

March 12, 2008

OPINION

Spitzer's Media Enablers

 By **KIMBERLEY A. STRASSEL**
 March 12, 2008; Page A21

The fall of New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer holds many lessons, and the press will surely be examining them in coming months. But don't expect the press corps to delve into the biggest lesson of all -- its own role as his enabler.

Journalists have spent the past two days asking how a man of Mr. Spitzer's stature would allow himself to get involved in a prostitution ring. The answer, in my mind, is clear. The former New York attorney general never believed normal rules applied to him, and his view was validated time and again by an adoring press. "You play hard, you play rough, and hopefully you don't get caught," said Mr. Spitzer two years ago. He never did get caught, because most reporters were his accomplices.



Journalism has many functions, but perhaps the most important is keeping tabs on public officials. That duty is even more vital concerning government positions that are subject to few other checks and balances. Chief among those is the prosecutor, who can use his awesome state power to punish, even destroy, private citizens.

Yet from the start, the press corps acted as an adjunct of Spitzer power, rather than a skeptic of it. Many journalists get into this business because they want to see wrongs righted. Mr. Spitzer portrayed himself as the moral avenger. He was the slayer of the big guy, the fat cat, the Wall Street titan -- all allegedly on behalf of the little guy. The press ate it up, and came back for more.

Time magazine bestowed upon Mr. Spitzer the title

DOW JONES REPRINTS

◀ R This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit:
www.djreprints.com.

- See a sample reprint in PDF format.
- Order a reprint of this article now.

Start a **FREE**
 trial of the
 Online Journal



Subscribe to
 The Print Journal



Free US Quotes:

- Symbol
 Name

Get **FREE E-Mail** by topic

Check Out our **Mobile & Wireless Services**

DIGEST OF EARNINGS

Details of the latest corporate earnings reported for **FREE**.

"Crusader of the Year," and likened him to Moses. Fortune dubbed him the "Enforcer." A fawning article in the Atlantic Monthly in 2004 explained he was "a rock star," and "the Democratic Party's future." In an uncritical 2006 biography, then Washington Post reporter Brooke Masters compared the attorney general to no less than Teddy Roosevelt.

What the media never acknowledged is that somewhere along the line (say, his first day in public office) Mr. Spitzer became the big guy, the titan. He had the power to trample lives and bend the rules, while also burnishing his own political fortune. He was the one who deserved as much, if not more, scrutiny as onetime New York Stock Exchange chief Dick Grasso or former American International Group CEO Maurice "Hank" Greenberg.

What makes this more embarrassing for any self-respecting journalist is that Mr. Spitzer knew all this, and played the media like a Stradivarius. He knew what sort of storyline they'd be sympathetic to, and spun it. He knew, too, that as financial journalism has become more competitive, breaking news can make a career. He doled out scoops to favored reporters, who repaid him with allegiance. News organizations that dared to criticize him were cut off. After a time, few criticized anymore.

Instead, reporters felt obligated to run with whatever he handed them. Consider the report in the wake of a 2005 op-ed in this newspaper by John Whitehead. A respected Wall Street figure, Mr. Whitehead dared to criticize Mr. Spitzer for his unscrupulously zealous pursuit of Mr. Greenberg. Mr. Spitzer later threatened Mr. Whitehead, telling him in a phone call that "You will pay the price. This is only the beginning and you will pay dearly for what you have done." Some months later, after more Spitzer excesses, Mr. Whitehead had the temerity to write another op-ed describing what Mr. Spitzer had said.

Within a few days, the press was reporting (unsourced, of course) that Mr. Whitehead had defended Mr. Greenberg a few weeks after a Greenberg charity had given \$25 million to the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation -- a group Mr. Whitehead chaired. So Mr. Whitehead's on-the-record views were met with an unsourced smear implying bad faith. The press ran with it anyway.

In 2005, Mr. Spitzer went on national television to suggest that Mr. Greenberg had engaged in criminal activity. It was front-page news. About six months later, on the eve of a Thanksgiving weekend, Mr. Spitzer quietly disclosed that he lacked the evidence to press criminal charges. That news was buried inside the papers.

What makes this history all the more unfortunate is that the warning signs about Mr. Spitzer were many and manifest. In the final days of Mr. Spitzer's run for attorney general in 1998, the news broke that he'd twisted campaign-finance laws so that his father could fund his unsuccessful 1994 run. Mr. Spitzer won anyway, and the story was largely forgotten.

New York Stock Exchange caretaker CEO John Reed suggested Mr. Spitzer hadn't told the truth when he said that it was Mr. Reed who wanted him to investigate Mr. Grasso's pay. The press never investigated.

Mr. Spitzer's main offense as a prosecutor is that he violated the basic rules of fairness and due process: Innocent until proven guilty; the right to your day in court. The Spitzer method was to target public companies and officials, leak allegations and out-of-context emails to a compliant

press, watch the stock price fall, threaten a corporate indictment (a death sentence), and then move in for a quick settlement kill. There was rarely a trial, fair or unfair, involved.

On the substance, his court record speaks for itself. Most of Mr. Spitzer's high-profile charges have gone up in smoke. A New York state judge threw out his case against tax firm H&R Block. He lost his prosecution against Bank of America broker Ted Sihpol (whom Mr. Spitzer threatened to arrest in front of his child and pregnant wife). Mr. Spitzer was stopped by a federal judge from prying confidential information out of mortgage companies. Another New York judge blocked the heart of his suit against Mr. Grasso. Mr. Greenberg continues to fight his civil charges. The press was foursquare behind Mr. Spitzer in all these cases, and in a better world they'd share some of his humiliation.

Instead, remarkably, they continue to defend him. Ms. Masters, his biographer, was on CNN the day Mr. Spitzer's prostitution news broke, reassuring viewers that the governor really was a "lovely" guy. Other news reporters were reporting what a "tragedy" it was that such a leading light in the Democratic Party could come to such an ignoble end.

There's little that's tragic about Mr. Spitzer, unless you consider his victims (which would appear to include his own family). The press would do well to meditate on that, and consider how many violations they winked at and validated over the years. Politicians don't exist to be idolized by the press, at least not by any press corps doing its job.

Ms. Strassel, who covered Eliot Spitzer's investigations, now writes the Journal's Potomac Watch column from Washington.

See all of today's editorials and op-eds, plus video commentary, on Opinion Journal¹.

And add your comments to the Opinion Journal forum².

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120528114453028807.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <http://online.wsj.com/opinion>

(2) <http://forums.wsj.com/viewtopic.php?t=1745>

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our **Subscriber Agreement** and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

RELATED ARTICLES FROM ACROSS THE WEB

Related Content may require a subscription | [Subscribe Now](#) -- Get 2 Weeks FREE

Related Articles from WSJ.com

- Best of the Web Today Mar. 11, 2008
- Spitzer's Rise and Fall Mar. 11, 2008
- Spitzer Spoils Clinton's Delegate Count Mar. 11, 2008
- Eliot's New Lawyer is Old Colleague: Paul Weiss's Michele Hirshman Mar. 11, 2008

Related Web News

- NY's Spitzer faces calls to quit Mar. 11, 2008 news.bbc.co.uk

- Gov. Spitzer Holds A Press Conference Mar. 11, 2008 [washingtonpost.com](#)
- Stock Exchange Cheers News Of Spitzer's Involvement With Prostitution Ring Mar. 10, 2008 [huffingtonpost.com](#)
- N.Y. governor Spitzer involved in prostitution ring: report Mar. 10, 2008 [marketwatch.com](#)

More related content Powered by Sphere 