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The Strange Persistence of Moral Sanity

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The fall of yet another politician in a sex scandal has added a note of *Schadenfreude* to the political season. Coming so quickly after the fall of former New York Governor Elliot Spitzer, the admission by former Senator John Edwards of an affair during his presidential campaign seemed to catch many observers off-guard.

Sexual immorality crosses all partisan lines. Spitzer and Edwards are prominent Democrats, but equally prominent Republicans have been caught in the same web. There is no room for partisan calculation here.

One interesting aspect of the Edwards saga is the near-universal assumption that, had Edwards won the primary race for the Democratic presidential nomination, he (and his party) would have been fatally wounded in terms of the November election. This assumption, revealed in media coverage of the scandal, seems to be common to both liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats. The assumption is probably valid.



The American people are incredibly forgiving, but John Edwards violated a basic sense of public dignity and personal morality. The fact that his wife, Elizabeth, is in the fight of her life with cancer only adds to the public's sense of outrage at his violation of his marital vows. His repeated lies added fuel to the fire. On top of all this, the narcissism and recklessness of his affair revealed a poisonous disregard for his responsibilities, his supporters, his family, his friends, and the public.

The American people were confronted once again with broken promises, broken commitments, and broken hearts laid bare in public. Even now, the public seems braced for further revelations in this scandal.

But what of that near-universal assumption that this scandal should end the political career of John Edwards? Some observers reject that assumption.

Writing for *Psychology Today* [warning: objectionable language], Roy F. Baumeister categorically rejects the idea that a sex scandal should be considered politically significant at all. He writes: "My thesis is that the American people and their chances for good government are the ones most harmed by these scandals. In fact, I recommend that we should stop considering sexual behavior as a qualification for political office."

That is an audacious recommendation, but it is not unprecedented. Similar arguments followed the fall of Elliot Spitzer. The public is not buying the argument.

Baumeister continues:

I can imagine people objecting that sexual decision making reveals a man's character. (I refer specifically to men here, because so far only men have had their political careers ruined by sex scandals.) This argument seems lame to me. A much better and more relevant test of character would involve how the person has managed his money. Has he always paid his bills on time? If the answer is no, that is much more reason to question his suitability for public office than an

occasional bit of unsanctioned sex.

That is an amazing and revealing argument. Christians must reject that argument on its face. The Bible clearly affirms that what is done with the body is directly related to the soul. Christianity is incompatible with a Gnosticism that divides the body and soul so that sexual behavior and character can be separated.

Baumeister even goes so far as to argue that the public is drawn to support high-testosterone men who, by virtue of that testosterone, are also likely to seek multiple sex partners. “High testosterone does not promote sexual fidelity,” he asserts. “It makes men want to have more different partners. On top of the self-selection of adultery-prone men into politics, the opportunities probably increase for a successful politician.”

In the end, he warns that the nation is “not so oversupplied with brilliant, wonderful, effective politicians that we can afford to disqualify a substantial number of them based on something as irrelevant as a bit of wild oats.” An extended adulterous affair encased in lies and betrayal is merely “a bit of wild oats?”

Well, there you have it — it’s not the man . . . it’s the testosterone. It’s not a moral scandal, just a bit of wild oats. Most Americans recognize those arguments to be patent nonsense. Even in these confused and confusing times, some moral sanity remains.

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