



[Return to the Article](#)

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Eliot Spitzer's "Emperor's Club"

By [Robert Tracinski](#)

As the political eulogies for Eliot Spitzer are written, a lot will be said about the alleged contradiction between his "righteous," "crusading" public persona and his tawdry personal life.

For example, in a remarkably insipid column today, Gail Collins of the *New York Times* professes utter amazement at the revelation about Spitzer, as if it came out of nowhere, like space aliens landing in the middle of Central Park. "You never know," sighs this middle-aged naïf.

The *New York Post's* man in Albany, Fredric Dicker, is having none of it. "[I Knew He Was a Fraud & a Hypocrite from the Day He Swaggered into Capitol](#)" blares his headline. Yet even Spitzer's critics still criticize him for "hypocrisy"--which implies that he espoused the right ideals but failed to live up to them.

All of this gets the story wrong. The real lesson here is the *continuity* between Spitzer's professional career and the scandal that ended it. The common theme of his public and personal life is identified, ironically enough, in the preposterously pompous name of the call girl ring Spitzer patronized: the "Emperor's Club VIP." That says it all, doesn't it? Spitzer wanted to puff himself up as an "emperor," a big-shot VIP who is the center of everyone's attention, with everyone else just there to bow to his whims.

The detail that really made this psychology clear--the detail that perfectly fit the psychological profile of a sociopath--was the way Spitzer dragged out his ashen-faced, shell-shocked wife to appear by his side at both of his press conferences this week. Her presence was unnecessary for any rational reason, but she was there because a sociopath views other people as mere pawns to be manipulated to serve his whims--so if he feels he needs Silda to stand by him to show her support, out she comes, and the psychological cost to her doesn't even register on his consciousness.

The tawdry incident that touched off this scandal is, in fact, the least despicable part of the whole affair. At least the call girl was, to all appearances, a willing participant and well paid. Spitzer was even a generous tipper, we've been told.

But Spitzer's professional life, rather than being better than his personal life, was worse. If in his personal life he paid money for attractive young women to create the illusion of his own supreme importance, in his professional life he achieved this illusion by abusing the power of the state, acting as a bully who threatened to "steamroller" over other people's lives and careers.

Spitzer's "crusading" career as New York's attorney general is a catalog of abuses of prosecutorial power. He tried cases in the media instead of the courts by releasing embarrassing documents at press conferences and leaking carefully selected facts to sympathetic reporters. This is slander under the color of law, an attempt to ruin a target's reputation without actually have to prove the allegations against him. Spitzer smeared his victims by digging into their personal lives and spreading rumors about their infidelity (another disgusting irony of this affair). He blackmailed businesses into paying massive fines by threatening to file corporate indictments that would cripple a firm's ability to operate, even if it were eventually acquitted. He threatened respectable businessmen with the prospect of being hauled off in handcuffs in front of their families.

He did everything he could, in short, to bully the rest of the world into a solicitous state of submission--the state of terrorized subjects groveling before a tyrannical emperor.

A man like this is usually considered to have an ego that is too big, but the opposite is actually true. This kind of bullying is proof that Spitzer was so insecure he needed to prop up his faltering ego by forcing others to cringe in fear before him. His hiring of prostitutes is the dead giveaway, because it adds a touch of the pathetic: he needed the attention and adulation of others so badly that he had to pay for it.

What still generates a residue of sympathy for him among commentators on the left is Spitzer's rhetoric about being a moral crusader. But even here, there is no real contradiction. Spitzer's ideological appeals were always to a kind of anti-business populism; it was always about envy and resentment of the wealthy and successful. It is a natural transition from this leftist ideology to the psychological of power-lust. The attitude leftist class warfare encourages and enables is: Who do these Wall Street big shots think they are, acting as they're bigger and more important than me? I'll show the bastards! I'll tear them all down, ruin their businesses, force them out of their cushy jobs, and humiliate them.

Eliot Spitzer is a timeless example of the basic conundrum of government: the fact that anyone who really wants to wield power is, by that very fact, the last person who should be allowed to do so. I call this the Washington Conundrum, named after George Washington--who is arguably the first man in history to demonstrate the solution: the only person who can safely be allowed to wield power is someone who seeks it out of dedication to the cause of liberty.

But take away the love of liberty--and the ideological framework of individual rights that supports it--and we return to the squalid pattern of most of human history: power not only corrupts, but attracts, rewards, and promotes the most corrupt types of human character.

Without the love of liberty and the principles of liberty, we don't get George Washingtons in public office. Instead, we get the Emperor's Club VIPs--self-aggrandizing thugs like Eliot Spitzer.

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