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Gingrich defends Hastert's handling of Foley incident *Democrats lack moral standing to criticize, he says*

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Former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich defended his successor's handling of the Mark Foley incident during a Republican rally in Greenville on Wednesday night and said Democrats have little moral ground from which to launch their criticism.

Foley, a rising star in the GOP's House majority, resigned last week following reports that he sent salacious e-mail messages to teenage male pages.

Democrats and some conservatives have called for Speaker Dennis Hastert to resign, citing conflicting accounts of when Foley's escapades became known to the Republican leadership.

Democratic Rep. John M. Spratt Jr. of York said he has sponsored a number of pages over the years and knows that parents expect members of Congress to be their children's guardians and protectors, "a role I take very seriously."

Advertisement "The revelations about Congressman Foley are disturbing not just for their depravity, but as a betrayal of that parental trust. That the Republican leadership knew of his obsession with male pages and yet did nothing makes this situation all the more unbelievable."

Republican U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, a fourth-term member from Travelers Rest, said calls for Hastert's resignation are misplaced because "he's been transparent in the way he's handled this. We learned about it on Friday. Monday, at midday, (Hastert) had released a preliminary report."


By 5:30 p.m. Hastert was on a conference call with Republican members, "answering questions, being very forthcoming, so I think he's handled it well," Inglis said.

After addressing 400 Greenville and Spartanburg Republicans in an Eastside hotel ballroom, Gingrich told reporters that "from what I know of it, it's very hard to know exactly what he would have done differently. The minute they had solid proof, Foley was forced to resign."

Gingrich said, "That is so much higher a standard than the Democrats ever set that I'm astonished at the way the elite media has had this totally one-sided interpretation of history. There is no evidence that at any point the Democrats would have forced anyone to resign over e-mails."

"They didn't force them to resign over felonies, they didn't force them to resign over actual sexual relations with pages," he said, referring to past incidents. "So suddenly you have this brand new standard and somehow because it's an election year, you have a media frenzy that I think, frankly, is pretty irrational."

Gingrich, then a north Georgia House member, became speaker in 1995 when Republicans broke the Democrats' 40-year hold on the House. He resigned under pressure in 1999 and is now an author and consultant who is credited in some GOP circles with framing the national debate.

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He is considering a presidential run in 2008.

Arizona Sen. John McCain, another potential presidential candidate who is slated to speak Friday in Greenville, said in Rhode Island that a panel including former senators should be formed to review how the House handled reports of Foley's interest in pages dating back several years.

"We need to move forward quickly, and we need to reach conclusions and recommendations about who is responsible," he said during a campaign speech for Sen. Lincoln Chafee in Rhode Island, The Associated Press reported.

Lured by South Carolina's early presidential primary, unofficial candidates have been working the state for two years. By Friday, Gingrich will be one of four potential contenders stumping in the Upstate and elsewhere.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware was in Columbia on Wednesday. New York Gov. George Pataki is to hold a news conference with GOP Agriculture Commissioner Hugh Weathers at 2:45 p.m. today at the Spinx gas station at 2901 N. Pleasantburg Drive in Greenville.

Joining McCain in the area on Friday will be former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore, who will speak in Spartanburg.
