

The Massa Meltdown

George De Stefano (March 12, 2010)



Why a Congressman's fall isn't (just) a laughing matter

Eric Massa, the U.S. Congressman from upstate New York who, facing allegations of sexual misconduct, has resigned after only a year in office, is an Italian American. At the website he created for his 2008 Congressional campaign, he noted, "I first came to Corning, New York in the early nineties, but the journey that brought me here began when my grandparents emigrated from southern and central Italy during the Great Depression."

Now that that's out of the way, let's talk about what's really significant about Eric Massa, and about the controversies surrounding him.



As pretty much everyone now knows, Massa's political career imploded over the past week in a series of bizarre and sometimes amusing incidents. First, Massa announced he was resigning because the lymphoma he thought he'd beaten had recurred. Then he said, no, that wasn't the real reason he was stepping down. He actually was being forced out by the Democratic leadership, and especially by President Obama's chief of staff, snarling pit bull Rahm Emanuel. They wanted him out, said Massa, because he was opposed to the President's so-called health insurance reform legislation.

But then it came to light that the House Ethics Committee was investigating allegations that Massa, the married father of two children, had groped several of his male staff members. Massa issued a semi-denial while also claiming that the White House had set him up.

"There's a reason that this has all happened, frankly one that I had not realized," Massa said in a radio interview. "Mine is now the deciding vote on the health care bill, and this administration and this House leadership have said, quote unquote, that they will stop at nothing to pass this health care bill. And now they've gotten rid of me and it'll pass."

Massa admitted he made an "inappropriate" remark to a male aide at a party, which led to the ethics committee investigation. He claimed that the White House used this indiscretion against him because of his opposition to Obamacare.

Massa's allegations against the White House and Rahm Emanuel, whom he has called the "son of the devil's spawn," caught the ear of right-wing talk show host Glenn "the crying man-baby" Beck, who invited Massa to appear on his Fox network TV show. The Congressman accepted the offer, but what he delivered wasn't what Beck had expected or wanted. Beck, practically salivating, begged Massa for revelations of Democratic perfidy. He wanted dirt about "corruption," and especially about "the unions."

But Massa wouldn't play along. He instead denied that he'd been forced out by the Democratic leadership, saying that he alone was responsible for the flame-out of his political career. "I wasn't forced out. I forced myself out. I failed, I didn't live up to my own code -- I own this," he said.

Poor Beck. He looked so upset you expected that at any minute the waterworks would start, the gush of patriotic tears he expertly induces whenever he gets farklept over how the dastardly "progressives" are destroying his America.

Beck hoped Massa would become the far right's latest poster boy, but he obviously had no idea who he was dealing with. Massa instead criticized right-wingers for demonizing their opponents and even called out Beck's and Fox's beloved Teabaggers for "pretending that the [Federal budget] deficit all happened this year."

At the end of the interview, Beck apologized to his viewers for wasting their time.

Much of the media commentary about the Massa-Beck showdown downplayed the sex scandal at the heart of l'affaire Massa. But the juicy bits provided some of the show's most entertaining moments. Massa, a veteran of 24 years in the Navy, showed Beck some photos from a book about a Navy rite called "Crossing the line" that apparently entails some semi-naked horseplay. Beck described the shots as "look[ing] like an orgy in 'Caligula,'" and refused to show them on air.

When Beck asked Massa about the allegations that he'd groped a male aide, he replied, "Yeah, I did. Not only I groped him, I tickled him until he couldn't breathe and then four of them jumped on me," recapping the story he's been telling about the exuberant boy-fun he had at his 50th birthday party in the Washington townhouse he shared with several male aides. But, he insisted to Beck, there was absolutely nothing sexual about the group-grope.

At the wedding reception of one of his aides, Massa danced with the bridesmaid. A member of his staff suggested he pursue her. Massa, recounting the incident to Beck, said, "I grabbed the staff member sitting next to me and said, 'Well, what I really ought to be doing is fracking you.'"

“Fracking”?

Trapped in the Closet

Here’s where that annoying catchphrase about denial not being just a river in Egypt seems apt. When the undead CNN talk show host [Larry King](#) [2] asked him if he was gay, Massa said no, adding, somewhat bizarrely, that the question was an insult to gay people. He stressed his hetero bona fides (wife, kids), and said that if anyone doubted he was straight they should talk to his old Navy buddies.

And that’s exactly what Joshua Green of [The Atlantic magazine](#) [3] did. Green talked to some of Massa’s former shipmates, and one told him that “Massa was notorious for making unwanted advances toward subordinates.” The informant said that Massa shared a hotel room with one of his Navy underlings while both were on leave during the first Gulf War. Massa started to massage the guy, telling him, “You’ll have to get one of my special massages,” which the future Congressman called “Massa massages.” It’s unclear if the sailor took up Massa’s offer, but you suspect that if he had, the encounter most likely would have had a “happy ending.”

The same shipman told Green that Massa came on to another sailor, who one night woke up to find Massa “undoing his pants trying to snorkel him.” The exact nature of this snorkeling has been a matter of some dispute in the media. But it seems unlikely we’re talking about an underwater activity involving rubber masks and fins.

Eric Massa is surely one un-self-aware dude. With every statement he makes to the media he reveals more of himself, without seeming to realize it at all. And didn’t he ever hear of Gary Hart, the one-time Presidential contender who dared reporters to confirm the rumors that he was having extra-marital affairs? By urging the media to talk to his Navy colleagues, Massa, either out of arrogance or just cluelessness, set himself up for the same fate as Hart. His political career is dead, and he’s a laughing stock.

But though we’re laughing at the Massa mishegas, it’s actually a pretty sad story, for a number of reasons. Massa, a former Republican, has on a number of key issues taken bold, progressive stances. He left the GOP in opposition to the Bush-Cheney war in Iraq and he’s against Obama’s escalation of the Afghanistan war, calling it “a fool’s errand.” He also has challenged Dick Cheney to debate him on the “war on terror,” saying, “I’ll go on his home turf, Fox, and go head to head with him. He stands on quicksand when it comes to matters of national security.”

Massa favors health care reform but he wants a single-payer system, not the massive give-away to the insurance companies that Obama and the Democrats have cooked up.

It’s too bad the US Congress now will have one less member who’ll take such positions.

The ex-Congressman has said that his cancer, which originally was diagnosed as terminal but then responded to treatment, has recurred. If true, that’s a hell of a lot for him, and his wife and children, to deal with, in addition to the loss of a political career and the mockery of every pundit and comedian in America.

And then there’s the gay thing. It seems more likely than not that Eric Massa is a closeted homosexual (or bisexual). Life in the closet, as any gay man, including myself, well knows, affords some protection from oppression and abuse. But it is psychologically and emotionally damaging and it distorts one’s relations with others. Closeted men, and especially those who don’t even acknowledge their situation to themselves, often “act out,” behaving sexually in inappropriate, even immature ways, just as Massa has been reported to do.

If Eric Massa had been like Roy Ashburn, the viciously anti-gay Republican State Senator from California who was recently exposed as gay, I wouldn’t have the tiniest bit of sympathy for him. But Massa’s no Ashburn, and I do feel for him. (Prendi cura, paisan.) Yes, he’s responsible for his own downfall, as he has acknowledged. But he’s also a victim -- of homophobia, and also of hypocrisy about homosexuality. You’ll note that there have yet to be any Congressional investigations of David Vitter and John Ensign, two heterosexual Republicans implicated in sex scandals. This double-



standard, despite the undeniable advances made by gay people, still pervades American life and politics.

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