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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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Why Anthony Weiner should not resign

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Editor's Note: Anne-Marie Slaughter is the Bert G. Kerstetter '66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University. Follow her on Twitter at @slaughteram.

By Anne-Marie Slaughter – Special to CNN

Whenever I give a speech, someone in the audience is likely to come up afterwards and suggest that I run for office. I am flattered, but my response is always the same. If I lived in a country like Britain, where election campaigns are time-limited and publicly funded, I would certainly consider running for office, at least after my children have left home.

But in the American political system I could not imagine putting myself or my family through the endless fundraising, with its attendant focus on rich lobbyists and investors rather than actual constituents, and the relentless media and partisan scrutiny. The price exacted is simply too high, particularly when it is possible to serve in appointed office instead.

I am hardly alone in that calculation. Indeed, in my experience the willingness to run for office is increasingly rare among many of the people whom I would most like to see in Congress or state and local government.

They have to be willing to give themselves up to the public – media included – 24 hours a day, while typically earning only a small fraction of what they could earn in the private sector and accepting the continual frustration of operating in a political and bureaucratic system in which it is harder and harder to get anything good done.

They also have to be competitive, driven, extroverted and highly risk-acceptant. Those are often the characteristics of our most successful economic innovators and entrepreneurs; it is not surprising that many of our most effective political figures – typically the rising stars of their parties — have the same traits. These traits, and indeed success itself, also correlates with high testosterone.

Read: Anne-Marie Slaughter's "Rebellion of an Innovation Mom".

That is the backdrop against which I conclude that Anthony Weiner should not resign, but should instead leave the decision regarding whether he can continue to serve in Congress to his constituents.

I in no way condone his behavior with women; it strikes me exactly as a pathology for which he needs treatment.

He has betrayed his wife and family; it is up to them to decide whether to forgive. And he has indeed compromised the public trust invested in him, which is why his constituents should and will have a chance to decide whether his lies mean they no longer trust him enough to have him represent them.

But consider Bill Clinton and Eliot Spitzer, to take only two of the many, many examples of powerful public men caught in sex scandals (Arnold Schwarzenegger, John Ensign, Mark Sanford, Rudy Giuliani, Gary Hart) or not caught, but revealed later (Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Nelson Rockefeller).

I for one am deeply glad that Bill Clinton did not resign; he was one of the best presidents of my lifetime and left the country in far better shape than he found it. His wife and daughter chose to forgive him and to preserve their family, which is their business, not ours. He also breached the public trust by lying, but in my view not to an extent that it affected his ability to govern successfully.

Republicans evidently make the same calculation about their candidates. It is striking that Newt Gingrich and David Vitter, to take only two recent Republican examples, were not abandoned by their supporters on the basis of sex scandals of equal severity and hypocrisy to those of comparable Democrats.

Eliot Spitzer had to resign or face legal action. The circumstances of his case were complicated by the hypocrisy of his targeting prostitution while serving as New York's attorney general, but on the straight facts he did nothing that countless men have not done, including many in public life who have simply not been caught or have chosen to ride out the scandal.

We rightly condemn that behavior, but again, Spitzer's wife and three daughters chose to forgive him and to maintain a close family life. (Full disclosure: I have been a friend of Spitzer's since college and known his wife since law school.) On the other hand, Spitzer fought very hard for a wide range of public reforms in which he passionately believed. The people of New York never got a chance to decide which facet of his behavior mattered more to them.

So back to Anthony Weiner. (Full disclosure: I worked daily with Weiner's wife, Huma Abedin, from 2009-2011, but only met Weiner once for five minutes.) His is a classic case of hubris – daring the gods and getting caught. May the resulting humiliation and comeuppance make him a better person, a better husband, and a better public servant. How he weathers this crisis and what he is willing to learn and admit from it will tell us a great deal about what he is really made of. But some of the very characteristics that led to this scandal are, properly channeled, the sources of the kind of bold, decisive, even daring action that this country needs from its leaders.

Absent criminal behavior, which is another category entirely, the issue is whether sexual misconduct undermines a politician's ability to represent his or her constituents and contribute to the common good. It is certainly legitimate for Weiner's Congressional colleagues to voice their views that the scandal surrounding his actions is harming the party's agenda as a whole. But it is equally legitimate for him to insist that in the end his fate should be decided by the good citizens of his district. A government of, by, and for the people should let the people decide.

The views expressed in this article are solely those of Anne-Marie Slaughter.

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