

Girls Will Be Girls. Or Not.

Why aren't more powerful public women caught up in sex scandals?

By JULIA BAIRD

CATHERINE THE GREAT WAS A WOMAN WITH AN EXTRAVAGANT, exacting sexual appetite. During the 34 years of her reign, she had a host of young, well-trained lovers—many of them soldiers—who were paid handsomely for sating her, and were often rewarded with plum positions on her court, or gifts of property or serfs. Her libido was so legendary that when she died of a stroke in 1796, rumor spread quickly that she had been crushed under the weight of a stallion she was attempting to have sex with. It's a myth that has endured, and serves as a reminder of our fascination with powerful, sexual women: will they stop at *nothing*?

The question is, as another round of public sex scandals unfolds, where are these women today? The confessions of Eliot Spitzer and David Paterson—the man who, on the same day he replaced Spitzer, admitted to past affairs—pale when compared with tales of the Russian empress. Yet while there has been a spate of men caught with their pants around their ankles in recent years, political scientists scratch their heads when asked to come up with a female equivalent for the men (Spitzer, former New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey) the New York tabs have dubbed “Luv Guvs.”

There have been only a handful of minor scandals involving women in public office in America, and most of them have been due to love affairs, not casual—or commercial—liaisons. In 1989, when Sue Myrick was running for re-election as mayor of Charlotte, N.C., she confessed to having had a relationship with her husband while he was still married to another woman in 1973. (She went on to win the election.) In 1998, shortly after U.S. Rep. Helen Chenoweth, a Republican from Idaho, began airing anti-Clinton advertisements insisting “personal conduct does count,” she admitted to having had a six-year affair in the 1980s with a married man who later worked on her congressional staff. In 2004, state Rep. Katherine Bryson of Utah was caught with a lover on a surveillance camera; her then husband set it up to catch a burglar, he said. She called it an abuse of power because county employees had been used to install the equipment, but a police investigation cleared her husband of wrongdoing. (Internationally, one notable standout was an escapade in Taiwan, where tapes of politician Chu Mei-feng having sex with a married lover were leaked in 2001. She apologized and resigned.)

Hardly the stuff of tabloid dreams. It's certainly not as exciting

as stolen hours at the Days Inn (Paterson), cigars in the Oval Office (Bill Clinton), a stripper nicknamed the “Argentine Firecracker” (Arkansas Rep. Wilbur Mills) or trysts with \$4,000-an-hour prostitutes (Spitzer).

Some women say the lack of scandal is another reason more women should be elected. Former White House press secretary Dee Dee Myers, author of “Why Women Should Rule the World,” says: “I'm confident predicting there would be fewer sex scandals if women were in power ... I don't think Hillary Clinton is going to be hitting on the intern.” But as morally superior as women are supposed to be, there is evidence to show they are led by their libidos, too: Prince Charles may have had Camilla, but Diana had plenty of lovers as well. Tom W. Smith, of the National Opinion Research Center at University of Chicago, says that when it comes to infidelity, “there is some sign that women may be closing the gap with men.”

Why, then, are so few women in politics embroiled in tabloid tales? The obvious answer is numbers: while there are 86 women in Congress, and one in four state politicians is female, few are prominent enough to attract savage media scrutiny. Some insist it can be explained by basic biology. Feminist author Robin Morgan says men “stow their brains in their crotches. Women do seem to approach work differently. And women tend to regard sex differently. They like to at least *like* the person.”

But surely part of the reason is that, historically, women who stray have suffered more than men who do. Men are often forgiven more easily—their dalliances are considered a lapse, an uncontrollable urge. Gunnbjorg Lavoll, a psychiatrist at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, says the assumption that men will be “naughty” is built into phrases like “boys will be boys.” “Do you hear ‘girls will be girls?’” asks Lavoll. “No. The social consequences for women are much harsher. What kind of woman would abandon her children?”

When Edwina Currie, a British politician, disclosed a four-year affair with her Conservative colleague John Major in her 2002 “Diaries,” she was roundly condemned. (Major said his wife knew and had forgiven him.) A newspaper poll showed 88 percent disapproved of her decision to reveal the affair—and while only a third thought worse of him, half thought worse of her. So perhaps women are just being smart by avoiding, or concealing, illicit or abundant sexual activity. A harem of young soldiers might not be a huge advantage when it comes to Election Day.

With KAREN SPRINGEN, CATHARINE SKIPP and JAC CHEBATORIS



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