

## Conservatives Write Off Sanford as a National Leader

**Tea Party, Anti-Tax Activists Mull Their Future After Downfall of Their Most Successful Spokesman**

By [David Weigel](#) 6/24/09 7:48 PM



Gov. Mark Sanford (R-S.C.) speaks at the Tax Day Tea Party in Columbia, S.C., on April 15. (YouTube: GovernorSanford)

At the Washington, D.C. office of FreedomWorks, the conservative non-profit that has promoted and trained organizers of anti-tax Tea Parties, no one knew what Gov. Mark Sanford (R-S.C.) was going to say. A TV was tuned to the press conference Sanford had called to explain a confusing four-day absence from the state, about which rumors had been multiplying in the local and national media. Staffers watched as the governor gave a strange, rambling statement about his “great adventures on the Appalachian Trail” and how he’d called the home office for his first gubernatorial race “Jurassic Park.” Eventually, agonizingly, he got to the

point. He had been unfaithful to his wife with a woman in Argentina.

“I’ve let down a lot of people,” said Sanford.

That was an understatement.



Image by: Matt Mahurin

“Overall, there’s a real feeling of disappointment around here,” said Brendan Steinhauser, the director of Federal and State Campaigns for FreedomWorks, and a key campaigner for the Tea Parties. “He really was a guy who united” — he paused — “or unites the different wings of the Republican Party. Economic conservatives, social conservatives, national security conservatives. After today? No way.”

Thanks to his early, insistent opposition to the economic stimulus package — a campaign that only ended this month when the South Carolina Supreme Court overruled Sanford’s attempt to turn down some of the federal aid appropriated by Congress — Sanford had risen quickly as a national spokesman for hard-core economic conservatism. The chairman (until Wednesday) of the Republican Governors’ Association, he had keynoted a fundraising dinner at the Conservative Political Action Conference, cut a prominent TV ad explaining his opposition to the stimulus, and spoke at multiple anti-tax Tea Parties on April 15. He even led a “Tea Party 2.0” national teleconference for the RGA, attempting to harness conservative excitement about the rallies into support for the GOP.

According to the governor’s own timeline, he and his wife Jenny Sanford had been “working through this thing for about the last five months,” meaning that he had been riven by the potential scandal during the entire period he spent making the case against Democratic economic plans. On Wednesday, conservative activists expressed shock, surprise, and a sense of betrayal at Sanford’s admission. They laughed off Sanford’s chances of a political comeback or a 2012 presidential bid. Some expressed sympathy for his family while some wrote him out of the “freedom movement,” worrying that his problems have robbed activists of a national voice at an incredibly important time.

“We’re going to press on,” said FreedomWorks’ Steinhauser. “There are going to be other leaders and activists, and hopefully elected officials, who will take the lead on these issues. If there’s another guy who wants to get involved in what we’re doing, we want to work with him.”

“It’s not helpful,” said Grover Norquist, the president of Americans for Tax Reform. “This is a guy who clearly could have been in the running as a serious presidential candidate with a serious record of cutting taxes and cutting spending.” But Norquist tempered his gloom with a joke. “It does indicate that men who oppose federal spending at the local level are irresistible to women.”

Many activists had previously believed Sanford’s original explanations for his trip — that he had been “doing some writing” or walking the Appalachian trail — and defended him from media attacks. The day before the press conference, RedState.com editor Erick Erickson published an essay on “the lesson of Mark Sanford’s hike,” calling it “refreshing that Mark Sanford is secure enough in himself and the people of South Carolina that he does not view himself as an indispensable man.”

Erickson was not so forgiving on Wednesday. “I think Governor Sanford needs to go crawl into a very dark hole where no one can see him or hear him and rehabilitate himself.” Erickson said in an email, “In two years, when the country remains in the gutter, he’ll be able to rehabilitate himself.” Erickson was less worried, though, about potential blowback from Sanford’s scandal onto his supporters, because “the left will ignore his actual record and portray him as some sort of stalwart for Christianity and social values.”

According to David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, which has hosted Sanford for speeches on privacy and the size of government, the scandal may very well set back the governor’s causes. “To not have him on the stage, when there’s not anybody else who can step in, is a serious problem,” Boaz explained. He suggested that the same dynamic was at work now; the “freedom movement” was gaining momentum, but it would be deprived of a leader who could frame their issues. “Sanford was not Reagan, at least not yet, but I think if more people got to know him they would have liked him. And now they won’t get to know him.”

Eric Odom, an activist who helped organized the Chicago Tea Party and runs TaxDayTeaParty.com, cited the Sanford meltdown as a reason why he opposed bringing partisanship into the debate over spending. “This may finally provoke Republicans into getting rid of the 11th Commandment [Reagan’s maxim about not criticizing fellow Republicans] and defend those politicians who are preaching that they’re true conservative leaders while doing this kind of thing in the background.” Odom had found Sanford’s appropriation of the Tea Party name “distasteful,” even though he had been optimistic about the opportunity to bring independents into the fold. He hoped that Sanford’s own record could be examined fairly. “If he wants to fly to Argentina and have an affair,” said Odom, “it doesn’t change the fact that he ran his state wisely.”

Some of the most reluctant criticism of Sanford came from the office of Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas). The two men had been friends in Congress, and Paul considered Sanford one of the few Republicans he could support in a presidential bid. “He’s saddened and is thinking of the governor’s family,”

said Paul's spokesman Jesse Benton. "The freedom movement will continue to thank Mark Sanford for his leadership on fiscal discipline, and it will look to other people, like Sen. Jim DeMint, for future leadership and work on issues like accountability at the Federal Reserve."

Other conservatives mentioned Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) as a leader who can take the mantle from Sanford, while few speculated on who they'd like to see as a "dark horse" presidential candidate representing their views.

"We'll see," said David Boaz. "Maybe all of the other Republicans will have affairs before 2012 and it'll even the playing field."