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Pride goes before a fall; Irreparably damaged, Gov. Eliot Spitzer must resign

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What a stunner. The last time Eliot Spitzer and "prostitution ring" were mentioned in the same sentence, the reformist governor was enacting a new felony statute to punish human trafficking. Before that, it was Spitzer the crusading attorney general, busting call girl businesses on Staten Island.

And now all the promise that rested on this leader with the wide vocabulary and the pugnacious jaw comes to this: a tawdry rendezvous - in fact, probably many of them - with a hooker, this time at Washington's Mayflower Hotel.

Of course, the governor has to resign. Fifteen months ago, he was the chief legal officer of the state. Hiring a call girl was not only against the law, but procuring her to cross state lines turned the \$4,300 evening into a federal crime. Spitzer, 48, is either viciously self-destructive or pathologically arrogant, believing he wouldn't be caught.

He cannot stay and play the odds, as he has with the Troopergate investigation, in which his aides were accused of misusing the State Police to embarrass a political rival. Spitzer can't blame an underling for this one. Federal investigators caught him in a wiretap, red-handed, in a series of telephone calls to the Emperors Club VIP to negotiate payment details.

Here is the busy governor of New York, on the phone, working out who pays for the prostitute's use of the hotel minibar. The decorum of the office can't withstand this man's abuse of it. From the moment of yesterday's shocking, sordid revelation - and his pitiful apology - no more state business can be done with Spitzer at the helm.

The governor's job would pass to the hands of David Paterson, 53, the former State Senate Democratic leader from Harlem. Paterson is respected on both sides of the aisle, but the state's business has suffered a grave setback. Paterson is smart and likable, but the question will be whether he's up to the task of righting this seriously listing ship.

The story of Eliot Spitzer's demise would be Shakespearean in its tragedy, had he really been the man we thought he was. When New York State Democrats rallied for him at their holiday party in 2005, Spitzer strode through the gala like a man at a coronation. Admirers formed a column behind him. He promised to reform the most dysfunctional legislature in the nation and to kick off the dust of the do-nothing latter years of Gov. George Pataki's administration.

All the momentum he amassed as he collected 69.6 percent of the vote in a landslide has been wasted. New York needed his push for higher ethics and campaign finance reform. We needed to focus on education, the environment, the soaring cost of health care and unmanageable tax burdens. The momentum is utterly lost, but the causes themselves should not also die.

As Spitzer said yesterday, he has violated his obligation to the people around him. Many gave up private-sector jobs to follow him into government. His wife, Silda Wall Spitzer, put her legal career on hold when he chose to run for public office. For all of them, his paying a hooker for sex is a betrayal. And the Spitzers have three teenage daughters who must now grow up living with this knowledge.

Should we have seen the real Spitzer more clearly? He lied about taking a loan from his father, Bernard, to fund his 1994 campaign for attorney general. His Wall Street and insurance targets, such as John Whitehead, Maurice "Hank" Greenberg and Richard Grasso, warned about the man's temper and bullying tactics. This page endorsed Spitzer for governor. After all, as Rep. Charles Rangel quipped derisively, Spitzer was the smartest man in the room. Until he wasn't.