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March 17, 2008, 5:00 a.m.

What Happened to Manliness?

The new moral contours of American politics.

By Hadley Arkes

Alan Dershowitz may not be the most even-tempered, understated member of the bar, but in a back and forth discussion of Silda Spitzer on CNN, he was as close to “losing it” as I’ve ever seen him. In a moment curiously rare, one commentator had the effrontery of calling into question that convention, in our own time, of bringing wives out before the cameras to stand beside their recently disgraced husbands. Whether that question opened new angles on the problem was a matter quickly blown away as Dershowitz exploded in outrage. Nearly screaming his charge and not letting go, Dershowitz kept trumpeting the “arrogance” of anyone who would dare question, or even cast a judgment, on a matter that Dershowitz regarded as irreducibly personal: This was one of those decisions welling up from that hallowed ground of “privacy.” It was Silda Spitzer’s decision, and her decision alone, to make, and no one should claim the standing to question it.

It was another version of “the woman’s right to decide” — and as with that other slogan (also invented by men) it obscured the role of the man who put the woman in this position. Dina McGreevey revealed in a [piece](#) in the *New York Times* that her husband’s political managers had ordered up the scene in which she would stand before the cameras with her husband, the Governor of New Jersey — and this before she knew what the presentation was all about. By her own report, the first information she had about her husband’s sexual involvement with one of his aides came when she was given the text of what her husband was about to say on television.

The plain truth that dare not speak its name is that these are mainly not decisions made by women to stand by their men. We have had psychologists giving us now various accounts of just what in the background of these women, would move them to make a gesture of loyalty for the sake of the family. But the brute fact, curiously unremarked, is that these spectacles are usually ordered up by the husband taking counsel with his political advisers, the people who really do count foremost in his life at that moment when his future hangs in the balance. The humiliation suffered by such a woman, and that her presence during the public acknowledgment only deepens the humiliation, are matters of less moment than the political ends to be served by the spectacle. Her presence may be taken to extract the lesson that was floated about Hillary and Bill: “She has forgiven him; it is a matter about *their* marriage — and why should it be anyone else’s business?” Why should it surprise us that a political performance has a political point — to overcome the crisis? But then why is the heart of the matter not recognized in the same way: that this is an expression of *his narcissism*; this is all about *him* and *his needs*. He has not called her there to apologize to her in public and publicly ask her forgiveness. This has nothing to do with *her needs, her feelings, her interests*.

Bernard Nathanson has told the story often that the mantra “her decision,” on abortion, came from the men who founded the National Abortion Rights Action League. It was to be “her decision”

because it was “her problem.” It was a conception that put discreetly out of the picture the man who had his own, distinctive role to play in creating the problem in the first place, or the man whose refusal to take responsibility and stand by her now made the problem hers alone to manage. This should move us to raise a different kind of question: Put aside all of the motives that might lead the woman, in these cases, to stand by her man; put aside the specious theories of sharing the humiliation in order to guard the children, and ask, why should the burden of this decision be placed on her? What happened to chivalry and, yes, manliness? Why would a husband, in this setting, not simply say that the fault was his alone, that he will absorb the humiliation himself, and not ask his wife to stand before the cameras, a bewildered bystander, and marry that humiliation with him?

All of that might be said, without knowing anything about the inclinations or motives of the political wife. It would have been the right thing for Eliot Spitzer to do, even if it were the case that his wife, as it was reported, urged him not to resign. The manly thing to do here would have remained the same even if the wife in question had turned herself into a version of Lady Macbeth, or better yet, Hillary Clinton. For this is the other side of the story that has gone without remark — a sea change in the mores of public life has actually been brought about by the Clintons. The best analogy may actually come from basketball: The Harlem Globetrotters showed some remarkable, dazzling things that could be done in the handling of a basketball, in the style of shooting and dribbling and passing. With the infusion of black players into professional basketball, the style was transformed, and it would be there now, for good, for whites as well as blacks.

What we have discovered in the last week is that the Clintons imparted lessons in our political life that have indeed taken hold. That a governor, caught in Spitzer’s scandal, would even think for a moment that he had any honorable course other than resigning, would have been regarded as astonishing even into the 1990’s. That Silda Spitzer could have urged toughing it out would indicate that she is the child now of another, newer ethic. Is the calculation here that the family itself had a better chance of weathering the scandal if the husband succeeded in holding to political power? Is the family to be judged, not by the ethic it exemplifies — or degrades — but by the political position it may still command?

Or is the playbook really that of Hillary Clinton? All of the talk about standing by your man was so much persiflage, self-serving banter. She had invested in him, she had stock in him. If he went down in impeachment, that would put the mark on the whole family; it would have foreclosed her political life. That she could be elected to the Senate and be the candidate to beat for the presidential nomination are themselves signs of the stunning success of their judgment and their tenacity. Silda Spitzer has a degree from the Harvard Law School — it may well have crossed her mind that she has the wit and connections to do more beyond the position of a First Lady. And she has had the telling example of a woman, with a law degree from Yale, who managed to use the position of a First Lady as a springboard to her own career in high office. Was all of this too at stake for Mrs. Spitzer? But whether it is Silda Spitzer or someone else, the model and the path are now clearly established among people who form the political class. Hillary Clinton may not get the nomination, but the evidence of the past week confirms that she and her fella have reshaped, in an enduring way, the moral contours of political life in America.

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