

Why do political wives stand by their men?

Joe Garofoli, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 12, 2008



Silda Wall Spitzer is a Harvard Law School graduate and a former high-powered Wall Street attorney who earned more than her husband. On Monday, this accomplished woman silently stood next to New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer in an increasingly familiar American media ritual: the news conference in which a male politician explains his implication in a sex scandal - accompanied by his wife.

Silda Spitzer appeared shaken and anguished during her husband's 67-second news conference, but she held his hand as they exited. Hours earlier, reports surfaced that the 48-year-old father of three teenage daughters had spent thousands of dollars on a call girl at a Washington hotel.

Analysts say a political spouse is part of a team, and when she's standing before the cameras - even silently - she is taking one for the team. Part political theater, part open-air therapy, these excruciating public confessionals demand three things of the spouse: to hold her family together at a moment of crisis; to support the person she supposedly loves; and to provide at least a shred of future political viability for her man.

But some analysts wonder if these humiliating productions have outlived their political usefulness.

"They have put these women through so much already - it just seems to be a second level of humiliation," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "It is supposed to make him look like not such a bad guy. Like, 'Geez, look, his wife was standing next to him.' But in this case, she looked so pained that, to me, he looked less sympathetic."

The appearance of Spitzer's wife standing next to him in this "outmoded tradition" should raise the ire of wives everywhere - both political and nonpolitical, said Penn State communications professor Nichola D. Gutgold.

"I saw that, and I wanted to yell to her, 'You don't have to do this! Go shopping! Go for a walk. Do anything else,'" said Gutgold, author of "Paving the Way for Madam President."

"I keep waiting for one of these women to tell their husband, 'You go make that speech yourself.' Why should they - it was their husband's wrongdoing? Why should they be internationally humiliated?"

A similar script

Silda Spitzer was following roughly the same script used by the spouse of Louisiana Sen. David Vitter after his name was found on a madam's list last year; by the wife of Idaho Sen. Larry Craig after he was arrested for disorderly conduct for allegedly trying to pick up an undercover police officer in an airport bathroom last year; and by the wife of New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey who stood by when he announced he had

a gay lover who also was a state employee.

And, perhaps most famously, Silda Spitzer followed the model used in 1992 by Hillary Clinton in a joint "60 Minutes" interview with her husband, Bill, then a presidential candidate. Responding to allegations that Bill Clinton had had an extramarital affair, Hillary Clinton created a media template for spousal behavior in times of scandal.

"You know, I'm not sitting here like some little woman standing by my man, like Tammy Wynette," Hillary Clinton said then. "I'm sitting here because I love him, and I respect him, and I honor what he's been through and what we've been through together. And you know, if that's not enough for people, then heck, don't vote for him."

Since then, the "stand by your man" stance has become a familiar cultural touchstone, even though it is never easy to watch the beleaguered spouse - or in some cases, to understand their silent loyalty.

On CNN's "Larry King Live" Monday night, Dina McGreevey spoke of why she appeared with her husband and why others shouldn't judge Silda Spitzer.

"Well, you know, as I watched her, my heart just broke for her because I know exactly how she's feeling," McGreevey said. "It's always difficult to learn that, you know, the person you love has betrayed your trust. The difficulty is increased tremendously when you have to face it in such a public manner.

"We all do it for very personal reasons. I did it because he was my husband. I had always supported him. I loved him. I had a daughter that, you know, would one day - will one day look back and recognize that this was one of the most difficult experiences in her father's life. And I wanted her to know that I was there for her father," she said. "And I would just ask people not to criticize her because you don't know what it's like unless you're in the person's shoes."

Public confessionals

Wendy Vitter, wife of Sen. David Vitter, learned that it is easy to make catty remarks from the sidelines - until your husband gets caught in a sex scandal. When asked in 2000 how she'd react if her husband cheated on her, she invoked Lorena Bobbitt, who famously cut off the penis of her philandering husband who she said also was abusive.

"I'm a lot more like Lorena Bobbitt than Hillary (Clinton). If he (Vitter) does something like that, I'm walking away with one thing, and it's not alimony, trust me," Wendy Vitter said then. But when her husband stood before the cameras to talk about his name appearing in the records of an escort service, she stood by him.

The rise of cultural conservatives in the 1980s created the need for politicians to perform a public confessional if they got caught with their pants down, said Paul Apostolidis, a political science professor at Whitman (Washington) College and the co-editor of "Public Affairs: Politics in the Age of Sex Scandals."

Religious conservatives are more likely to be forgiving if there is a public apology. Having a spouse standing nearby shows that the family unit is behind the penance.

"CNN and Fox News become the frames of how we view these events," Apostolidis said. But he said that sex scandals often provide a way to talk about other issues.

Political enemies

"Everybody is missing the larger point in this story," said Naomi Wolf, author of "The Beauty Myth" and last year's "The End of America."

Wolf said the investigation of Spitzer - done with the help of federally ordered wiretaps - shows how easy it is for the government to take down its political enemies through expanded domestic surveillance. Wolf, in thoughts echoed throughout the liberal blogosphere, believes the Republican-led Bush administration and Justice Department were no fans of Spitzer, who could be an aggressive politician and prosecutor.

"This is the scandal," Wolf said. As for how spouses behave during these crises, "it's none of our business. Absolutely none of us can know how we'd react in that situation or judge others."

E-mail Joe Garofoli at jgarofoli@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/12/MN37VI8QI.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle