

**The Good Wives: Infidelity and the Political Wife**

*By Julie Still*

The *New York Times* describes the television show “The Good Wife, as follows: “Julianna Margulies plays Alicia Florrick, another nice-looking woman in a good suit and pearls whose life blows up when her husband is caught on tape in a sexually and ethically compromising position” (Stanley). For a new series, “The Good Wife” has done well and Margulies won a Best Actress Golden Globe for her performance in the series in January 2010 (Harris 2).

The public view of the state of a marriage after one spouse’s infidelity is what makes the situation newsworthy and meaty enough to anchor a television drama. Many marriages encounter sexual affairs and infidelity is usually considered a private matter that concerns only the parties involved even those in celebrity occupations can find some privacy either by request or by fleeing the areas they usually inhabit, and business magnates can often afford to have the marriage repair or divorce proceedings take place behind closed doors. There is one group of wives, however, that find they must often, if not always, handle this personal crisis in the glare of the cameras, all too frequently literally and not just figuratively.

Those in public office in contemporary America have very little privacy. The intense public debate over what kind of dog the Obamas should get when they moved into the White House or the deconstruction of Sarah Palin’s wardrobe are just a few examples of the kind of hyper-attention paid to the denizens of the political sphere. While these are

personal matters they are not as personal as marital infidelity. In recent years, a number of American male politicians have faced the public exposure of their sexual affairs. *Politico*, an online publication focusing on national politics, found that women in elected office are far less likely to be named in sex scandals than men. In part this is because there are far more men than women in public office (Mason). As women move more into the public political realm they, too, are falling prey to public exposure of marital lapses. In 1998 an Idaho Republican Congresswoman, Helen Chenoweth, admitted a decade old affair she had had with her married business partner. The affair was made public after she aired a political ad mentioning then President Bill Clinton's infidelity. (Kurtz D1). Very recently Nikki Haley, the newly elected Republican Governor of South Carolina has been accused of having an extramarital affair (Sacks), though, at the time of this writing there has not yet been any real evidence of this and she has denied it. Another incoming governor, Mary Fallin of Oklahoma, is alleged to have had an affair with a state trooper when she was lieutenant governor (Mason). Even so, this small number of highly publicized political women conducting, or being accused of conducting, extramarital affairs is eclipsed by the much larger number of men caught in adulterous relationships while in office. In only the past few years Congressmen Mark Souder and Mark Foley, and Senators Larry Craig, David Vitter, and John Ensign have made the news for inappropriate sexual activity

In American politics a straying male usually makes a public apology for his indiscretion, asks forgiveness and pledges to do better. Most often this speech is made with his wife

by his side, as a sign of support. Two recent examples of the iconic pose are Silda Spitzer, wife of former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, and Dina Matos McGreevey, former wife of former New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey. This public exposure of a wronged spouse has been criticized by feminists (Pollitt 14; Belkin 9) because a public wife must stand alone and exposed, her betrayed body on display for critique and review, while her husband, standing behind a podium or microphone, tells assembled media and the viewing audience at large, of his indiscretions. The script for a public wife in this circumstance is to gaze at her husband, never acknowledging the attendant press, and, if not smile, at least show little emotion, and no negative emotion. The gist of the image is that if a politician's wife can forgive an elected man's adultery, surely the voters can as well. Jim McGreevey gave his wife explicit instructions on how she was to look and behave the press conference where he will announce that he is being blackmailed by a gay lover and resigning from the governorship:

As we were in the car leaving Drumthwacket, Jim told me again that I had to be Jackie Kennedy. "You have to smile," he said.

I just looked at him.

"And if reporters ask you why you're here, you should tell them, "I'm here because he's my husband and I love him," he said.

I didn't answer.

"And if the reporters ask you why what you think of gay marriage, you should say, 'I'm sensitive to the issue.'" (McGreevey 214)

This behavior recalls Arlie Hochschild's work on the commercialization of human feeling *The Managed Heart* , wherein she defines emotional labor to be "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild 7) and later states, "We are brought back to the question of what the social carpet actually consists of and what it requires of those who are supposed to keep it beautiful" (Hochschild, 9). The silent, forgiving, adoring wife is doing the emotional labor of the electorate.

Most of these public wives keep their thoughts about the ordeal private, but a few in recent years have chosen to write about their side of the story. This review examines four titles, three books and one book chapter, written by public wives, "good wives," if you will. Three are or were married to Democrats, one to a Republican. Two were married to Governors, one to a President, and the other to a former Senator and Presidential hopeful. Three of the men had affairs with one or more women; one of the husbands was sexually involved with another man.

Hillary Clinton currently the Secretary of State, formerly Senator from New York, and prior to that First Lady of the United States while her husband Bill Clinton was President , writes in her autobiography, *Living History*, of his infidelity with a White House intern. During the public outing of then President Clinton, Mrs. Clinton believed her husband's initial denials of the affair and adamantly defended her husband. The Clintons have remained married. Elizabeth Edwards, whose husband John Edwards served in the

Senate before running for Vice President in 2004 and, briefly, president in 2008, devotes one chapter of her book *Resilience* to how she dealt with her husband's infidelities with a woman who had worked on his presidential campaign. They were separated at the time of her death in 2010. John Edwards was not in office or campaigning when his affair was announced in the media and made his public confession in a television interview that did not involve Elizabeth. Jenny Sanford was the First Lady of South Carolina when her husband Mark Sanford began an affair with an Argentine woman. Her book, *Staying True*, focuses on the marriage from her viewpoint; the Sanfords have since divorced. Jenny Sanford broke new ground by not appearing with her husband at the 2009 press conference where he publicly confessed his affair. Dina Matos McGreevey was married to Jim McGreevey, then the Governor of New Jersey when he resigned in 2004 after being blackmailed by a man with whom he had had a sexual relationship. The McGreeveys went through a public and acrimonious divorce. Her somewhat dazed expression and smile are often referred to in discussions of wives being at press conferences when their political husbands confess and indiscretion. Like Sanford, Matos McGreevey's book, *Silent Partner*, focuses on her marriage

The McGreevey marriage differs from that of Clinton, Edwards, and Sanford for reasons other than the gender of her husband's paramour. While the other three had been married for decades before their husband's infidelity/ies became public, and had been activity engaged in raising one or more children for many years, Matos McGreevey had

only been married a few years before her marriage dissolved. Her daughter was a toddler during the public examination of the affair, while the other women had older children. Interestingly enough, Matos McGreevey and Hilary Clinton share one factor—both went into marriage knowing they would be political wives; Matos McGreevey's husband already held elected office and Clinton's had just lost an election but was likely to remain involved in politics. The other women married before their husbands went into politics, though it may have been considered as a possibility at the time of the marriage. Thus, all of Matos McGreevey's marriage had been lived in the public eye, whereas the other three women's marriages had at least started as private unions (Hillary Clinton's husband was not in office when they married). However, all of the women played an active role in their husband's campaigns. Jenny Sanford managed her husband's campaigns and Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Edwards, and Dina Matos McGreevey all were involved and active campaigners. In fact, Hillary Clinton continued to be involved in her husband's legal defense, at least from a consulting angle, during his impeachment trial. Mark Sanford continued to ask for his wife's advice and approval during the publicity firestorm after his return from meeting his mistress in Argentina. After the press conference at which Mark Sanford confessed the affair and referred to his mistress as his soul mate, he called his wife and asked "How'd I do?" (Sanford xviii).

Silda Spitzer, wife of former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, and the inspiration for television's "The Good Wife," publically took the blame for her husband's indiscretions. In a book on her husband she is quoted as saying, "The wife is supposed to take care of

the sex. This is *my* failing; I wasn't adequate" (Masters). In contrast, none of these good wives assumed the blame for, or took ownership of, their husband's actions. In fact, all took pains to point out that their husband's behaviors belong to the men themselves. Elizabeth Edwards said:

This is not about his indiscretion. He has his own battle to rediscover himself and realign his life. This is about my looking around me one day and finding, first, an ugly crack in the foundation of my life, and then finding out in time that the crack was deeper than I had first thought (Edwards 169).

She does, however mention feeling humiliated, especially by the public knowledge of her husband's behavior (Edwards 191). Hillary Clinton wrote, "Why he felt he had to deceive me and others is his own story, and he needs to tell it in his own way" (Clinton 441). Sanford starts out her book with this statement: "I see now that June 24, 2009, was a day that changed forever the trajectory of my life, but it did not change me" (Sanford ix). She also wrote of feeling publicly humiliated. Dina Matos McGreevey said she felt she was "being humiliated in front of the whole world" (Matos McGreevey 229).

All of the women wrote in their memoirs of their reliance on the comfort and support of family and friends while adjusting to the knowledge of their husbands' infidelity. They worried about how their children will respond and what affect this will have on them. For Edwards there are additional fears. At the time she wrote she knew she had a terminal illness and worried that after her death she would be erased from the lives of her

children and family (Edwards 190). When Bill Clinton finally told Hillary that he was unfaithful one of her first thoughts is that they will have to tell their teenage daughter (Clinton 466). Jenny Sanford cited the need to have her children view her with respect and integrity as a reason why she separated from her husband (Sanford xx). She did not want them to find out about their father's affair from the media (Sanford 196).

Another commonality in all four stories, and one that all mentioned as being particularly painful, is that their husbands told them as little as possible and only escalated the amount of information when it became clear that it would be made public. None of the men "ripped the bandaid off" in one fell swoop; all pulled it off a bit at a time. Bill Clinton initially told his wife only that his words and behavior towards a young woman might be misconstrued (Clinton 440). Hilary believed him and publicly denied rumors of infidelity. Some months later he confessed that he had engaged in sexual conduct with a young intern (Clinton 467). Sanford found copies of correspondence between her husband and another woman. He told her he would end the affair and that there had not been any other affairs (Sanford 169-170). Neither proved true; he continued the affair, and even went so far as to ask her permission to see his mistress (Sanford 179, 188) and later admitted that he had "crossed the line" with other women (Sanford 202). Jenny Sanford also had the luxury of finding out in private without an impending public announcement; she had time to adjust before the world found out. Initially Jim McGreevey told his wife he might not run for reelection because he no longer enjoyed politics, with the never-ending crises and scandals (Matos McGreevey 183). A month later he told her he was

being blackmailed by a male staffer with whom he had had a physical relationship and within days he resigned (Matos McGreevey 196-7). Initially John Edwards told Elizabeth Edwards that he had only had one encounter but a year later confessed that there had been others (Edwards 175).

Some of the couples spoke openly about issues of fidelity before their marriages. Elizabeth Edwards had told her husband that she needed fidelity, "Leave me, if you must, but be faithful to me if you are with me" (Edwards, 179). Hillary Clinton did not address this in particular but does say that she wanted her marriage to last and because of her worries and fears about commitment refused Bill Clinton's initial proposals. She wrote "I thought of him as a force of nature and wondered whether I'd be up to the task of living through his seasons" (Clinton 61). Mark Sanford requested that the promise to be faithful taken out of the wedding vows because he was not sure he could keep that promise. At the time she thought he said this out of "pre-wedding cold feet" and told him she had faith in him (Sanford 29).

A third commonality is that all four women were or had been employed in their own right before becoming political wives, and therefore had some confidence in their ability to earn a living. All but one had lived independently before marriage. Dina Matos McGreevey cited her Portuguese Catholic heritage as a reason why she continued to live in her parent's house before her marriage (Matos McGreevey 11). This, along with

financial concerns, may have been one reason why Matos McGreevey found setting up her own household so stressful; finding and buying a house is a great concern in the later chapters of her book, as her husband's resignation gave her limited time to find housing and the financing to afford it. Hillary Clinton chose to stay in her marriage and therefore did not have to find her own housing. While Jenny Sanford's husband was in office she moved herself and her four children to a privately owned family residence. Elizabeth Edwards, presumably, stayed in the house she had been living in and her husband moved out. All these women spoke of their intention to work in some way after their separation. Elizabeth Edwards, who stopped practicing law after the death of her sixteen-year-old son in 1996, started a furniture store. "I wanted something that was mine," she wrote (Edwards 203). Hillary Clinton decided to run for a New York Senate seat, was elected. She later ran for President in the 2008 primary and is currently serving as Secretary of State. Jenny Sanford was a vice president at an investment banking firm before her marriage (Sanford 19) and told her sons not to worry when she and her husband separated, that she could provide for them (Sanford 195). Dina Matos McGreevey was employed throughout her marriage and while her husband lost his job (as governor) she kept hers. In fact one of the first things her husband told her after the announcement of his resignation is that she would have to get health insurance for herself and their daughter through her job as they would not be on the state plan any longer (Matos McGreevey 222).

Three of the women write about their sexual history before marriage, which is highly unusual for women in public life, especially those who might be better known as someone's wife than for their own accomplishments. Hillary Clinton is forthright about the fact that she and Bill lived together in college (Clinton 55) and alludes to them doing so at other times before their marriage some four years later. Jenny Sanford notes that her husband abstained from alcohol and sex during college but that she "had gotten a few things out of my system" and she questioned if his abstinence led him to wonder in later years if he had missed something (Sanford 171). Matos McGreevey is forthright about having a sexual relationship with Jim McGreevey before their marriage and implies that she had other "serious boyfriends" (serious boyfriend possibly being code for "sexual partner") before that (Matos McGreevey 11). Given that her husband declared himself a gay American when resigning from office she felt the need to state explicitly of their intimate relationship, "so let me say outright that on this occasion, as on many others, the sex was good" (Matos McGreevey 12). Edwards does not go into that level of detail in *Resilience* but does imply that she and her husband continued a sexual relationship, or at least that he "looks at me as if I am the most beautiful woman he has ever seen" (Edwards 200). She discussed their courtship in general terms in a previous book, *Saving Graces*.

Infidelity is not the only private matter that political campaigns make public. Divorce used to be a social defect that would prevent someone from running for office. Ronald Reagan broke the divorce barrier on the Presidential level and it is now considered as

commonplace in political candidates as it is among the population at large. None of the four women whose books are examined in this review had been married before but, Dina Matos McGreevy married a man who had been divorced. Before she realized that her husband was seeing another man, she wondered if he was in love with another woman – his first wife. After the revelations about his sexuality she realized that Jim McGreevey's purpose in keeping the two women from meeting was not because he still harbored romantic feelings for his ex-wife but because he was afraid the two would compare notes or that his first wife would say something to her regarding his sexuality (Matos McGreevey 130, 169). However, the details of a divorce are still used for political fodder. Connie Schultz, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who is married to Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, wrote a book on her husband's initial senate campaign. In it she describes her feelings when the campaign prepared for a potential ad from her husband's opponent capitalizing on a restraining order requested by ex-wife Brown's during their divorce. In part due to her status as a working journalist, Schultz had not appeared in her husband's campaign materials. In her book, Schultz recalls a conversation she had with the campaign staff about an ad they were proposing that would feature Brown's former wife. "Isn't there a role I should be playing in this? Do we really want the only wifely image in Sherrod's race to be that of his former wife," she said at the time (Schultz 187). The ad was filmed featuring the former wife and Schultz, along with all of the children in their blended family, but it was never aired as the expected attack did not materialize. As with infidelity, political wives can expect that the details of their husband's prior marriages will be made public, and that their husband's prior wives will be appearing in newspapers and in political ads. Most women who

marry divorced men don't expect that their husband's work will require them to discuss the details of their husband's divorce or to appear in public or on television with the former wife.

The appearance of books and other writings by political wives discussing marital problems can be taken as a sign of several things. One is the general decline of privacy in a Facebook, cell phone camera age with a 24/7 media cycle. Another is that women are no longer as willing to be the "good wife" who stands by quietly and stoically while her husband's infidelity is discussed in public, and to continue the marriage as if nothing happened. The women, knowing from experience that they can support themselves and their children, and feeling some sense of their own personal power, chose to tell their side of the story, even if they have stayed in the marriage. For better or worse we have moved away from a time when someone in public office can engage in extramarital dalliances knowing that a collusion of the media and a circle of personal confidants will remain quiet. We have also, hopefully, passed a time when political wives are required to literally stand by her man when he faced the cameras and described an affair. Certainly the works of Clinton, Edwards, Matos McGreevey, and Sanford, give us a glimpse of what it is like to be a "good wife."

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