

AlbertMohler.com

## The Spitzer Affair and the Press

Wednesday, March 12, 2008



The fall of New York Governor Eliot Spitzer is unfolding like a Greek tragedy — only more slowly. Few seem to think that the Governor can hang onto his office, even for a few days. As details of his complicity in an elite prostitution service add up, the legal and political consequences rise.

One interesting aspect of this tragedy is the role of the press. According to media accounts, reporters from The New York Times were alerted to the story last Friday and the Governor advised several aides of the development over the weekend. The first media blast on the big story came mid-day Monday. The press knew the story was big, and the closer reporters looked, the bigger the story appeared.

Tuesday's newspapers brought the first wave of substantial reporting and Wednesday's papers now bring the first major wave of editorial comment.

The editorial offered by The Los Angeles Times does not call for Gov. Spitzer to resign but instead chides the society for its hang-ups on sex. As the paper editorialized in "Spitzer and Sinning:"

*Only time, or leaks from a federal investigation, will tell what erotic refinements New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer was seeking when he allegedly paid "Kristen," an employee of the Emperors Club VIP escort service, more than \$2,000 on Valentine's eve. But governors have been getting caught with prostitutes for about as long as there have been governors, and Spitzer's alleged lapses are notable mainly as evidence of a nationwide recrudescence of personal vices that resist all efforts at eradication.*

So the nation's leading west-coast newspaper sees the issue as one of personal vice, not the public trust. As the editorial concluded:

*We don't mean to imply support for prostitution, smoking or excessive drinking. There is, however, something encouraging in seeing even a self-destructive maverick spirit live on despite the best intentions of public scolds. Perhaps we should give the last word to "Kristen," who in the federal government's complaint dismisses concerns for her well-being: "I'm here for a purpose. I know what my purpose is. I am not a ... moron, you know what I mean."*

Well, we know what the paper's editors mean, and this is not the first time the paper has made such an argument. Back in October the paper editorialized on the divorce of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, arguing that America should follow the example of the French and consider all marital and sexual matters related to elected leaders as merely personal and off-limits to public consideration. As the editors argued then [see my commentary]:

*The Sarkozys' 11-year marriage had been famously troubled since at least 2005, when she ran off to New York with another man for eight months and the French media started scrutinizing their relationship. Madame Sarkozy did not vote for her husband. She rarely appeared in public with him and looked grim when she did. And to her credit, she made no effort to impersonate a good political wife.*

*The only surprise in France was that the Sarkozys' marital woes made it into the news at all. In the past, French politicians' peccadilloes have been off-limits; newspapers did not even report the existence of President Francois*

*Mitterrand's illegitimate daughter until his funeral. That taboo was broken with the rise of Sarkozy's political fortunes. Even so, the end of L'affair Sarkozy was refreshingly dignified — no tabloid tell-alls, no fighting over finances, no disputes over custody of their 10-year-old son. The marriage had obviously become painful and humiliating; its demise isn't a tragedy, it's a mercy.*

*The French example makes one wonder when Americans will begin handling the flammable mixture of sex and politics more sensibly.*

The editors concluded by urging that “this would be a good year for Americans to practice the fine French art of divorcing judgments about sex from judgments about policy.” Well, give the editors credit for consistency at least.

The editors of *The Los Angeles Times* are now arguing, in effect, that New Yorkers should follow the example of the French, and consider the private life of Gov. Spitzer to be merely personal (without reference to the criminal charges expected).

But, wait just a minute. It turns out that the French aren't in synch with the editors in Los Angeles either. Just today, *The Financial Times* reports that Sarkozy's party has taken a major loss in local elections — and that French voters voiced their outrage over the President's personal life:

*At the Elysée Palace, advisers greeted Sarkozy's latest marriage – to Carla Bruni on February 2 – with concealed relief. By remarrying, the President is closing the door on one of the most difficult periods in his life, his divorce from Cécilia last October.*

*Until his marriage with Bruni, Sarkozy had been torn apart by his personal life. It affected his first few months in office in a way that is hard to evaluate but unmistakable. Smiling one day, foul to his ministers the next; one moment listening, the next distracted, Sarkozy could never hide his emotional state.*

*The Elysée advisers hope this period is over and that his presidency will take a more ordinary turn.*

*Having his private life so enmeshed with public life has cost the President dear. His poll ratings are at a low. They have been in freefall since September, when his approval rating stood at 64%, as opposed to 41% now, the point to which Jacques Chirac had sunk six months after his election as President in 1995. For Sarkozy, who has done everything he can to avoid the same fate as his predecessor, this comparison is painful.*

Interestingly, a very different approach is taken by the editors of *The Chicago Tribune*. In the paper's editorial, published today, the editors state:

*He was the white knight who had vanquished Wall Street wrongdoers. His reputation as a champion of rectitude stretched from coast to coast. Would he someday parlay that image into a run for the presidency? . . . On Monday the white knight tumbled from his steed.*

The paper actually points to the private dimension of the tragedy, comparing a photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Spitzer on the day of his inauguration last year, and then at the press conference on Monday. At this point the paper delivers an unusually personal rebuke:

*That's the punishment, of course: To awaken every morning to his life — to the scene of his crime. There's no escape, for him or for his victims.*

*Just a man left to wonder how hubris, or whatever the enabling delusion, somehow entitled him. . . . Imagine, though, awakening this morning as Eliot Spitzer. Imagine living with the failed promise of that photo from Jan. 1, 2007. A private matter. What could be worse?*

Finally, the editors of *The New York Times* — the paper closest to this story — delivered a clear call for the Governor to resign . . . now. In their words:

*Gov. Eliot Spitzer has now twice violated his obligations to the people of New York. He violated their trust when,*

*according to law enforcement officials, he patronized a prostitution ring. He compounded that violation Tuesday by hiding in his Fifth Avenue apartment and refusing to explain his actions or his future plans.*

*To put it bluntly, Mr. Spitzer must either resign immediately or explain why he deserves to continue in office. It is almost impossible for us to imagine how he can survive this scandal and provide the credible leadership that his state needs.*

*New York's government cannot afford to be paralyzed while Mr. Spitzer games his political prospects or, as many suspect, tries to work out a better legal deal with federal prosecutors.*

The editors concluded: "There are many other problems that will require a strong and credible governor's attention and backing, including rules on ethics and fair election redistricting and campaign finance reform. All of this is on hold while Mr. Spitzer focuses on his personal plight. New York cannot wait any longer."

All three of these editorials from major American newspapers offer interesting angles on this tragic story. The editors in Los Angeles blame the society for having hang-ups about sex, but their argument falls apart on closer analysis. Beyond that, it is not their state that is in such turmoil. The editors in Chicago offer the interesting and instructive counter-point to the Los Angeles paper, arguing that the essentially private character of the tragedy makes it *worse*, not less significant.

Meanwhile, the editors of *The New York Times* — a paper not known for sexual conservatism — have to deal with the reality of a tragedy that has brought state government to a stand-still as the Governor hides in his Manhattan apartment.

Taken together, these three editorials serve to remind us all that the press is not monolithic in the face of a story like the tragedy of Eliot Spitzer. At the same time, we are reminded that Christians must have more to say about this than the secular press can be expected to muster. There is far more to this story than a mere Greek tragedy. This is literally too tragic for words.

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Photo credit: Office of the Governor, State of New York

[Full text](#) of the Governor's March 10, 2008 statement.

