Elizabeth Edwards' cancer and the remorselessness of US political life

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Last Wednesday doctors in Chapel Hill, North Carolina told Elizabeth Edwards, wife of John Edwards, former US senator, Democratic Party vice presidential candidate in 2004 and presidential hopeful in 2008, that the breast cancer originally diagnosed three years ago had metastasized to her right rib, the surrounding bones and possibly to her lungs.

The following day, John Edwards announced that he was remaining in the race for the Democratic nomination and that his wife was planning to participate actively. Mrs. Edwards told the media, "I expect to do next week all the things I did this week."

On the human level, it is entirely natural and appropriate to feel sympathy for the Edwardses' situation. Less than three years after her initial diagnosis, Mrs. Edwards has received news that must be, for even the most stoic individual, deeply unsettling. She must feel anxiety not only for her own future, but, even more, for the impact of her illness and its emotional consequences upon her husband and, especially, her two young children. It is within this context that the response of the Edwardses to their personal crisis is troubling and, in its own way, sheds a certain grim light on the political culture of the United States.

First, there is the speed with which the couple came to their decision to soldier on regardless. Perhaps this is really what they want, in their heart of hearts, to do. But one cannot avoid the thought that the Edwardses found themselves suddenly in the midst of a nightmare scenario that was as much political as medical. If their own accounts are to be believed, they committed themselves to the continuation of the campaign within hours of learning the unhappy news. According to a piece in the *New York Times*, based on Elizabeth Edwards' account of the events, as "the nurse fumbled to find the vein in her arm last Wednesday," for additional tests (which proved negative) to see if the cancer had spread even farther, "her decision about her husband's presidential campaign was sealed." As she sat getting her IV, Mrs. Edwards concluded, "It's really important that he [Edwards] run."

That this is what she would be thinking in the midst of these medical procedures says a great deal about the dehumanizing impact of the American political process on the candidates themselves. Receiving a diagnosis of metastatic cancer is, in the most literal sense, a deadly serious matter. Elizabeth Edwards' disease is classified as Stage 4—that is to say, incurable. Various treatments may succeed in prolonging her life by years, even decades, but every stage of the process of confronting such a condition, including having an IV inserted, is exhausting and nerve-racking. As she told the *Times*, "I was feeling particularly desperate."

And yet, in the midst of personal desperation, the decision to get back on the "campaign trail" brooked no delay. Why? The ugly truth is that Edwards and his wife had, according to the rules of the American political game, no choice. They had to come to an immediate decision: either announce immediately that they were staying in, or get out and cash in their chips.

The Edwardses and their political advisers were well aware of one inescapably political reality: within hours of the news of Elizabeth's cancer breaking, their financial backers would start to bail out if there existed the slightest doubt about their future plans. There would be, to be sure, tearful expressions of sympathy and solidarity. But the cash would dry up quickly.

Ruthlessly stage-managed as they are, or perhaps all the more so because of their political emptiness, American presidential campaigns are demanding, monstrous undertakings. To be considered a serious

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candidate, the former North Carolina senator will be obliged to raise $100 million during 2007. March 31 marks the end of the first quarter of fundraising, and, comments the *Associated Press*, "the presidential campaigns are working overtime to make sure they don't get tagged as losers in the money race. 'Money in the off year has never been more important than in this presidential cycle,' said Michael Toner, a former Federal Election Commission chairman."

Hillary Clinton may report that she has already raised as much as $40 million, Barack Obama may have $20 million and Edwards is expected to come in third among Democratic candidates. If he were to skip a beat, lose momentum, he would effectively be out of the race.

And so, Edwards and Elizabeth had to decide immediately. Yes, it is a heartless and even brutal process. But American presidential campaigns are not without logic and purpose. It is this very process of dehumanization that whips the character of the presidential hopefuls into shape. Do they have what it takes to run the most powerful and brutal capitalist state in the world? Have the candidates been so emptied of everything decent and humane that they are prepared for what will be demanded of them once they arrive at the top of the political dung heap?

There is another aspect of this process that deserves comment. Bourgeois politicians everywhere are ambitious, but perhaps nowhere as blindly or recklessly so as in the US. Edwards and his wife are risking a great deal . . . but in pursuit of what exactly? Were John and Elizabeth Edwards the leaders or representatives of a socially significant movement, their decision to fight on, whatever the personal consequences, would appear in an entirely different and far more noble light. A great historic cause has a right to demand everything of those who place themselves at its service.

But Edwards, to be blunt about it, serves no cause other than that dictated by his blind ambition for the pedestrian glory of a high state office. The assertions by John and Elizabeth Edwards that they 'could not let their supporters down' are hollow. He is, at the end of the day, just another bourgeois politician.

Edwards made his name and fortune (estimated in 2003 at between $12.8 and $60 million) as a personal injury lawyer. Elected to the US Senate in 1998, Edwards served one term. He co-sponsored Sen. Joseph Lieberman's Iraq War Resolution and also later voted for it (a decision he now says he regrets), and voted for the Patriot Act, the blueprint for an American police-state. His policies are all over the map, and one has reason to believe they are mostly regulated by shifts in the political winds. He has nothing of importance to offer the American people. Were his campaign to end tomorrow, its only legacy would be unpaid campaign bills.

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