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## Aide says he gave early alert on Foley Speaker's office denies account

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By Rick Klein, Globe Staff | October 5, 2006

WASHINGTON -- A high-ranking congressional aide caught up in the scandal involving a congressman's e-mails to teenage boys said yesterday he alerted House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert's office three years ago about possibly inappropriate contacts between then-Representative Mark Foley and high school students who were working as House pages.

Kirk Fordham, who resigned yesterday as chief of staff for Representative Thomas M. Reynolds of New York, the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, said he told "senior staff" in Hastert's office in 2003 that Foley was getting too close to the teenage pages and that the speaker needed to step in, according to Fordham's interview with the Associated Press.

"The fact is, even prior to the existence of the Foley e-mail exchanges I had more than one conversation with senior staff at the highest level of the House of Representatives asking them to intervene when I was informed of Mr. Foley's inappropriate behavior," said Fordham, who was Foley's chief of staff at the time.

In the AP interview, Fordham said he was working for Foley, a Florida Republican, when he discovered Foley had been contacting the male pages. Fordham did not identify to whom he had spoken in the speaker's office, but said at least one person still works in House leadership. Fordham said he would tell congressional and FBI investigators everything he knows.

But Hastert's office pushed back late yesterday, rejecting Fordham's contentions. "What Kirk Fordham said did not happen," Scott Palmer, Hastert's chief of staff, said in a statement issued late yesterday.

The account dealt a staggering blow to the troubled leadership of Hastert, who is under increasing pressure to step aside as House leader in the wake of the scandal. Fordham's contentions undercut Hastert's claim that he didn't know about Foley's inappropriate contacts with pages until late last year, and that Foley simply sent "over-friendly" e-mails to a former page, a teenage boy.

Foley, 52 -- a six-term Florida Republican who led a special caucus on missing and exploited children -- abruptly resigned last Friday after an ABC News reporter confronted him with sexually explicit electronic messages he had sent to teenage male pages. He has since entered an alcohol rehabilitation facility at an undisclosed location; through his lawyer, he has said he is gay and denies having had any sexual contact with minors.

After resigning from Foley's staff, Fordham went to work for Reynolds, a four-term representative and chairman of the Republicans' congressional elections committee. Yesterday, Fordham resigned from Reynolds's staff, saying he did not want to be a distraction in Reynolds's reelection campaign in his Buffalo, N.Y.-area district.

Though Hastert has said he won't resign and got public support from President Bush earlier this week, Republican Party insiders have begun to speculate that Hastert, an Illinois Republican, will have to step down shortly after next month's congressional elections -- if he is not forced out sooner.

Yesterday, Representative Ron Lewis, a seven-term Kentucky Republican, canceled a fund-raiser he had scheduled with Hastert for next week. Lewis said he wants to know all the facts behind the scandal before deciding whether to campaign with Hastert by his side.

Meanwhile, the third-ranking member of House leadership, majority whip Roy Blunt, became the latest Hastert deputy to publicly distance himself from the speaker's handling of the matter. Reynolds and majority leader

John A. Boehner have questioned whether Hastert's response to the allegations surrounding Foley was appropriate.

"I think I could have given some good advice here, which is you have to be curious," said Blunt, a Missouri Republican. "You absolutely can't decide not to look into activities because one individual's parents don't want you to."

Though Hastert insists his staff did not know about Foley's contacts with pages until last fall, he said in an interview with conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh that he and other GOP leaders told Foley to stop contacting the boy. But since last Friday, a series of far more explicit instant-message exchanges between Foley and other pages have emerged, calling Hastert's account into question and placing his job in jeopardy.

On Tuesday, Hastert argued that resigning over the scandal would hand Democrats a cudgel to use against Republicans in next month's congressional elections. But James Campbell, a political science professor at the University of Buffalo, said Fordham's contentions put "a lot more pressure on Hastert."

To limit the political damage, Campbell said, the GOP leadership needs to publicly disclose everything they know about the Foley episode to avoid being dogged by the matter until election day. "It's silly for this to be coming out in dribs and drabs," he said.

With a criminal investigation heating up, the Justice Department has ordered House officials to preserve all records of electronic correspondence Foley may have had with the teenage boys.

Hastert had asked for a full Justice Department review of the Foley matter.

Yesterday, Hastert received votes of confidence from two influential conservative members, Representative Mike Pence of Indiana and Representative Joseph R. Pitts of Pennsylvania. They issued a joint statement endorsing Hastert's continued leadership, and several rank-and-file GOP members said they wanted the speaker to stay on the job.

But many other Republican members are more cautious.

"Speaker Hastert is a man of integrity, and I take him at his word," said Jeb Hensarling of Texas. "That being said, as the father of a 2-year-old boy and a 4-year-old girl, I believe that we must always err on the side of caution when it comes to protecting our children, and it is clear that what appears to some to be innocuous e-mails at the time should have been investigated further."

The scandal has begun to spill over into congressional races that have few obvious connections to Foley or Hastert. Campaigning yesterday alongside Senator Lincoln D. Chafee, a Rhode Island Republican, Senator John McCain called for congressional leaders to appoint a special independent panel to fully investigate the Foley matter and the response of Republican House leadership.

"I don't know what all went on, and that's why we need credible people in this country to find out and inform Congress and the American people," said McCain, an Arizona Republican.

Representative Peter King, a New York Republican, said the scandal could cost Republicans House seats in closely divided districts. But he said people who are calling for Hastert's resignation before getting all the facts are "panicking."

"Until we know more, it's really premature to be saying that the third-ranking constitutional officer in the United States should step down because of a nebulous remark made in an e-mail," King told Fox News. "If he knew anything else, that's a different story. But until then, I think it's the wrong thing to do." ■