

Spousal arousal like never before

By **Anne Summers**

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With marital infidelity yesterday's news, the private lives of candidates' partners have become grist for the media mill in this US presidential campaign, writes **Anne Summers**.

It's nothing new for candidates for high political office in the United States to have to come clean about something - their taxes, their health, their financial probity, their drug use, any and every aspect of their private lives.

But the politics of disclosure is breaking new ground in the US presidential election because it is not just the candidates who are laying themselves on the media altar. Next year's election is already shaping up as the year of the spouse. Partners, too, it turns out, have plenty to unburden - and a far bigger role to play than in any previous election.

Marital fidelity was once the biggest personal issue for candidates. But with two of the three declared Republicans married more than once and having admitted to affairs, that seems to have lost its sting.

That is, until Rudy Giuliani's third wife, Judith Nathan Giuliani, revealed she had had another husband whom, until a week ago, she had forgotten to include in her biography or mention in interviews for profiles with such esteemed publications as The New York Times.

Nor, it seems, had she told Rudy. His website stated she had been married only once before their fairytale wedding at Gracie Mansion, the New York mayoral residence, in May 2003.

It may be easy to overlook a first husband - especially when you spent only five years married to him. Judith Giuliani has now come clean on hubby No. 1, and in the process turned herself into a "slick Stepford wife", according to the New York Post. But it has made an already messy story a whole lot harder for the aides to spin.

Divorced candidates are nothing new and sometimes, like Ronald Reagan, they become president. Divorced wives of candidates, or presidents, are also no longer a novelty. Betty Ford had been married to someone else before she met Gerald and that was no barrier to him taking over at the White House after Richard Nixon departed in disgrace.

But a candidate and wife with five marriages between them is a whole lot harder to sell, especially when they have to factor in Rudy's shockingly shabby treatment of his second wife, the popular New York newscaster Donna Hanover, who learnt from television she was being dumped by her husband.

Then there are the health disclosures. The day Judith Giuliani admitted to a previously hidden husband, the country was informed that the cancer of Elizabeth Edwards, wife of a Democratic contender, John Edwards, had returned - and metastasised. Her condition "is no longer curable but is treatable". There was no question of him withdrawing from the campaign, the couple gamely said.

A week earlier, the Republican contender Mitt Romney and his wife, Ann, appeared on Larry King Live to talk about her multiple sclerosis. She has had the condition since 1998 but had not previously felt it necessary to submit herself to such media scrutiny.

Why now? Perhaps they felt it necessary to head off charges of callousness, given her husband's opposition to stem cell research, which has the potential to lead to a multiple sclerosis cure.

It is just as likely that the spouses' private lives matter much more because they are so involved in the campaigns and at a much earlier stage than in the past. So can we now expect Senator John McCain and his wife, Cindy, to go public about how she's faring since the stroke she suffered a few years back?

Previously it was only as the primaries loomed that spouses got involved in campaigns. This time, the campaigns were in full swing by the end of February and it is still a long time until the first primaries in January.

Previously, it was also not until after the conventions, when the candidates for each party were selected and the presidential contest began in earnest, that the potential first ladies had to endure the full glare of the media spotlight.

Then there were all kinds of well-publicised comments and admissions.

In 2004 Senator John Kerry's wife, the billionaire Teresa Heinz Kerry, not unknown for speaking her mind, got into political trouble by bragging to black audiences that she was African-American. (She was born in Mozambique but of European descent.)

In the 1988 campaign Kitty Dukakis confessed to an addiction to diet pills, while in 1992 Hillary Clinton antagonised stay-at-home wives with her remarks about Tammy Wynette and baking cookies.

Today the communications challenges are more complex and far more demanding. Long gone are the days when a couple of television and radio interviews would suffice for the daily media feed. This time round there is not only a lot of traditional media space to fill (Barak Obama supposedly has up to 500 journalists travelling with him), but candidates have to constantly update their websites, as well as supply pod casts, blogs and endless videos for YouTube, photos for Flickr and groovy bios for MySpace.

Their political rivals (usually from their side of politics at this stage in the process) are just as busy challenging or even trashing every aspect of the candidate's past and present, and serving up their multimedia menu.

It is not surprising that in this roiling and voracious multimedia vortex, candidates' spouses are playing a bigger role and at an earlier stage in the process. Nor is it surprising that they are open to far greater scrutiny earlier in the process.

In a couple of cases the spouse is pivotal to the campaign strategy.

Elizabeth Edwards provides significant political advice for her husband, which must be one factor in their decision to continue campaigning even while she has stage four cancer.

This decision has elicited a lot of cynicism. "John Edwards announces that his slowly dying campaign will not be rushed by his slowly dying wife," said the political gossip blog Wonkette this week. But it has increased his popularity and helped his fund-raising - at least for now.

Bill Clinton is a key adviser to his wife's campaign and he, too, has had health problems. Hillary mentions in many of her speeches that he has had two heart operations.

The candidates have had their share of health problems. Giuliani has made no secret of his prostate cancer, nor of the fact that it left him impotent. McCain has had so many tussles with skin cancer, including melanoma, that he says he has "more scars than Frankenstein". Both have also been married more than once and have admitted to affairs.

Which leaves only Romney among the Republicans with a clean slate on both counts. He is not slow to use "sweetheart" when talking about his wife so as to differentiate himself from his competitors.

Romney's great-great-grandfather had five wives - in the good old days before 1890, when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints abolished polygamy. But as Romney tells it, of the "four leading Republican candidates for president, only one has one wife - the Mormon". (Although, to show he's a cool sort of guy, Romney still likes to roll out the joke: "I believe marriage should be between a man and a woman, and a woman and a woman ...")

Of all the spouses, you would think Bill Clinton could pose the biggest political problem. When it comes to spousal transgressions, none of the candidates' partners can match the former president's track record. But it is all out there, with the public having had years to digest the revelations and get over them. Clinton's popularity when he left office was in the stratosphere and remains so. He is a huge asset to Hillary's campaign.

His wife and her team do not like Bill's "womanising" to be mentioned but short of a new scandal emerging, it is unlikely his past peccadilloes can do her any harm. Hillary has survived the sexual humiliation of the Monica Lewinsky affair - when many, especially women, argued that if she had any pride she would dump him.

What better revenge than to be elected, not once but twice, as a senator from New York (a state in which you had never lived); become the first woman to run for the

presidency; and make your husband work his backside off to ensure you will be in charge of the world? Sure beats staying home and baking cookies.

These days Bill is engaged in full-time atonement. Last month he sent an email to Hillary supporters urging them to donate a million dollars to her campaign. He has followed up with regular mails telling everyone how fabulous she is.

"All across the country, Hillary is campaigning with the signature wisdom, grace, and humour that make her a great candidate," he wrote on February 22. "I know that if we all work hard enough, those same traits will make her an even better president."

Corny stuff but still pretty powerful when coming from someone with the political resume and personal charisma of Bill Clinton. And with Bill, it's not just words. He's been doing the rounds of Manhattan houses, bars and even gyms raising money in a way that has never been done before.

On March 22 he sat in on an exercise class at an Upper West Side gym and raised \$US70,000 (\$87,000) in half an hour without breaking into a sweat. He talked about health and fitness while 40-odd lycra-clad devotees, exercising to the sounds of Joni Mitchell's Chelsea Morning (the inspiration for his daughter's name), paid \$US2300 each for the privilege.

Bill and Hill raised \$US10 million last week - a record in US political fund-raising, and way beyond the weekly million-dollar target he had set last month. With the kind of war chest Hillary is accumulating, she will soon be unbeatable.

Bill has other uses, too. A few weeks ago, when Hillary got wind of Obama going to Selma, Alabama, to commemorate the historic civil rights march in 1965, she arranged an invitation to speak at a neighbouring church. She has been clearly worried about the leakage of black supporters, traditionally rock solid in favour of her husband, towards Obama.

At the last minute, Bill rushed to join her in Selma, the first time he had appeared by her side since she announced her candidacy. He saved her political skin by taking attention away from Obama, and from Hillary's poor performance.

Her campaign denied he had been there to "out-black" Obama, but the man who is often referred to as the first black president of the US had clearly done her campaign a huge favour.

The 2008 presidential election was always going to be an unusually fascinating one, given the calibre and diversity of the candidates. But when you factor in the spouses, it promises to be twice as interesting. Twice the spice.