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Remind me: Which political party is "decadent" and "sick"?

Mark Sanford's zipper problem is yet more proof that Republican conservatives are just liberals in right-wing drag

By Joe Conason

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Whenever the latest Republican politician is caught with his zipper undone, a predictable moment of introspection on the right inevitably ensues. Pundits, bloggers and perplexed citizens ruminate over the lessons they have learned, again and again, about human frailty, false piety and the temptations of flesh and power. They express concern for the damaged family and lament the fall of yet another promising young hypocrite. They resolve to restore the purity of their movement and always remember to remind us that this is all Bill Clinton's fault. What they never do is face up to an increasingly embarrassing fact about themselves and their leaders.

They're really just liberals in right-wing drag.

The proof is in the penance, or lack thereof, inflicted on the likes of Mark Sanford, John Ensign and David Vitter, to cite a few names from the top of a long, long list. For ideologues who value biblical morality and believe in the efficacy of punishment, modern conservatives are as tolerant of their famous sinners as the jaded libertines of the left. Even after confessing to the most flagrant and colorful fornication, the worst that a conservative must anticipate is a stern scolding, followed by warm assurances of God's forgiveness and a swift return to business as usual.

Mark Sanford [may have forfeited his presidential ambitions](#), but the South Carolina governor seems determined to hold onto his office despite his escapade in Argentina -- and if he is thrown out, the reason will be his offenses against good government rather than his betrayal of his marriage vows. John Ensign isn't expected to step down from the Senate, despite the mounting evidence that he concealed his extramarital affair through the misuse of public funds; even now [he remains more popular](#) than fellow Nevadan Harry Reid, the Democratic majority leader. And then there is David Vitter, the Louisiana bon vivant whose evangelical constituents seem inclined to reward him for consorting with prostitutes by giving him another Senate term. The safest prediction is that these pharisaical pols will continue their careers without suffering the retribution they have earned.

According to the Old Testament -- a text regularly cited by these worthies as the highest authority in denouncing reproductive freedom and gay rights -- [the proper penalty for adultery is death by stoning](#). Leviticus is quite clear on this point ([as any truly strict originalist could hardly deny](#)). Fortunately for all of us, biblical law doesn't rule this country, despite the zealots on the religious right who disdain separation of church and state. Very few Americans believe that we should impose state sanctions, let alone the death penalty, on private peccadilloes. But civic tolerance doesn't excuse the limp, smiling attitude of the Republican right toward the infidelity of its leaders.

That flabby acceptance contrasts sharply with right-wing screaming about the iniquity of the

opposition. As understood by conservative commentators, this is not mere rhetoric but a theory of civilization's rise and fall. [Ann Coulter believes that liberals actively "seek to destroy morality"](#) by "refusing to condemn what societies have condemned for thousands of years," including "promiscuity" and "divorce." [Dinesh D'Souza once recommended sarcastically that the Democrats adopt the mantle of "moral degeneracy"](#) by forthrightly advocating "divorce, illegitimacy, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality and pornography."

The supposed depravity of the Democratic Party has long been a favorite theme of conservatives, dating back to the rise of Newt Gingrich, who distributed an official campaign lexicon to Republican congressional candidates that featured such defining insults as "decadent," "permissive," "sick," "selfish" and, of course, "liberal." Back then the Georgia Republican was on his second marriage and carrying on a clandestine affair with the young Capitol Hill clerk who would eventually become his third wife (after he converted to Catholicism and had his union with wife No. 2 annulled). In 2007, [he admitted on James Dobson's radio show](#) that he was cheating on wife No. 2 with future wife No. 3 while he was publicly chastising President Clinton for consorting with Monica Lewinsky. Gingrich has remained a consistent favorite among his pious comrades.

Today, in fact, [Gingrich is fully rehabilitated](#) as a party spokesman, still nurturing presidential ambitions. So why should any other Republican fear the wrath of the righteous? The disappointment in Sanford and Ensign among the devout must be particularly keen, since they have so rigorously aligned themselves with the most fervent elements of the religious right.

For more than a decade, [Ensign lent his name to Promise Keepers, the all-male Christian prayer movement](#) run by a former Colorado football coach, whose mass rallies highlighted men's integrity, purity and uncompromising domination of family life. Both he and Sanford have worked closely with the Family, a secretive Christian fellowship on Capitol Hill that maintains a brick townhouse where Ensign and other members of Congress have resided. Over the years both men have won the highest marks from the [Family Research Council](#), the [Christian Coalition](#) and the [American Family Association](#) -- and until the other day, Sanford was featured as an invited speaker at the Family Research Council's upcoming Values Voters Summit 2009. (As [Pam Spaulding and Think Progress noted](#), however, the FRC removed his photo from the summit Web site immediately following his confessional press conference.)

Certainly [there is considerable pressure for Sanford to resign in South Carolina](#), and perhaps he will surrender. But he might well ask whether that is fair when Ensign is hanging on and Vitter appears to be in the clear. For a while, Family Research Council president Tony Perkins had threatened to challenge Vitter in the Republican primary next year, but [last March he announced that he won't run after all](#) -- and instead endorsed Vitter for reelection. Amazingly, [Perkins then hosted a radio broadcast with Vitter](#) as his guest, where they tut-tutted over the alleged ethical problems of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. Nobody had the poor taste to mention the infamous black books in which [Vitter's friendly madams](#) in Washington and New Orleans [had inscribed his name and phone number](#).

By the way, while Vitter, Ensign, Gingrich and perhaps Sanford have been able to retain their positions and political viability, the same cannot be said for the most recent offenders on the progressive side. Neither Eliot Spitzer nor John Edwards, each among the most promising figures in the Democratic Party, will ever be a candidate for public office again, although their misbehavior was no worse than what their Republican counterparts did.

If they looked honestly at themselves, religious conservatives might notice that they are morally lax, socially permissive and casually tolerant of moral deviancy -- just like the liberals they despise. So as

they wonder aloud why the same salacious nightmare haunts them, year after year, the best advice they can get happens to come from that old sinner Clinton. As he so often says, the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing while expecting a different outcome.

-- By Joe Conason

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