THE SANFORD SCANDAL: ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST...

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By ROBERT WATSON, Ph. D.
Contributing Writer

The tragic death of Michael Jackson will likely dominate the news in the weeks to come, which, in an ironic way, will benefit South Carolina governor, Mark Sanford. Sanford’s steamy love affair with his Argentine mistress will be pushed off the front page and, accordingly, from the public’s memory. So it was back in 2001 with the tabloid affair between Congressman Gary Condit and the young aide, Chandra Levy (who was murdered); that is, until the horrific events of 9/11 relegated it to a non-story.

The problems with a fickle news cycle capable of only concentrating on one big story at a time are, of course, many, but include the fact that we often miss the opportunity to have a real discussion about these issues. In the case of Sanford, he is but the latest prominent Republican to suffer an ethical crash and burn. Much like Nevada senator, John Ensign, who just had his own sexual scandal, Sanford was a rising star in the GOP and likely presidential frontrunner party. Indeed, Sanford was on McCain’s short list for VP in 2008, until last week he chaired the Republican National Governor’s Association, and he was a former congressman.

While in Congress, Sanford voted for the impeachment of President Clinton in the Monica Lewinsky scandal and, along with GOP leaders Newt Gingrich, Bob Barr, Henry Hyde, Bob Livingston, and David Vitter, was a vocal critical of marital infidelity. Yet, every one of those Republicans claiming moral outrage for Clinton’s oral indiscretions had their own mistresses.
I do not care what happens in the bedroom and between married couples, as long as it does not harm society. Members of both parties misbehave. But, when one party holds itself up as the moral police, audaciously claims to be the party of God and family values, and aggressively attacks anyone who either opposes them or strays from the path, then commits the very same sins, it constitutes the worst kind of moral hypocrisy. The missing story is that we’ve had enough of closeted Republicans bashing gays and serial philanderers hiding behind scripture while attacking everyone and everything. The GOP has become the do-as-I-say, not-as-I-do party. It is not so much sad as it is offensive.

Robert Watson, Ph.D.

SOTOMAYOR: TO OPPOSE OR NOT TO OPPOSE…

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So the question should be whether or not Republicans will oppose Judge Sonia Sotomayor, Obama’s nominee for the Supreme Court. Of course, in a democracy it is essential that there be healthy opposition. Likewise, all nominees for such an important (and lifelong) appointment must be vetted. However, in politics as in life one must pick and chose one’s battles.

Consider the facts. Republicans have only 40 seats in the Senate – not enough to derail the nomination. At the same time, Obama stood to benefit by nominating a woman or a Hispanic. He got both. These are two of the demographic groups Republicans lost by big numbers in the fall 2008 election and many women and Hispanics are still smarting over the ugly tone of debate set by Republicans on women’s issues and immigration. If the Republicans are ham-fisted in their opposition of a Latina nominee they could further alienate these two vital voting blocs.

And then there is Sotomayor’s compelling personal story. After losing her father when she was only nine, the young woman battled poverty and diabetes while her mother worked menial jobs and long hours to support the family. Yet, in a quintessentially American story, Sotomayor earned a scholarship to Princeton where she graduated with honors and then completed her law degree at Yale. This is a story Americans relate to and celebrate. So, when Republicans criticize Sotomayor for the empathy she brings to the court, they are the ones looking out of touch.
It would thus seem that Republicans would be wise to let this nomination go through with only appropriate and necessary opposition, while concentrating on the larger issues of building their shrinking base of support and trying to address the problems facing the country. But of course they won’t. They not only will oppose Sotomayor but will do so in an obstructionist and negative tone. In fact, this has already begun… even before the nominee was announced!

The question thus becomes not whether the GOP will oppose Sotomayor but how they will do so. Initially, they began to label her as an unqualified judicial activist. But, she is neither. Absent any solid footing we can expect to see a smear campaign that will bloody the waters for everyone. It is up to the people to reject the fear-mongering and misinformation that has characterized politics in recent years.

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By ROBERT WATSON, Ph. D.
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Presidents have tried to make progress toward the puzzle that is Middle East peace, and have come up short. Although the lessons of history are discouraging, Obama’s speech to the Muslim world signaled a new approach to the issue.

Many presidents in modern times did not visit the Middle East (Kennedy, Johnson, Ford, and Reagan). Even Truman, who played such a pivotal role in Israel’s creation, did not visit the region. Eisenhower, Nixon, and Carter – presidents who pursued ambitious policies in the region – visited only once or twice. Only Bill Clinton and George W. Bush made several trips to the Middle East, but half of Bush’s were simply “photo ops” with U.S. troops.

What sets Obama apart is that he visited the region so early in his presidency and has already been to Turkey, met King Abdulla of Saudi Arabia, and hosted both Netanyahu and Abbas at the White House. The purpose of Obama’s speech was part of the larger strategy to repair America’s image in the region and open a dialogue.

Most apparent, however, was the tone of Obama’s speech. While he remained steadfast in his support for Israel and reiterated his top priority as keeping America safe, Obama changed the tone from his predecessor. Obama wisely chose not to use the word terrorist in his talks, rightly recognizing that the lion’s share of Muslims and Arabs are not terrorists and are fed up with
Bush painting the entirety of the Muslim world as such. Where Bush focused solely on terrorism with juvenile analogies such as “you are with us or against us,” Obama stressed the need for common ground and a shared destiny.

The speech stressed his belief in democracy but not in any nation’s right to impose it at gunpoint; in the need for religious freedom; in the need to respect the rights of women; in moving beyond harmful portrayals of one another; and in our responsibility to assist Iraq and Afghanistan and work with the people of the region.

No, there will be no immediate peace treaties and, with hotspots in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Palestine, much heavy lifting remains throughout the region. However, the difficult process of undoing the mess made by Bush’s “wanted dead or alive” style has begun. Obama’s speech signaled to the world that we are “under new management.”

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HEALTH CARE: THE COST OF NOT ACTING...

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By ROBERT WATSON, Ph. D.
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That we are desperately in need of a complete overhaul of our health care system would seem to be a no-brainer. We have the highest health care costs in the world (no other country is even close), yet we rate toward the bottom of industrialized nations in almost every quality of life and health care indicator. Over 50 million Americans lack health insurance and millions more lack adequate or affordable health insurance, and our businesses – large and small – are having trouble staying afloat in trying economic times, in part, due to the costs of providing employees and retirees with health care. For instance, the U.S. auto industry is about to go the way of so many other industries in America, in part because there is more health care in each Chevy Malibu than there is steel or anything else. Our German and Japanese rivals benefit from government-provided health care.

However, Republicans are framing health care reform as socialism. This worked to defeat similar efforts by Truman, Nixon, and Clinton, and fear-mongering seems to be the GOP’s playbook of
late. And it shows signs of working. So, Obama has dusted off his formidable grassroots network that helped elect him and is employing his personal likeability and oratorical gifts to reclaim the tone of the debate.

As someone who struggled without health care while getting my graduate degrees; as a son who lost his mother to a long-term battle with a disease that bankrupted her; as a father of two, I find it hard to sympathize with insurance companies. As a historian, I would look to Teddy Roosevelt, who used to say that the best decision was the decision he made, the second best decision was the one he didn’t make, but the worst decision is not to make a decision. Republicans want to do nothing while the ship of state sinks.

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