

The Appalachian Trail

There was a time when I regularly took potshots at Governor Palin of Alaska. I said a lot of things about her and almost all of them were rather negative. I said that the Republican Party would be crazy to nominate her as their candidate for President. Well, I've got to admit that I was remiss on at least one important point. That point is this. At least Sarah Palin has the sense to have her romantic adventures with her own hubby, the Dude, the person she's married to. A few years ago I would have said that the simple fact of fidelity would not be such an issue. I would have pointed out that remaining faithful to one's spouse was simply the norm, to be expected. But not any more.

What's going on here? Did I miss something? Did President Clinton make the world safer for high profile adultery when he was stupid enough to dally in the White House and then cold enough to deny, lie and get impeached? Weren't any of the current batch of philanderers watching? Didn't any of these self-absorbed wannabees think they would get caught too? I guess not. Maybe Oscar Wilde was right. The only thing worse than bad publicity is no publicity. Each one of these guys must have that saying in a needlepoint hanging above his bed.

I mean really folks, Giuliani, Spitzer, Gingrich, Foley, Craig, Edwards, Barry, Mahoney, Vitter, Ensign and now Mark Sanford being disgraced. I've heard cheating on your spouse called a lot of colorful things but never "Hiking the Appalachian Trail". That's a good one. Of course it turns out he was lying about that too. The lovebirds were in Buenos Aires. Let me get this right. He disappeared for a week and he thought it would just blow over? He's the Governor of South Carolina not the janitor at your local middle school. Come to think of it, the janitor would probably be missed more than a whole bunch of Governors I could name.

Tell me something. If you were a very prominent public official, someone who had worked hard for millions of votes would you just go AWOL when romance called? If you were near the top of a very short list of presidential contenders would you risk unavoidable scrutiny and scorn? If you were a standard bearer for responsible, conservative, family oriented policy positions would you check yourself into Club Clinton? Would you just go away and not tell your staff? Would you jet off to South America and not even let your Lieutenant Governor know when you'd be back? If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions you should take yourself to the woodshed and give yourself a whuppin.

You should also give up any notion you may have had about getting elected to something. We have plenty of libidinous egoists already, more than enough. Additional fools need not apply.

Yeah, I know, libido is a powerful thing. And a person's private life should be left that way...private. Mark Sanford might even be a good Governor. But we live in a world where the standards of politics are dictated by public opinion. We live in a country where a great many citizens vote based on what they perceive a candidate's morals to be. It's really important nowadays to keep your nose clean. The days of looking the other way (see Kennedy, Roosevelt et al) are over. The media are not out to protect you anymore. They are out to sell air time to sponsors. The failures of public officials and especially their hypocrisies sell best of all. It matters not whether you're right or left. There are countless talented media professionals just waiting to skewer the foolish politician. It's their job and they enjoy it.

So why? Why would otherwise reasonable, calculating people do this to themselves? I wish I knew. Many of them are people who have made political hay from pronouncing on the ethics of the larger society. These are folks who would never accept behavior like this from a staff member (except for Sen. Ensign who actually paid a staff member for this sort of thing). Doesn't it ever occur to them that the more you opine on the morals of others the bigger target you make of yourself? This is not rocket science. It's simple human dynamics. Don't take the position of the righteous unless you are one. Otherwise, you're just one more in a long list of two faced politicians who come and go, signifying nothing but human conceit and an enormous capacity for self delusion.

Sanford's is a cautionary tale as was Clinton's and Kennedy's and Edwards'. It is a reminder to value integrity, to add it all up before you plunge ahead. Do a little soul searching before you decide you're above being judged. Remember that your folly will hurt everyone who matters to you. Then take a step back and read all the warning signs before you hike the Appalachian Trail.