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June 25, 2009

## The Meaning of Sanford and Political Adultery

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Another American politician brought low by marital infidelity. Two GOP leaders admit adultery in two weeks. And the limping Republican Party takes yet another blow.

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford's affair will upend his state's politics. It will reshuffle the GOP 2012 field. It has already weakened the GOP bench. Other Republicans will move up in the lineup. The affair will consume the political news cycle for at least a day. More revelations may follow. But the ripples of Sanford's fall will likely soon fade. This is how it goes in American life for all but the most prominent of politicians.

Sanford stood Wednesday before the deluge of flashes, caught off guard, rambling, and red eyed, as he confessed adultery. His crippling admission concluded a bizarre six days of absence. Was the story more a Greek tragedy or farce, as the upstanding southern governor admitted his sin inside the Greek Revival State House?

Here was the missing man whose staff said he was on the Appalachian Trail. His wife seemed not to care where he was. And Sanford would explain why. The budding conservative leader, from the heart of the Bible Belt, was in Argentina with his mistress. Behind him, young women snickered. It was absurd political theater. It was a Tom Wolfe novel. It was sad.

And we watched. Another politician would anguish in confession, dimming his own star for betraying his family and perhaps mildly--if tax dollars funded flights to his liaisons--his constituents. Sanford's admission came a week after fellow Republican, Sen. John Ensign of Nevada, revealed his own infidelity.

For their party, the national implications of Sanford and Ensign are more psychological than material. Neither man was synonymous with the Republican Party to the average voter. Sanford is not reason to write another GOP obituary.

Each political affair seems to say something more about us. Politicians' confessions of adultery, not adultery itself, are more common to a generation that experienced an explosion of divorce. Baby boomer politicians lost face for actions that were not newsworthy a generation before. What nearly removed Bill Clinton from office and ruined Gary Hart's presidential ambitions, never significantly impacted the careers of Franklin Roosevelt or John Kennedy.

Far more salacious sex scandals have gone uncovered in South Carolina. News of segregationist leader Strom Thurmond's bi-racial daughter, which he fathered as a young man with a black maid, was only made public postmortem.

Sexual affairs have been a part of U.S. politics since Thomas Jefferson. But it was always the stuff of dirty politics. And for a long time, until our time, politicians' affairs were generally kept outside the purview of the public eye.

No party has a monopoly on cultural propriety. For every Mark Sanford there is a John Edwards. For every David Vitter there is an Eliot Spitzer. Few of these falls actually hurt either party's brand. But there is always a particular bite when the moral impropriety involves leaders from the party more concerned with moral values.

"When you have an individual who associates with or holds himself out to be a religious or a moral conservative, it certainly undermines the party," said veteran GOP strategist Tony Fabrizio.

"It layers on the hypocrisy and people hate hypocrisy," said Steve Elmendorf, a Democratic strategist.

Republicans have long had to live down their Bill Bennetts. Bennett wrote "The Book of Virtues" and was later shown to have lost millions of dollars gambling. But Bennett has

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recovered in part. He is an influential political commentator today.

One of the most prominent voices inside the Republican Party today, Newt Gingrich, has admitted that he had an extramarital affair while pushing to impeach Clinton. Henry Hyde, whose affair was exposed while spearheading the Clinton impeachment, was at the end of his life given the nation's highest civilian award.

Social conservatives tend to hold their fallibility close. Red States experience more divorce and teen pregnancy per capita than Blue States. Moral values are understandably more important to those closer to moral breakdown. And South Carolina is one of the most socially conservative of states.

Sanford called himself a "person of faith all my life" as he admitted to the affair. He said that when a religious person "falls" the "fellowship" suffers. He apologized to people of faith. Sanford spoke of "God's laws" being "designed to protect people from themselves."

Here was a politician live on TV wrestling with the depth of his sin. It was more human than most political confessions. We may not condone. But we understand.

"There are moral absolutes," he said and "consequences" if you break those absolutes. He added, looking around at the all-too-familiar media onslaught, "This press conference is a consequence."

Sanford was no spokesman for the social conservative cause. His infidelity is not that of former Idaho Sen. Larry Craig. Craig was a social conservative who opposed extending hate crimes protection to gays and lesbians. In 2007 Craig was caught in an airport bathroom propositioning a man.

Craig, like Jim McGreevey, who resigned from the New Jersey governorship for an extramarital affair with a man, only compounded the untoward atmosphere by trotting their betrayed wives at their sides. We did not have to witness the same with Sanford.

Sanford made his name as a fiscal hawk and, in an age of starved politicians, was at times endearingly quirky. Sanford once brought two live piglets onto his state legislature floor to call attention to excessive spending. But like Ensign, Sanford's past will now dog him.

Ensign had called for the resignation of Craig and Clinton. "He has no credibility left," Ensign said of Clinton's affair. Sanford voted to impeach Clinton. He was later hard on Republican leader Bob Livingston for admitting past sexual "indiscretions" during the Clinton scandal.

"The bottom line is Livingston lied," Sanford said on CNN. "He lied to his wife" and "it makes for a horribly confused grand jury setting."

And it was Sanford, again discussing Livingston in 1998, who said in an interview with the Associated Press, "We as a party want to hold ourselves to high standards, period."

Now Sanford joins the chorus who paid for that standard.

So many marital scandals seem to go back to the Clinton circus. The impeachment of Clinton, indicative of the more superficial boom times of the late nineties, seems too small to be big news today. What is the meaning of adultery amid the Great Recession and inside this post September 11th America?

More uncomfortable questions have still to be confronted in our culture. Was Edwards' effort to make poverty a national issue less valid because he betrayed his wife? Yet Edwards also jeopardized his party. What would have happened if he had won the nomination?

But then there are historical moral figures like Martin Luther King Jr. Was King's leadership on civil rights less valid for his infidelity?

This is a country where nine in ten Americans believe it is "morally wrong" for married men and women to have affairs, according to Gallup. And yet, depending on the study, as many as a quarter to a third of married men commit adultery.

Sanford's human contradictions are our own. We are one of the most socially conservative wealthy nations. We are also a nation that built industries on violent and hypersexual entertainment. We uniformly condemn affairs but some of our most popular romantic comedies celebrate leaving imperfect marriages in search of greater love. And based on Sanford's letters, he seems to have loved this woman.

Unlike in France, and in some cases unfortunately, the unspoken social contract of modern American politics includes marital fidelity. When broken, a politician risks his job and future. But other politicians, as with Gingrich and Clinton, survive.

Questions always follow these sordid political scandals. Above all, did they really believe the affair would not be exposed? So many men in the public spotlight--let's face it, the failings are

mainly men's--seem to forget this merciless age of 24-hour news. But then, infidelity is common to powerful men. And perhaps their sexual impulse is at times more powerful than their political instincts.

It always strikes me that so many reporters take pride in exposing a politician's infidelity. Some cases involve public hypocrisy but others seem to involve little more than family embarrassment. Sanford, for now, looks more like the latter. But of course, governors cannot disappear for days and expect no questions.

Ultimately, Sanford's affair concerns practical politics. How bright was Sanford's star? It's debatable.

He was, until Wednesday, an up-and-coming talent--smart, politically brave and strong on the very theme that the GOP is most attempting to recapture, fiscal conservatism. But he is also from the firmly Republican South. And today, the GOP is looking to reach beyond its base. In the end, would he have been a top-tier contender to win the Republican nomination or merely an also-ran? It's impossible to say, and yesterday rendered any such speculation moot.

Nevertheless, Sanford's exit from national politics will reshape the 2012 race.

Possible Republican Southern contenders in 2012, from Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal to former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, now have a less crowded field. Republicans are certainly now able to contest South Carolina in the GOP primary.

Sanford, like Ensign, has already lost his party leadership post. It only took hours for news to come that Mississippi's Haley Barbour would replace Sanford as the head of the Republican Governors Association. Barbour is also considered a possible contender in 2012.

Barbour now peculiarly joins Gingrich, both leaders of the party during the 1994 GOP landslide, as the newest Republican graybeard to return to the front page.

Sanford meanwhile represents one more rising GOP figure, like Utah's Jon Huntsman Jr. who recently became ambassador to China, to step off the national political stage.

"A southern favorite son is out" of the next presidential race, Fabrizio said, but, "five months from now, it will be Mark who?"

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