

October 8, 2014

## Here's the real scandal in the de Blasio aide brouhaha

*Why does the mayor's wife get a \$170,000-a-year aide in the first place?*

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration was rocked last week by revelations that his wife's chief of staff, Rachel Noerdlinger, has been living with a man who was convicted of manslaughter and posted violently misogynistic and anti-police rants on social media. While there have been numerous concerns about the de Blasio administration's vetting process, there is an even more basic question here — why do political spouses get taxpayer-funded aides at all?

Spouses, along with other relatives, occupy a nebulous area in politics and governance. It is clear they can play a decisive role in the policy decisions of a leader. This idea is millennia-old — the Bible and other ancient books are filled with examples of queens pushing kings to act for good or ill. The early founders of our representative government may have wanted to eliminate invisible hands from pushing the levers of power, but, especially when it comes to spouses, that was more of a hope than a realistic goal. What has changed from those early days is actually putting the first ladies or gentlemen in quasi-official positions — with paid staff — and treating them like they are a natural part of the political process.

Presidential first ladies have had paid staffers since at least the Harding Administration — mainly serving as social secretaries. Jackie Kennedy is reported to have had 40 staffers. However, it was Rosalynn Carter who took the step of opening up the “Office of the First Lady.” Since then each successive first lady seems to have expanded it.

It may come as no surprise that other executives have chosen to copy this model, and NYC mayors — who have never been accused of underplaying their importance — were happy to jump on the bandwagon. While two of the last five mayors, Ed Koch and Michael Bloomberg, were single, both the wives of David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani had staffers. But these staffers weren't well known, nor were they highly paid. Noerdlinger, who is raking in \$170,000 a year, is very different. She has been credited as a key figure in the administration.

If this is true and Noerdlinger is important to the mayor's office, then why does she work for his wife? And why does the spouse of a chief executive need a staff at all? Arguably, the presidential level is different — the first lady or future first gentleman play critical hosting roles on the international scene. Due to the way international affairs play out, it is probably a good idea to have some barrier between the first spouse and the media.

However, for other political spouses, the most charitable explanation would be that this is an indulgent waste. But the reality may be more sinister — the additional staff is actually an expansion of government for purely political gain. The spouses don't, and probably shouldn't, serve a functional role in government. Instead, the spouses are another tool in the campaign playbook, wielded as quasi-official ambassadors for the administration. The spouse's role in office is usually to complement and soften the political positions of the elected official — witness Laura Bush's work on education and Michelle Obama's on nutrition.

It is only when it all comes crashing down that we see how little citizens actually benefit from the facade and the spousal staffers appointed to keep it up. Look at ex-Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell, who portrayed a seemingly idyllic marriage until both he and his apparently bitterly-estranged wife were convicted of corruption. His wife was apparently using her appointed staffers to personally benefit from the largesse of a campaign donor. In this case, some of the key testimony in the trial was provided by the wife's chief of staff, who called the first lady of Virginia a "nutbag."

At the moment, de Blasio seems to be hunkering down and defending Noerdlinger. Maybe it's time that he and other executive officials are forced to answer why their spouses need paid staffers at all.

*Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York, and writes the Recall Elections Blog.*