
Speaker Hastert Knew

SCHIEFFER: And it is not just a Washington inside-the-beltway scandal for sure, now. This poll says that 80 percent of Americans knew about this story.

The poll is very bad news for Republicans on every front. On the major issues--moral values, the war in Iraq, the war on terror, the economy, health care, gas and oil prices, and the deficit--more Americans now favor the way they are being handled by Democrats than favor the approach the Republicans have taken on these issues. On the war on terrorism, for example, 44 percent now favor the Democratic approach, while only 37 percent favor the Republican. Two months ago, 44 percent favored the Republican approach, 39 the Democratic

approach. So that means that has flipped. As for the president, his job approval rating in this new poll is now down to 33 percent, which is an all-time low.

So a poll Democrats are going to like a lot, and one the Republicans won't like very much. To talk about it and the fallout from this latest scandal, from Peoria, Illinois, Congressman Ray LaHood. He is close to Speaker Hastert; and in Washington, Congressman Tom Davis, himself a former page. Joining us in the questioning this morning, Dan Balz from The Washington Post.

Well, Congressman LaHood, you have said that the page program should perhaps be suspended for awhile, but you have also said you didn't think the speaker should step down. After seeing these kind of numbers that we just reeled off, are you rethinking any of that?

Representative RAY LaHOOD (Republican, Illinois): Well, not really, Bob. Look it, I give Speaker Hastert high marks for strong leadership. He took care of Tom DeLay, his best friend. When Tom was having ethical problems, the speaker went to him and asked him to leave. When he appointed Duke Cunningham to the Intelligence Committee, he went to Duke and made sure he wasn't on the Intelligence Committee after it was disclosed he took \$2.3 million. And when Bob Ney was appointed chairman of the House Administration Committee, he was appointed by Speaker Hastert. Speaker Hastert went to him and told him to step down from that committee after the Abramoff disclosures.

Hastert had the ability to take on these big, ethical challenges that our party has faced, and I believe he stepped up this week with his statement apologizing, taking responsibility, and saying that there would be an evaluation of the program. And I think he's done what he should have done, maybe a few days too late, but he's shown the strong leadership that he showed in other instances when we've had these ethical challenges.

SCHIEFFER: But what you're saying when you list all that, Congressman, is that he did appoint some of these people who turned out to be crooks. So doesn't he have something to answer for there?

Rep. LaHOOD: Well, they weren't crooks when he appointed them, Bob, or certainly he wouldn't--they would have never gotten the positions they got had they had these ethical challenges. And when it was disclosed that they did, he took care of it. And particularly when you think of what he--he went to Tom DeLay and said, 'Tom, you have to leave the House.' This is the fellow that made him speaker on the second day of impeachment, when DeLay rounded up the votes for him.

And look it, Denny Hastert has shown strong leadership when it's been--when he's been called upon to do it. There's no dispute about that, and I think he did it late this week with a very strong statement that he made from his office in Batavia, Illinois.

SCHIEFFER: Well, let's turn now to your colleague, Tom Davis of Virginia. You were once the chief strategist for Republicans, the chief fund-raiser for

House Republicans. How do you think the speaker handled it?

Representative TOM DAVIS (Republican, Virginia): Well, I think they were slow out of the starting blocks, there's no question about it. Now it's going to be investigated, everybody's going to be sworn under oath, be interrogated, and we'll have a complete report. But you know, it's taken a week of fumbling around to get to where we are. And so instead of talking about how we have the lowest unemployment rate in the world, the stock market hit a new all-time high, oil prices are down 25 percent, we're fumbling, talking about these other issues, and that's not good for us.

SCHIEFFER: Well, do you think that Speaker Hastert ought to stay on, Mr. Davis?

Rep. DAVIS: Well, I just think--let's wait till the investigation. There's so much finger-pointing at this point. We're going to have an investigative report very soon. I think this: I think anybody that hindered this in any kind of way, that tried to step in the way of hiding this or covering it up is going to have to step down, whoever that is, and let's wait for the report.

Mr. DAN BALZ (National Political Correspondent, The Washington Post): Congressman, last week, Speaker Hastert suggested that the news media and the Democrats may have been behind this. Is there any evidence that this was some kind of Democratic plot to do in the Republicans, or wasn't this something that was made by the Republicans?

Rep. DAVIS: Well, it was made by Mark Foley. And the--it was his actions. I mean, I'm sure the Democrats would love to stir this thing up and keep it going. That's politics. But at this point I think we need to go regular order, we need to focus on what are the facts of this case and investigate it and get the facts out there.

Mr. BALZ: Do you think it would be helpful if Speaker Hastert said now he will not stand for re-election whether the Republicans win or lose the House?

Rep. DAVIS: I don't think that's going to satisfy the Democrats, I think it just keeps the feeding frenzy going. I think we just need to go regular order, get this investigation over. Let the chips fall where they may, and get out in the next 30 days and talk about the other issues that are important to the American people. And right now, there's no oxygen for those issues, and that's hurting Republicans.

SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you, both of you, and I'll go to you first, Mr. Davis. The job you used to have, and that was as the chief fund-raiser and strategist, is now held by another congressman, Mr. Reynolds, who actually went to Mark Foley--and we now know he apparently knew about all of this--and urged him to run for re-election. Had that been up to you, had you known what he apparently knew at that time, would you have urged him to seek re-election?

Rep. DAVIS: Well, you know, hindsight's great in this business. At this point--obviously at this point, knowing what we know now, we wouldn't have

urged him to seek re-election. His name's on the ballot and it's radioactive.

SCHIEFFER: But he apparently knew.

Rep. DAVIS: Well, I...

SCHIEFFER: He knew he was sending overly friendly e-mails to these children.

Rep. DAVIS: You know, I don't want to second-guess Tom at this point. But I think, in retrospect, as we look back at this point, that decision wasn't a good decision.

SCHIEFFER: How about that, Mr. LaHood? Would you...

Rep. LaHOOD: Well, look it, Bob...

SCHIEFFER: Had you known what Mr. Reynolds apparently knew when he urged this man to run for re-election, would you have urged him to seek re-election?

Rep. LaHOOD: Probably not. I think what Tom Davis said is accurate. Twenty/twenty is perfect hindsight and, you know, I'm sure everyone wishes they had it.

I think the disservice was really done to the speaker; the fact that his own staff, the fact that others did not go to him and tell him about this. Look it, I believe that if Speaker Hastert had known about this, he would have called Foley in, gave him what we call a Dutch Uncle talk, and then monitored the situation. I really believe that because of the way that he's handled these other ethically challenged members. And--but, look it, mistakes have been made, there's no question about it.

SCHIEFFER: Well, but--I mean, should the speaker then get rid of some of these staffers? I know that the man who was a clerk at the House, he departed quickly. There's been some rearranging of chairs on the deck there. But shouldn't the speaker, once he found out about this, have told his staffers, 'How in the world could this have happened and you didn't tell me about it?' And some of those people still work for him.

Rep. LaHOOD: Well, Bob, I'm sure that he's had a very serious talk with his top staff people, and I'm sure he's very angry about the fact that they withheld this information. I'm a former staffer of two members, and if this would have been disclosed to me as chief of staff to Bob Michael, I would have taken it to him. And I guarantee you, Michael would have handled it just the way Hastert would have handled had he known about it. So I hope he's talked to his staff. He deserves better than that.

Mr. BALZ: Mr. LaHood, I'd like to ask you about another member of the leadership, the Majority Leader John Boehner, who last week said on two different occasions that he had informed--he'd passed this on to the speaker's office, that it was in the speaker's court, that, you know, that that was his problem and--the speaker's problem and not anybody else's. Do you think that

he was trying to undercut the speaker in the way he was doing it? Was he trying to put some distance and protect himself and throwing it on the speaker?

Rep. LaHOOD: Look it, there's a lot--there's been a lot of ducking and dodging and diving and weaving all week long. And I agree with Tom Davis, this thing should have been handled early week. We had a conference call of all the Republicans on Monday and I suggested that somebody take responsibility and we suspend the page program. We needed to take dramatic action for political reasons and for professional reasons. And, you know, I've seen what other members have said and other leadership have said, and I also know that Congressman Boehner and others have put out statements after the speaker's statement supporting him and supporting him as speaker. So, you know, there--obviously there, you know, there is a lot of finger-pointing that had gone on earlier in the week. But I do think people are behind the speaker now, Dan.

SCHIEFFER: Mr. Davis, let me ask you, because you're known in the House as one of the best people for sizing up the political situation. Do you think this scandal is going to be wide enough known and will people be so concerned about it that it could tip the House toward the Democrats taking control? Do you think Republicans are going to lose the House as a result of this? And the other things we saw that people feel so strongly about?

Rep. DAVIS: Well, it's certainly not helpful. And I think 30 days is an eternity in politics. So a lot can happen in the last 30 days. A lot of candidates are saving their messages, their ads, their mails. And these races are really going to be joined in the next 30 days.

But this adds to a very difficult atmospheric for Republican candidates going into the last 30 days, where it's difficult to get what we call oxygen for your message. And I--again, the message is one where the economy is the best in the world in terms of our unemployment rate's the lowest in the world, the stock market's at a new high. And that gets no coverage. At this point, it's all about scandals and everything else.

SCHIEFFER: Oh, it's also Iraq out there.

Rep. DAVIS: And Iraq is out there as well. And this is not the only, quote, "scandal" out there. There've been other members of Congress--Republican and Democrat--but it adds to an atmospheric where Congress itself isn't held in high esteem right now.

SCHIEFFER: If the election were held today, which it isn't, of course. But if it were held today, would Republicans lose their majority?

Rep. DAVIS: I think if it were today, but remember, 30 days is a long time. If you'd asked me 30 days out in 2000, when I was chairman of the campaign committee, we probably would've lost it, too.

SCHIEFFER: So right now, you think they're running behind.

Rep. DAVIS: I think it's--I think it's a--I think it's a tough lift right now. But I will just say this. There are so many races in the margins. Until someone's over 50 percent in polling and you can't cross it. So it's a tough lift under the atmospheric today. But you don't time elections for today. You time it for 30 days from now. I think Republicans have good get-out-the-vote strategies.

SCHIEFFER: What about you, Mr. LaHood? How bad--are Republicans in bad shape right now?

Rep. LaHOOD: You know, Bob, here in Illinois, we're going to have a bumper crop. Gas prices have come down dramatically. People are feeling pretty good about the economy in our area. And that's what I think our--we have three very competitive races in Illinois and I think our people need to talk about these issues and really persuade the voters. We have a very short period of time here. There's a little window of opportunity, but it's closing on us fast, and we need to really take advantage of the next 30 days and our resources to persuade the American people that we can govern. But it is going to be--this is going to be the most difficult 30 days in the last 12 years that we've been the majority party.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, thank you all both.

Rep. DAVIS: Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: And we'll come back. We'll start to Stuart Rothenberg the political analyst. Dan Balz will join us for a discussion of where it all stands right now when we come back.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: We're back now with Dan Balz of The Washington Post and Stuart Rothenberg of The Rothenberg Political Report. And I have to say, those of us in Washington, when we're trying to find out what's going on, the Rothenberg Report is one of the first things we turn to, Stu.

Just give us the bottom line here. How bad has this hurt the Republicans, and where do you think this is all going to wind up in November? Will Republicans lose the House?

Mr. STUART ROTHENBERG (Editor and Publisher, The Rothenberg Political Report): I think right now you have to say, yes. The likelihood is the Republicans will lose the House. Having said that, we still have a month to go. Things could change.

It's bad, but it's been bad for a long time, Bob. The political environment for the president, for congressional Republicans. The public wants change. This is an added burden. I don't think it fundamentally changes the election cycle, but it's impossible for Republicans to get their message out right now, and we'll see how long that lasts.

SCHIEFFER: Well, Dan, it looked like the Republicans were making a little comeback a couple of weeks ago when the president started about the war--talking about the war on terrorism. He got a little bump himself. But now, this new poll by Newsweek, which I must say is fairly astonishing to me to see--I've never seen one party in this kind of shape. Certainly in the last 15 or 20 years in a poll, as what this poll reflects today. Where do you think it is right now?

Mr. BALZ: I don't disagree with Stu. I think that there was a period in September when the president had gone on the offensive about the war on terrorism and gas prices had come down pretty substantially, that Republicans at least believed they have an opportunity to really fight it out district by district, and perhaps hold their majority. Then you had not only the Mark Foley scandal, you had the National Intelligence Estimate showing that Iraq was a breeding ground for terrorism. You had Bob Woodward's book, and now you've had terrible news out of Iraq over the last week, some of which has been obscured by the Foley scandal, frankly, but may be more significant in terms of the election. So, when you talk to Republicans now, they know they are right back where they were before in a very difficult environment. And as Stu suggests, there's no way that they can kind of get their message through this kind of problem that they're running into now.

SCHIEFFER: Because one of the things--talking about Iraq, now we have nearly 60 percent in this poll that says they believe that the administration misled them on going into Iraq. Was Iraq a problem before? I mean, my sense of it is that it was the problem.

Mr. ROTHENBERG: Absolutely.

SCHIEFFER: But does this make it worse in any way?

Mr. ROTHENBERG: I think so, sure, yes. It has been the problem. Bob, this election is all about change vs. status quo. And whether it's Mark Foley or more news about Iraq, it adds to the perception that the country's headed off on the wrong track and that we need change, that our political leaders aren't doing the right things. Now, more reports about casualties, fatalities, pessimism about any improvement in Iraq only feeds the desire for change.

SCHIEFFER: Well, do Democrats really offer any alternative? I mean, they seem to be, you know, they're very critical of the effort in Iraq, but as yet, I see nobody who's come up with some sort of a plan that has caught on about what to do, you know, if you don't like the way the president's doing it.

Mr. ROTHENBERG: You know, Ken Mehlman of the Republican National Committee, a number of months ago, I think, said, 'We have to get this election away from a referendum on the president and Iraq and more to a choice between Republican and Democratic candidates.' He was actually correct in that. It's just that the Republicans are having a hard time doing that. No, the Democrats don't have a detailed agenda, but the out party doesn't need a detailed agenda when there is such a strong desire for change.

And I called a number of consultants over the past few days to see what district level polling was showing. Not the Newsweek, the national numbers, but district by district, state by state. They're not seeing Republicans say they're going to vote for Democrats. Republicans still say that they're going to vote for Republicans. The problem is the enthusiasm among Republicans has dropped measurably. And they're very concerned about turnout. And midterm elections is, as we all know, mostly about getting the base out. And this is looking like a significant problem for the Republicans.

Mr. BALZ: And I think...

SCHIEFFER: John--go ahead.

Mr. BALZ: I think the other problem with that is that among independents, Republicans are fearful that there's going to be a sizeable independent vote against them in this cycle and they've been trying to figure out ways to minimize that. I think all of what's happened over the last two weeks makes it more likely that those independents vote and vote Democratic.

SCHIEFFER: John Warner, the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, a longtime supporter of the military--I guess you would call him a hawk--he's just back from Iraq and he says it's going sideways, that we may lose Baghdad, that unless things change in the next couple of months, we're going to have to start thinking about another way to go about this. It sounds to me like he's just about to say we're going to have to figure out how to get out of there. Will that have an impact, do you think?

Mr. BALZ: Well, it certainly has had, in a sense, an almost seismic impact on kind of a perception here in Washington that Republicans who have been supportive of the president and of the war may be ready to move in a different direction. Maybe that won't happen until after the election. That seems to be the signal that Senator Warner was saying. But I think that his comments were very significant and not helpful to this administration.

SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you about the people on the other side of the Capitol building, and that is the Senate, Stu, who you said that you think at this point it looks like the Republicans will lose the majority in the House. What about the Senate? They need six seats over there. Is that doable?

Mr. ROTHENBERG: Well, now it is doable. A couple months ago I didn't think there were enough seats in play, but now the Virginia race has come into play, the Tennessee race. And even more broadly, as the environment deteriorates for Republicans, as there are questions of Republican turnout, that would affect Senate races as well. Yes, I think you have to say now the Republican control of the Senate is very much in doubt.

SCHIEFFER: And what about--would you agree with that, Dan?

Mr. BALZ: I would agree with that. I think that the fact that Harold Ford is running a very strong race in Tennessee, the problems that Senator Allen

has had in Virginia make it more difficult for the Republicans to be confident that they can hold the Senate.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, thank you all very much, and obviously this is a story we'll be watching and talking about right up until Election Day. We'll be back with a final word in just a sec.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally today, when there is no good news for Republicans, or very little, here is one more thing. If there is one thing that you would think the White House would not want to call attention to in this election year, it would be the government's bumbling response to Hurricane Katrina, and the man who led that effort, old Brownie, as we have come to know him. Which is why I had to read it twice before I really believed the story I found in yesterday's newspaper.

It said the White House had served notice that the president would not abide by new congressional rules which will require the next head of FEMA--that's Brownie's old job--to have five years experience in disaster management. Why would the president have a problem with that? Well, the White House says it would encroach on his constitutional power to appoint anyone he chooses for a top government job. In other words, if the president wants to appoint someone as incompetent as old Brownie, he's going to fight for his right to do just that.

Now, let's make sure you understand, we are talking about Brownie of "Brownie, you've done a heck of a job" fame. Brownie, you may recall, had a lot of experience as a horse show judge, and no experience managing emergencies, which is why Congress decided to write this new job description for the next emergency manager.

Now, the president has every right to protect his powers. But with all the attention that this will refocus on Katrina mistakes, you have to believe that a lot of those Republican candidates in close races out there would have preferred the president leave this constitutional battle for another day--the day after the election.

That's it for us. We'll see you next week, right here on FACE THE NATION.