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Politicians risk hiding in the closet

Journalists have agonized forever about the tough questions of what to reveal about a public person's private life when his or her public image is different from the life that person is leading in private.

Though the Republicans have profusely apologized for an in-house memo which

... Between the Lines ...

B Y J A C K R I L E Y

fueled rumors that newly elected House Speaker Tom Foley is a homosexual, the question remains whether journalists should pursue such claims when they receive information that a high public official is gay.

Syndicated journalist Jeff Greenfield offered one answer: "My answer is a reluctant 'yes.' If, in fact, a prominent public official has been hiding a fact about his private life, it makes that figure a classic candidate for blackmail. Unlike a Barney Frank (one of two openly gay members of Congress), a genuine closet homosexual is by definition keeping secret what he regards as personally devastating to him.

"The thought of what a malicious force could do with that information to an attorney general, or secretary of defense, or congressional leader, curdles the blood. It is precisely what takes the debate out of the realm of 'purely private behavior' and into the arena of direct public concern."

Well, as a professional journalist with the establishment media for a number of years, the questions of what to reveal about a person's private life has crossed my mind, too. Like Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., I know of Republicans who are homosexual. But I wonder where Jeff Greenfield would stop. If I am an influential columnist, could I not be "blackmailed" also?

Or are we putting a little too much emphasis on sexuality? Yes, it's a tough question, all right.

Should doctors help terminally ill die?

With the medical industry preoccupied with AIDS, one subject not often discussed in public is now the focus of open debate: should doctors be allowed to help patients kill themselves?

As reported by The New York Times, assisted suicide does occur and is not considered a rare phenomenon.

"There are many cooperative physicians," said Marty James, a Los Angeles man who is a crusader for doctor-assisted suicide and who claims he has helped at least a dozen friends kill themselves before AIDS killed them. "The public would be surprised at how helpful doctors are willing to be."

AIDS has made this topic more urgent by the overwhelming devastation brought on by the disease, with patients often left blind, disoriented and in diapers by the time they die.

"The horror of AIDS has heightened the degree of discussion," admits Dr. Robert McAfee, a Portland surgeon and a member of the board of trustees of the American Medical Association.

Those who believe doctors should be allowed to assist in their patients' suicides say that terminally ill patients have a right to choose death over the torment of the final stages of their disease. They argue that it is in keeping with the doctor's role as caretaker to provide the pills or injections needed to carry out that choice.

Opponents argue that such a practice would be crossing an ethical line that should never be breached. And they worry that any legal provision carries the risk of misuse. The responsibility of the doctor, they say, is not to help kill patients but to find ways to make them more comfortable in the days and weeks before death.

A recent issue of the newspaper of the American Medical Association carried a commentary from a New Jersey doctor who wrote, "In the past six months, I've had three patients ask me to terminate their lives because they were in pain and dying of terminal cancer." He went on to say that he thought he "should be able to do so."

Meanwhile, in Eugene, the Hemlock Society is advertising for a chapter development person to help run an initiative in the Portland area. The position "requires knowledge of death/dying and professional background in marketing, PR, fund raising, ministry or allied fields." The chapter address is PO Box 11646, Eugene, OR 97440.

Wisconsin officials okay antidiscrimination policy

A far-ranging antidiscrimination policy, which includes a sexual orientation clause, has been approved by regents at the 12-campus University of Wisconsin.

The policy prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, religion, color, creed, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, ancestry or age "if it poses a clear threat to the educational environment."

Over the past two years, five racial incidents involving U of W fraternities were reported. The incidents involved fliers distributed on campuses last fall which contained epithets aimed at blacks and native Americans.

Like similar proposals in effect or in the works on campuses across the country, the Wisconsin policy has drawn heavy fire from the American Civil Liberties Union, which fears a suspension of the constitutional right to free speech.

Opponents of the new policy say the "cure is worse than the disease," but university officials said they want to send a message to minority students, including gays, that the administration does care.

Students from minority groups, including gays and lesbians on campuses throughout Wisconsin, campaigned hard throughout the spring in support of the measure.

Penalty for violation of the new policy may include expulsion from the university system. ▼

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