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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Don't Tickle Me, Bro!

By CHARLES M. BLOW

Welcome to Ticklegate.

This week the sexual harassment allegations against former Representative Eric Massa, and his death spiral of defenses and admissions, including groping and tickle fights, have expanded many Americans' sexual lexicons far beyond the bounds of comfort.

In the process, they have provided quite a bit of fodder for late-night comics and water-cooler snickerers. So much so, that it can be easy to lose sight of the serious subject at the heart of this case: sexual harassment, and, in particular, male-to-male sexual harassment, an area in which claims have grown dramatically.

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the percentage of its sexual harassment filings that are made by men has doubled over the last two decades. And, although the agency does not compile data on the gender of those being accused, anecdotal evidence suggests that most of those filings are for male-to-male harassment.

While it is heartening to realize that more men seem to be comfortable speaking up, the Massa case illustrates to what degree their attempts at disclosure can be squeezed between two seemingly oppositional pillars of American masculinity: homoerotic ritualizing and homophobic trivializing.

We saw an extreme example of the homoerotic rituals last year when contractors in Afghanistan got in trouble for their naked shenanigans. This behavior is even more widespread, if less severe, in fraternal groups and sports culture. This normalizes impropriety in a haven of horseplay.

It is not surprising then that Massa has already attempted to excuse his raunchy behavior by pointing to the Navy's sexually charged "Crossing the Line" ceremonies. The ceremonies, which mark the first time sailors cross the equator, can include everything from cross-dressing to simulated sex.

On the other side, even among the most egalitarian progressives, is a somewhat subtle homophobia, which is cloaked in comedy and treats these allegations as somehow more depraved and freakish because of their same-sex subtext. For some, it is an extra shroud of shame that they feel free to mock and that diminishes the seriousness of the claims, and may deter others from making them. (As an experiment, imagine the objects of Massa's attention as young women. Most of the humor drains away in a hurry.) Even former Representative Mark Foley, whose case is being endlessly compared to Massa's, told me on Friday that these male cases need equal treatment: "It cuts both ways."

If brotherly bonds must be forged in mostly male work environments (and it is not at all clear to me that they must), then everyone involved must recognize and respect limits far short of where they currently stand. And when someone claims that the lines have been crossed, we as a society, must take those claims more seriously. It's all fun and games until someone gets tickled.

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