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A New Twist to Wives' Playbook for Sex Scandals

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

It has been almost two decades since Hillary Rodham Clinton declared that she was not “some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette.” It was a striking moment: she was saying that she was not reflexively standing by her man, as previous generations had, but she was standing by him nevertheless.

Her proactive loyalty in 1992 was credited with rescuing Gov. Bill Clinton's presidential campaign after he admitted “causing pain” in his marriage.

Nevertheless, for years afterward, a parade of political wives stood dutifully by their errant husbands when they acknowledged their misdeeds. They hardly uttered a peep, understanding that they were props in a drama scripted by the exigencies of politics. Not to be there would have been unthinkable; to have to speak would have been unbearable.

But in the past two years, that script has been tossed aside. From Jenny Sanford in 2009 to Maria Shriver last month, wronged political wives have been rebelling against being typecast as “the good wife.” Now, Huma Abedin, the wife of [Anthony D. Weiner](#), a New York Democrat who [resigned from Congress on Thursday](#) in disgrace over lewd online antics, has shredded the script entirely.

Not only did Ms. Abedin not show up at any of his news conferences, including Thursday's in New York, when she was nearby, but she also has issued no statements. Ms. Abedin, 35, who has been married to Mr. Weiner, 46, for less than a year and is pregnant, has remained mute to the media. In fact, two people close to her said, Mr. Weiner never even asked her to appear with him when he resigned.

“It was discussed but not debated because it was so clear that she wouldn't go out there,” one said; both insisted on anonymity to preserve their relationships with her.

“She's worrying about the bigger picture, her own family, her own life, the baby, how to get back to living a normal life,” this person said, adding that Ms. Abedin “has no plans to leave him at this point, but that could change.” The couple is spending the weekend together in the Hamptons.

Ms. Abedin represents a new generation of political wife: strong professional women less dependent on their husbands as the sole breadwinners and more likely to say, “This is your mess, you clean it up.”

“The rule book has been thrown out,” said Ruth Mandel, director of the [Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers](#) University. “These other women started to look less like supportive spouses and more like victims. So people began to ask, ‘Why does she have to do that?’ ”

One reason has been children. Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster, said some women had stood by their men to try to protect their children.

Another big reason has been politics. Polling shows that a wife's reaction is a strong cue to voters, Ms. Lake said, particularly to blue-collar women and women over 50. “If the wife is there, they are more accepting,” she said. “It matters to them if the wife says they are pulling together, but if she looks injured, they will turn against you.”

Mr. Weiner's political career, for the moment, is on ice. So Ms. Abedin did not face the same political imperative that Mrs. Clinton and others have faced, to serve as character witnesses for their candidate-husbands.

Moreover, Ms. Abedin deeply guards her privacy, even as she is married to one high-profile public figure and has worked for another — Mrs. Clinton, now the secretary of state — for 15 years. She has had an up-close look at Mrs. Clinton's own evolution. In 1998, Mrs. Clinton stood by President Clinton when he denied having sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern; seven months later, when he admitted on television that he had had an inappropriate relationship with Ms. Lewinsky, Mrs. Clinton left him on his own.

By now, expectations for a betrayed wife have been flipped upside down. The question today is not why Ms. Abedin was not at Mr. Weiner's news conference, but why she would be there.

“It's very gladdening to us — and I think most people — to see Huma not being dragged visually through this,” said Robert King, the co-creator and executive producer of the CBS drama “The Good Wife.” He and his wife, Michelle, developed the show after being riveted by the scene in 2008 of Silda Wall Spitzer, a corporate lawyer, standing glumly behind her husband, Eliot Spitzer, a Democrat, when he resigned as governor of New York after being caught in a prostitution scandal.

At that point, Mr. King said, the serial images of these wives being exposed to the public in such vulnerable moments began to seem like a cliché. Everyone is now aware of the political calculations involved, he said, and he would like to think the show has helped bring such public humiliations “to the end of the line.”

Ms. Wall Spitzer's attending that news conference also inspired Jennifer Weiner, the author of “Fly Away Home,” a novel about a political wife who stands by her husband for his mea culpa. “I couldn't figure out what she was doing up there,” said Ms. Weiner, who is no relation to Anthony Weiner.

She decided that some women worried that if they did not appear with their husbands, political handlers would try to put their children onstage. “It's a hard posture to own in 2011,” she said. “It's hard to read it as anything other than some kind of endorsement or forgiveness.”

In 2009, Jenny Sanford, then married to Gov. Mark Sanford, Republican of South Carolina, became a hero to many by being one of the first high-profile political wives to forgo the obligatory joint appearance.

“Jenny Sanford really liberated a lot of these political wives,” said Ms. Lake, the pollster. “They thought, ‘I don't have to put up with this anymore.’ ”

Ms. Sanford, whose husband had cheated on her, has said that even if he had asked her to be there, she would not have. His actions, she told Barbara Walters in an interview, “don't in any way take away my own self-esteem; they reflect poorly on him.”

A joint appearance does not necessarily say anything about the long term. Dina McGreevey, the wife of former Gov. James E. McGreevey, Democrat of New Jersey, stood

by him in 2004 when he [announced that he is gay](#) and had had an affair with a man; they later went through a bitter divorce.

And standing by does not necessarily mean standing by passively. After Senator David Vitter, Republican of Louisiana, [said in 2007 that he had sinned](#) — he had been implicated in a prostitution ring — his wife, Wendy, went further than most political wives and took the microphone herself. She said she had forgiven her husband and was proud to be married to him. He was re-elected last year.