

The Washington Post
September 11, 1996, Wednesday

A Touch of Class

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OP-ED; Pg. A23
LENGTH: 922 words

Eileen McGann and husband Dick Morris have handled Morris's sex scandal with considerable class and splendid skill. Right from day one, when they went ahead with hosting a Chicago dinner party for 25 friends and relatives just hours before their guests were to learn about the expose that Morris and McGann already knew was coming, the consultant-and-lawyer couple have endured their travail with far more maturity and intelligence than American journalists have brought to the story.

Morris's cool and consistent refusal to confirm, deny or discuss any of the kinky details that Washington call-girl Sherry Rowlands sold to the Star tabloid has been exactly the right response. No one seems to doubt the accuracy of Rowlands's account, but the fact that a top political strategist also is a toe-suck ing foot fetishist seems of no moment whatsoever beyond pure and simple titillation. The fact that Morris also reportedly has an "out of wedlock" daughter from a long-term relationship with a Texas woman also seems of no public relevance.

Some observers insist that Morris's worst offense was neither soliciting prostitution nor adultery but professional breach of trust in letting Rowlands listen in on phone conversations with President Clinton. However, given Morris's previously well-documented record of trashing Clinton's character in all sorts of private venues, his lack of respect and ambivalent loathing for his top client ought to come as no surprise to Clinton or anyone else. In addition, the subsequent revelation that Morris pre-scandal already was secretly writing a self-aggrandizing tell-all tome about the Clinton White House is just further evidence that Morris's professional duplicities reached far beyond prostitutional pillow talk.

McGann and Morris's utterly composed demeanor when facing the press, followed by their quick and canny decision to speak with Time magazine and pose for exclusive photos that put them on Time's cover, have likewise been a consummate means for limiting and counteracting the initial burst of derogatory publicity. With added news that Morris's Random House book advance is now some \$ 2.5 million and that the New Yorker has invited him to speak at private forums, Morris's audacious tenacity continues to be strikingly successful.

Columnists' denunciations of Morris -- and McGann -- have ranged from the plausible to the outlandish. Drawing a parallel between Rowlands's occupation and Morris's professional willingness to get into bed with candidates ranging from Jesse Helms to Howard Metzenbaum, Time's Lance Morrow labels Morris himself "a highly paid political prostitute." But that fact wasn't widely disputed even before Rowlands decided to betray Morris's trust for a modest windfall from the Star.

Richard Cohen innocently wonders why Morris "does not have the good sense to crawl away into obscurity." But that just highlights how much better Morris's understanding of the public dynamics of personal reputation is than Cohen's, for Morris's refusal to go through a public ritual of shame and apology has been tactically brilliant and already is speeding his resuscitation.

Maureen Dowd censures McGann, saying that "standing by your man is the oldest way of sacrificing your self-esteem." But, leaving aside the supposition that McGann truly loves Morris and is devoted to his well-being, Dowd's recommendation of "why not send the bum packing?" manifests a naive view of a crisis that McGann has handled with impressive aplomb and no apparent lack of self-esteem.

Susan Estrich aptly castigates Morris for paying for sex, stating that Morris's once-a-week arrangement with Rowlands represented "a man's preference for women he can own and control." But anyone who peruses the Star's account of Morris's private proclivities will find Estrich's analysis simplistic, for Rowlands's broken confidences portray a man who lusts after women he's unable to control -- most notably First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton -- rather than submissives.

Estrich's further contention that Morris's year-long hiring of Rowlands was "not a victimless crime" is also off-target. Estrich's worthy aim is to reinforce the criminal status of sexual prostitution, but a clear-eyed view of the Rowlands-Morris affair reveals no "victim," at least before Rowlands decided to sell her story, and perhaps afterward too.

Rowlands made a rational financial decision to keep Morris as her sole paying client after leaving the "escort service" through which she first met him. Come this summer, she made a similarly reasonable decision that Morris would be worth more as journalistic prey than as a weekly trick. Ideology aside, seeing Rowlands as Morris's "victim," rather than vice-versa, is simply fatuous.

And even after the Star expose, it's hard to find any real victim here. Rowlands certainly thinks she's come out ahead, and -- especially in the wake of that \$ 2.5 million book advance -- Morris may think so too. Bill Clinton's election prospects seem unaffected, and even the Jefferson Hotel seems unruffled by all the free publicity.

But Eileen McGann's impressive self-assurance is a lesson in graceful strength under fire, and the skillful savvy with which she and Morris have endured this crisis ought to be remembered long after the toe-sucking jokes subside.

The writer, who received a 1987 Pulitzer Prize for his book "Bearing the Cross," is also the author of "Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade."