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Sifting the Wreckage for the Real Eliot Spitzer

By DANNY HAKIM and MICHAEL POWELL

The e-mail message was time-stamped Dec. 18, 2007. It was sent at 5 a.m. It did not mince words.

“I’ve been up all night, I haven’t been able to sleep thinking how we’ve gotten to this position,” it began, according to one recipient’s recollection.

The author of the e-mail message was Eliot Spitzer, the 54th governor of New York. His administration was just days from the end of its first year, and his poll numbers were abysmal. And now the morning newspapers had another report of another set of subpoenas issued as part of an investigation into the administration’s effort to tarnish a Republican rival.

The heat of Mr. Spitzer’s frustration and anger, according to two senior aides who read the early morning message, all but radiated off their computers and BlackBerrys.

Mr. Spitzer ordered a 7:30 a.m. conference call. He canceled plans to attend a forum in the Bronx on predatory lending in poor neighborhoods, suggesting it was a waste of time when “everything was falling apart.”

One aide recalled the thrust of Mr. Spitzer’s fury: We’re disasters; I am surrounded by idiots. Another remembered it this way: Rome is burning, and I’m supposed to be up in the Bronx talking about predatory lending.

“He was clearly very upset,” one of the aides said. “It was somewhere between the typical thing and the far end of the typical thing.”

Mr. Spitzer announced his resignation 11 days ago, after reports of something that was substantially beyond “the far end of the typical thing” — his involvement as a client of a high-priced prostitution ring.

Interviews in recent days with a handful of people close to Mr. Spitzer, almost all of them still shocked and confused, suggested that no one had figured out, for certain, what had happened. Was Mr. Spitzer’s conduct an aberrant episode, as short-lived as it was out of character? Or had the man they had served with passion and devotion been living a secret second life for years?

“Nothing from my experience meshes with this, so it’s hard not to feel badly for him,” an aide said. “As torn as we are and confused by it all, he was great to work for and it’s a loss.”

It is hard to say what role, if any, Mr. Spitzer’s escalating disappointment in Albany played in his extraordinarily risky, self-destructive behavior, and it remains unclear when his once seemingly idyllic life went so awry. But the interviews with his aides and others who encountered him over the last several months made it clear that he had come to feel deeply ambivalent about his job as governor, the latest, grandest political prize in what many calculated would be a rise that could take him to the White House.

In fact, several aides said that 14 months into his term, he felt profoundly exasperated with the experience of trying to bend a powerful and divided State Legislature to his will.

He just could not accept the way things worked, or did not work, in Albany, the aides said. He was offended to the point of distraction by the fact that his chief rival, Joseph L. Bruno, the Senate majority leader, was seen by many to have outmaneuvered and outwitted him. Mr. Bruno had taken to calling him “a spoiled rich-kid brat.”

And the aides, all of whom spoke on condition of anonymity out of deference to the wounded Mr. Spitzer, said the former governor, for all of his estimable brilliance, was often a poor chief executive: combative, micromanaging, and unable to take a long view when things went wrong.

Despite Albany’s often dysfunctional ways, there were allies to be had, coalitions to be assembled. But he most often saw them as enemies, all part of a system that had thwarted reform.

“He was much too angry at too many people and too many institutions to be effective,” recalled Dan Cantor, executive director of the labor-backed Working Families Party. “His enemies were against him and his friends were deserting him.”

Fury and moments of surrender characterized his last nine months, but in truth Mr. Spitzer was always a politician of the most intense, high-strung order, whose outbursts were the stuff of legend. But his eruptions seemed particularly ill suited for the role of executive.

Mr. Spitzer’s unhappiness generated its own collateral damage. Several aides said Mr. Spitzer had begun drinking more than his usual nightly glass of scotch. And his wife, a loyal and reliable support during Mr. Spitzer’s years of unchecked success, appeared to find the role harder to play when each month seemed to bring some fresh setback.

But if much of Mr. Spitzer’s undoing remains hard to fathom, there are, for those who worked with him or encountered him of late, indelible images of a man who had seemed so suited to his last job, struggling to find his way in his new one.

Albany, July 9

The Capitol

Eliot Spitzer sat in his office on the second floor, on a chair in front of his desk.

He began the interview, talking with his usual bravura and staccato pace about the ugly breakdown in budget negotiations — hitting all his talking points, staying, as only he could, relentlessly on message.

Republicans had been spreading word that the governor had called Mr. Bruno “senile.” They said he had sent his men to spy on Mr. Bruno, too.

Mr. Spitzer seemed customarily confident, even defiant.

However, the life in his voice, like the sunlight late that afternoon, soon began to drain.

It was Day 190 of his administration — a term that had begun with his promise that everything that was dysfunctional and hopelessly partisan about Albany would change with his swearing-in.

But as the conversation wore on, that promise — that he would bring a kind of constructive passion back to Albany — began to feel distant, naïve, even lost.

And then he was asked a question about his wife. He was, in that moment, no longer a prosecutor trying a case, and the veneer of toughness that he and his handlers had taken years to build up fell away almost completely.

There was quiet for several seconds.

“This, this is harder,” he said, speaking with care about his wife, Silda, “because she looks at me and she says, ‘Do you really want this stuff? And do you want this for your kids and do you want them to see this stuff?’ ”

He paused again.

The reporter started to continue. “Just all the ——”

“Yeah,” Mr. Spitzer said. “It’s ugly.”

For a second, he flashed again with enthusiasm, speaking of a run he had taken with one of his daughters the day before.

“We had a great time,” he said. “I ran with Sarabeth in Utica, and it was spectacular. She beat me, which was great. But then you pick up the papers and you see this stuff.”

He paused again, looking nothing short of fragile.

“Well, you know,” he said. “There it is.”

His eyes were moist.

Manhattan, Sept. 21

The Grand Hyatt Hotel

The governor’s old allies had in mind tough love, not an arm-breaking session. Mr. Cantor and Bob Master, another leader of the Working Families Party, walked into the lobby of the Grand Hyatt New York.

Governor Spitzer was holding a morning of political meetings upstairs. The Working Families Party had endorsed Mr. Spitzer and worked hard for his election. But in the last eight months he had fought with the party over his effort to push through a campaign finance bill that would limit union spending on elections and he had repeatedly insulted the powerful health care workers’ union and the Democratic-controlled State Assembly.

Richard Baum, the secretary to the governor, greeted them in the lobby, three people who were at the meeting recalled. Mr. Cantor previewed his talk in the elevator: The governor had to massage his allies; he had to move on issues like family leave, which played to his political base. And he should not view the political world as divided between the virtuous and the venal.

Mr. Baum smiled, warily. “This should be interesting,” one person recalled him saying. The governor was not used to hearing that sort of criticism.

They took their seats in the governor’s suite, seven or eight men in a tight cluster. Mr. Cantor, glancing at his notes, cataloged their discontents. At the end the governor leaned in, his face less than 12 inches from Mr. Cantor’s.

And Mr. Spitzer began screaming.

“You have no standing to lecture me,” he said, expletives punctuating virtually every third syllable. “You’re part of the system that is the whole problem in this state.”

A year’s worth of perceived slights poured out, as he recalled old political races gone bad and proposals that had died in the Legislature. Curse piled upon curse, spittle flying.

“In the world of politics, calculated rage is really common,” recalled a man who was in the room. “But this was not calculated; this was pure rage and kind of scary to watch.”

Mr. Spitzer bolted upright and walked toward the door. He turned, and said: “I’m going to announce that I’m giving licenses to the undocumented.” Mr. Cantor did a double take. This was worst possible time for a wounded governor to embark on that initiative, no matter how progressive. “You’re going to get killed on this,” he warned, and in fact it would become another in the governor’s first-year collection of failures.

Mr. Spitzer waved him off. He suffered no deficit of confidence.

“No, no, no!” the governor said. “It’s all good. All good.”

Mr. Spitzer pivoted and walked out.

Manhattan, March 12

Office of the Governor

Eliot Spitzer had taken roughly 100 seconds to announce his resignation before a mob of TV cameras.

He exited the media room into an office hallway. The corridor was lined with young people — staff members, secretaries, idealists and overachievers. He could have easily averted them and walked directly to his office.

But if Mr. Spitzer was disgraced, he did not shrink from the challenge.

“He was at the far end, and he made the point of walking down the length of the hallway,” said one aide who was there. “There was a gantlet of people, and he said what he said.

“I don’t know how you find the words to talk to a young staff at a moment like that,” the aide noted, “but he did it.”

Mr. Spitzer reassured the young people that their futures were still ahead of them. He warned against making the same mistakes he had, from the modest to the catastrophic.

“People think it was hubris and that he must have been a fraud, but that’s not right,” another aide said of the former governor. “He was a very good man who lost himself due to a combination of factors.

“He wanted so much to change things in Albany, but it didn’t work out the way he planned. He couldn’t meet the expectations of the public or the expectations he set for himself. They said he was pushing too hard and not pushing hard enough, that he was Mr. Softee and a steamroller. He felt damned if he did and damned if he didn’t at every turn.”

In such circumstances, without the ability to adjust or relax, “it’s only a matter of time before you self-destruct,” the aide said. “Ironically, he knew full well that he was being watched. He even talked about it. He said: ‘If we ever stumble, they’ll be merciless.’ Those were his words.”

The walk down the hallway over, Mr. Spitzer cried, one of the aides said.

“I couldn’t look,” the aide said.

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