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For Republicans, a Long Winter Gets Longer

By Dan Balz

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Mark Sanford's summer adventure to Argentina -- no, he was not hiking the Appalachian Trail, as his aides incorrectly told reporters -- is now a full-fledged personal and family embarrassment, a story of infidelity followed by a public confession of the kind that has become all too familiar from political leaders.

But Sanford's story is more than personal. For a Republican Party down on its luck, the governor's disappearance and subsequent rambling apology to his wife, his family, his close friends and all the people of South Carolina draw more unwelcome publicity to a party that needs but cannot seem to get any good news.

Coming a week after [Sen. John Ensign](#) (R-Nev.) admitted to an extramarital affair, the scandal will impact the Republicans in several ways. First, it further damages the GOP brand, potentially driving away more voters or at least making it more difficult to win back some of those who abandoned the party in the past two elections. Second, it could disillusion social and religious conservatives -- a critically important part of the Republican coalition -- who may now wonder whether those who share the Republican label truly share their values. Third, the Sanford saga removes one more new-generation GOP leader from the field of prospective 2012 candidates, adding to doubts about the strength of the party's bench.

For Republicans, the long winter continues. "It's bad news," said Peter Wehner, a former Bush White House adviser, of the back-to-back confessions by Sanford and Ensign. "It reflects on them individually, but it reflects on the party. The Democrats are vulnerable on a number of areas, including scandals. They've had their own on a range of issues. But if you accept as I do that the Republican brand is hurt, this does more damage to it."

John Weaver, a longtime GOP strategist, said: "The voters have chosen new management [in the White House] for a reason, and this just reinforces it. It just makes the hill a little steeper for us." Looking toward 2012, Weaver joked, "At this rate, if you're a junior Jaycees president in Memphis, you could be in line for the nomination."

Republicans in Congress have been trying to develop a more effective response to President Obama and the Democrats, and there is a sense among some GOP lawmakers and strategists that they have slowly begun to identify the president's vulnerabilities. But polls show that Republicans have made little progress since the election. The latest Washington Post-ABC News survey found Republicans lower in favorability than at any point since the early 1990s. Obama enjoys huge advantages in public trust.

Some political strategists question how Republicans can get traction when two pillars of their message -- family values and fiscal rectitude -- have been undermined by errant politicians' transgressions, and by the collective failure of GOP leaders to control spending when they held the White House and Congress.

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"If Republicans talk about family values, people will roll their eyes," said Matthew Dowd, a onetime adviser to President George W. Bush who later broke with the president. Dowd said Obama's big budget deficits leave him and Democrats vulnerable on that issue, but he added, "It's hard to say [voters are] going to trust Republicans on it."

Beyond issues is the question of party leadership. Some of the most visible Republicans are unpopular outside the party. More discouraging may be that those who are not so well known are making poor first impressions. "I suppose the problem is we have a lot of old familiar faces that people see with mixed views, and they don't get to know newer leaders except in an unfortunate light," said Vin Weber, a former congressman from Minnesota.

Sanford's and Ensign's mistakes are, no doubt, disqualifying for whatever future political hopes they might have had. But others mentioned as possible 2012 candidates have had their own problems in recent months. Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin has raised questions among GOP strategists about her reliability and readiness, though she remains one of the most charismatic figures in the party. Louisiana Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#), one of the brightest young minds in the party, took on water with his performance in delivering the Republican response to Obama's speech to Congress in February, though one speech does not a career end. Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., who was prodding his party to change, accepted Obama's offer to become U.S. ambassador to China.

Sanford had endeared himself to conservatives by being one of a handful of Republican governors to object to Obama's stimulus act and resist accepting all of the money for his state. But he has not been a consensus-builder and has left his party in turmoil in South Carolina. Even without the affair, Sanford's governing style and penchant for going it alone would have made it hard to succeed through the rigors of a long presidential campaign without voters wondering whether he had the judgment and dependability to lead the party or the country.

GOP strategists said three Republicans may benefit from the problems of others. One is Mitt Romney, who is moving as aggressively as anyone to prepare for a second run at the White House. Another is Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, who will take over the chairmanship of the Republican Governors Association from Sanford. Scott Reed, who ran Robert J. Dole's 1996 presidential campaign, said Barbour, who will soon be in Iowa and New Hampshire helping raise money for the party, can use the association as a base for rebuilding the GOP. Reed also argued that former House speaker Newt Gingrich has been helped by the ineffectiveness of some in the younger generation, although his presidential prospects remain clouded by his polarizing profile.

Republicans will need help from those three and many others to turn around their fortunes. They will need missteps by the president and more success in finding a credible message. But when every small step forward is matched by a setback juicy enough to dominate the cable-news culture of today's politics, it's no wonder Republicans continue to have such long faces.

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