

TheNational

'Pro-family' governor admits to affair

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WASHINGTON // The bizarre saga of the missing South Carolina governor, Mark Sanford, came to a dramatic end on Wednesday when he admitted he had been on a secret trip to Buenos Aires for a rendezvous with his mistress.

But the emergence of a fresh scandal surrounding a Republican politician – on the heels of a sex scandal involving John Ensign, a prominent Republican senator from Nevada – is likely to raise new questions for the party, which is searching for new leaders after a resounding defeat in the November general election.

Mr Sanford, 49, had entered the national spotlight after a high-profile battle with the White House over stimulus funds and he was considered a possible candidate for the 2012 presidential race.

The negative headlines began last week when fellow state legislators questioned his whereabouts. To their surprise, Mr Sanford's staff said they had no information; they were not in contact with him. Nor could the governor's wife, Jenny, explain why her husband suddenly disappeared on Father's Day weekend.

On Monday a spokesman announced the governor was on holiday, hiking on the Appalachian Trail. But that story contradicted a sighting of Mr Sanford at the Atlanta airport. Finally, on Wednesday, the governor reappeared at a hastily convened press conference in the rotunda of the South Carolina Statehouse where, sometimes fighting back tears, he admitted his infidelity.

"I've let down a lot of people, that's the bottom line," said Mr Sanford, who also told reporters he had spent "the last five days of my life crying in Argentina".

"What I did was wrong. Period," he said.

The admission follows a similar unburdening this month by Mr Ensign, 51, another presidential hopeful caught up in a twisted tale of impropriety. Mr Ensign's mistress was a former campaign staffer who is married to a former aide, Doug Hampton. A spokesman for Mr Ensign later said Mr Hampton attempted to extort money from the Nevada senator by threatening to make the story public.

The consecutive, prominent scandals involving two rising Republican stars brings more hardship to a party that, according to some polls, is becoming increasingly unpopular with American voters. Just 25 per cent of those who responded to a recent NBC News / Wall Street Journal poll said they had a "favourable" view of the Republican Party, a record low for that poll.

Meanwhile other potential candidates to lead the party have also fallen on hard times, including Sarah Palin, the Alaska governor, whose vigorous defence of her family – her unwed teenage daughter Bristol recently had a baby – has become something of a national political sideshow. Bobby Jindal, the governor of Louisiana, was sharply criticised for his televised response to a speech by Barack Obama earlier this year. And Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker who initially emerged as a strong critic of the current administration, was denounced for calling Mr Obama's Supreme Court pick, Sonia Sotomayor, a "racist".

The Sanford scandal "damages them further at a time when they need to be on the road to recovery", said Larry Sabato, the director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics. "They're already suffering for a host of other reasons, they don't need this added on top of it."

Mr Sabato referred to a series of Republican misdeeds in recent years including those of Larry Craig, the former Idaho senator who was arrested in 2007 for "lewd conduct" in an airport bathroom, David Vitter, the Louisiana senator whose name appeared on the client list of a Washington DC prostitution ring in 2007, and Mark Foley, a congressman from Florida who abruptly resigned in 2006 over sexually explicit messages he sent to a teenage House page.

"Most people connect the dots and right now the dots spell GOP," Mr Sabato said.



The South Carolina Gov Mark Sanford makes an emotional confession about his extramarital affair at the statehouse.
Davis Turner / Getty Images / AFP

But infidelity is not a Republican phenomenon. John Edwards, a Democratic candidate for president in 2004 and 2008, shocked his supporters when he admitted last year to cheating on his cancer-struck wife. Rumours persist about whether Mr Edwards fathered a child with his mistress, Rielle Hunter. Elliot Spitzer, the former New York governor, was caught last year arranging a meeting with a high-priced call girl in a Washington DC hotel. And of course there will always be the well-documented sexual exploits of Bill Clinton, the former president.

But sex scandals tend to hit Republicans harder, analysts say, since Republicans tend to be more socially conservative and often stress the importance of family values. Mr Sanford, for example, a devout Christian who belonged to a Bible study group, was favoured by “pro-family” Christian groups for his promotion of traditional family values. He and Mr Ensign were also critical of Mr Clinton’s adultery and both men pushed for Mr Clinton to resign the presidency.

“Republicans get in trouble because they so often appear to preach to other people about how they should live their private lives,” Mr Sabato said. “The hypocrisy becomes the issue as much as the actual sin.”

The scandals could actually help some potential Republican presidential candidates including Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, and Tim Pawlenty, the governor of Minnesota. Both men, at least publicly, seem to have secure family lives. But it could hurt other potential candidates such as Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker who has been involved in affairs and married three times.

John Weingart, an associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, said the recent scandals make it “unlikely” that either Mr Sanford or Mr Ensign will continue to pursue the presidency.

As an example of how devastating such a scandal can be to a political career, he pointed to the 1988 presidential bid of Gary Hart, a Colorado senator who was considered a front-runner for the 1988 Democratic nomination. Mr Hart dropped out of the race shortly after the press revealed his involvement with a 29-year-old model.

“You would think anybody who aspires to national office would have learned that the price for aspiring to national office is being faithful to your spouse,” Mr Weingart said. “But they haven’t.”

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