

A “Fine French Art” America Cannot Afford — Does Marriage Really Matter Anymore?

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Few divorces make international headlines but when one spouse is the President of France, the international media take notice. What the media make of the divorce is a story unto itself, revealing as much about the worldview represented by major media as about the President of France.

The facts are now public and are fairly easy to follow. Nicolas Sarkozy, the President of France, recently divorced his second wife, Cecilia Ciganer-Albeniz. According to press reports, the divorce was a simple legal matter and the proceedings lasted no more than fifteen minutes.

President Sarkozy’s marriage had been the stuff of rumor and controversy for some time. The couple had just recently announced a reconciliation of sorts in early 2006, suggesting that they were attempting to save their marriage. The people of France were already aware of the fact that the national media had reported that Mrs. Sarkozy had lived with another man in New York for some months in 2005. She has also reported not to have voted for her husband in the national election that brought him to office.

All this makes for an interesting political life, but such marital maneuvers are not all that uncommon in French public life. Francois Mitterrand, president from 1981-1995, had a second family during his presidential administration and a place was made for his mistress and her daughter at his public funeral in 1996.

All this serves to underline the differences between the political cultures of France and the United States. In America, marital stability has been seen as a necessary qualification for high office — especially for the presidency. Is this still the case?

In the 2004 election, the once-married George W. Bush was opposed by the twice-married John Kerry. Nevertheless, Kerry’s ex-wife and children appeared supportive of his candidacy and made no accusations against his character. Voters may not have felt comfortable with the idea of Teresa Heinz Kerry as First Lady, but that was unlikely to have been a major factor in the election.

In 2000 both major party candidates were married to their original spouses and provided ample evidence of marital harmony and stability. Both Laura Bush and Tipper Gore appeared genuinely thrilled to stand alongside their husbands and both families included supportive children.

Will the 2008 presidential race change this landscape? The three leading Democratic contenders are all married to their first spouses (though the Clinton marriage must be considered a thing unto itself — in any event the public is hardly unaware of the complications).

On the Republican side, the picture is very different. John McCain has been married twice, as has Fred Thompson. Both divorced their first wives and married younger women. In McCain’s case, the divorce and remarriage took place many years ago. Thompson’s is more recent. Meanwhile, Rudolph Giuliani is on his third marriage and the

circumstances of his second divorce are certain to raise particular concerns, as is the fact that he lived for at least some time with a gay couple while between marriages. Did he think New York was in France?

Add to this the fact that Mr. Giuliani's adult son is, or at least has been, ardently opposed to his candidacy and it becomes clear that Americans are waking up to a new political culture. Among the three leading Republican candidates, only Mitt Romney presents a picture of marital fidelity, with his wife and five adult sons all eagerly supportive of his candidacy. Evangelical voters, who in recent cycles have seen the Republican Party as the party of family values, are left wondering what happened to the family values of its leading candidates and why the only leading candidate that represents the right family and marriage profile is a Mormon.

Conservative voters went for Ronald Reagan in droves, even though he had been associated with Hollywood culture and was to be the first divorced man elected to the presidency. Nevertheless, all that was rather far behind Reagan when he ran for president in 1980. The 2008 race could shape up very differently.

Should evangelical Christians care about the marital and family commitments of political candidates? Some suggest that we should simply grow up and get with the program, neatly separating the personal from the political.

That is precisely the advice offered by *The Los Angeles Times* in a recent editorial. In "Le divorce," the editors call for Americans to follow the French example and let the marital chips fall where they may when it comes to political leaders.

In their words:

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 demise of a marriage is not a tragedy? That is quite a claim, and it says a great deal about how the elites within the culture view now marriage. But the editors have much more to offer:

The French example makes one wonder when Americans will begin handling the flammable mixture of sex and politics more sensibly. Many voters seem to believe that politicians who have troubled marriages are flawed people. This belief appears unshaken despite abundant ancient and latter-day evidence that happiness or lack thereof in marriage is a lousy predictor of a leader's performance. (How a politician treats underlings, old friends, rivals and campaign contributors is generally a more accurate barometer of character, though such topics don't sell tabloids.) Voters should know that anyone driven enough to succeed in modern American politics — like anyone at the top of other workaholic, hard-driving professions — is, by definition, highly likely to have strained his or her marriage, whether or not adultery was involved. Yet the urge to equate marital rectitude with political rectitude remains strong.

Let's get this straight — voters should be more concerned about how a candidate treats campaign contributors than how the candidate treats his or her spouse? Can this be a serious proposal?

The editors of *The Los Angeles Times* conclude by celebrating "tolerance" and argue that "this would be a good year for Americans to practice the fine French art of divorcing judgments about sex from judgments about policy."

This is one "fine French art" that Americans are likely to find hard to follow. The editors evidently believe — against common sense — that it is even *possible* to divorce these issues so cleanly. Voters have learned to sift issues and make decisions when armed with evidence about the total character of a candidate for high office. But it is an insult to moral judgment to suggest that marital infidelity, discord, and divorce are not related to a candidate's essential character.

If a candidate cannot keep and honor marital vows, why should voters believe that he or she would show greater fealty to an oath of office? Americans have made mess enough of our own political culture. The last thing we need now is to follow the French example when it comes to marital morality and political leadership.

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