

# A Tale Of Two Legislators

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Last Saturday, Larry Craig, a U.S. senator from Idaho, announced his resignation amidst disclosures that he was arrested in an airport men's room for conduct deemed lewd.

When the scandal first broke a little over a week ago, the Republican senator protested his innocence and vowed to stay put. If he was guilty of anything, said the seasoned politician, it was only an ill-advised consent to accept a reduced charge in order to avoid an embarrassing public drubbing. He accepted a plea deal, Craig said, because he wished to see the episode blow over.

He was not so lucky after all. Craig had been arrested on June 11 in a sting operation at a Minneapolis airport men's room. The sting targeted men who solicit homosexual liaisons in toilet stalls by making certain gestures.

Craig's denials notwithstanding, his Republican colleagues were loath to spare him. Aware of their dimming prospects in next year's elections, the party's leadership in the Senate demurred to rally to his defense. Instead, they planted themselves in the forefront of those calling for Craig's exit from the hallowed halls of Congress.

A lawmaker who represented Idaho for more than a quarter century in Congress, Craig was no fly-by-night but a nimble politician who held senior positions on a

number of critical committees and knew his way around Washington. He also was astute enough to know that his self-inflicted political wound would impede his ability to legislate and to remain a strong voice for his constituents' interests.

Craig stepped up to a podium last Saturday and told a crush of reporters that he would step down. "It is with sadness and deep regret that I announce it is my intent to resign from the Senate effective Sept. 30," he said, his mien downcast.

He didn't stop at announcing his resignation, but went further to express contrition. "I apologize for what I have caused," he said in a voice drenched with emotion. After his sobering announcement, one of his harshest critics, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, issued a terse statement. Craig had "made a difficult decision, but the right one," said McConnell. Then he added: "It is my hope he will be remembered not for this, but for his three decades of dedicated public service."

Craig's drama holds out profound lessons for Nigerian public officials in general but for embattled Speaker Patricia Etteh in particular. Going on two weeks now, Etteh has been in the center of a swirling financial scandal. This miasma was generated by revelations of a gargantuan sum of N628 million she authorized spent on sprucing up her

official residence as well as her deputy's. Etteh, it seems, skirted official procedure in approving the whopping expenditure.

Etteh's promiscuousness with public funds has tarnished her political image. Even in the degraded arena of Nigerian politics, it is hard to forgive a public official who expends six million dollars to refurbish two fairly new residences. Etteh's conduct exposed her blindness (or, worse, indifference) to Nigerians' deepening misery. She also tarred the broad political class, offering hapless Nigerians a lens through which to grasp their so-called leaders' parasitical ethic. Multiply Etteh's financial recklessness by a multitude of factors, and you begin to glean the tragedy of a nation whose leaders are unconscionable leeches and predators.

Placed side by side with Etteh's scandal, Craig's solicitation of sex won't even register on the scale. It is a personal flaw of the kind that is hardly flayed in Nigerian politicians. During a visit to Abuja in 2002, a legislative aide regaled me with risqué narratives of how scantily dressed young women haunt the halls and grounds of the National Assembly. Male lawmakers, he told me, cavort openly with these women. Power is said to be an aphrodisiac. For many powerful Nigerians, extracurricular sex is viewed as one of the perks and fringe benefits of power.

Were Craig a Nigerian, he would not have to hide in a toilet to solicit carnal thrill. He would, if he had former President Bill Clinton's nerves, turn his office into a venue for his dalliances. But unlike Clinton, he would not have to make surreptitious sport of his trysts. Many married Nigerian politicians flaunt

their harem. Certainly, no Nigerian police officer would muster the temerity to harass a randy lawmaker on the prowl for sexual pleasure.

The point is that, on Nigerian terms, Craig's conduct merely rises to the level of a peccadillo. But Craig comes from a place where public officials are held to high standards.

Besides, the Idaho senator knows that, while elections are not perfect anywhere (a favorite new mantra of Maurice Iwu's as well as other apologists of electoral fraud), a man mired in his sort of sex-related scandal won't stand a chance in any free and fair election conducted outside of France. As McConnell and other Republican colleagues demonstrated, a politician caught in a scandal—more so during an election cycle—is bound to be a lonely, friendless figure.

By contrast, Etteh has a few loquacious apologists in her corner. And they're far from acknowledging that her sense of priorities is, at minimum, stinky.

On the day of Craig's capitulation, Madam Etteh neither resigned as speaker nor offered any words of remorse to Nigerians. Instead, Nigerian newspapers dripped with reports of covert schemes to sustain her at her privileged perch. She was reported to be hard at work, never mind that her mission was misconceived: to keep her trophy. She reportedly reached out to several caucuses, desperately striking deals to thwart those at work on her ouster. If she was aware of the depth of national outrage generated by her renovations scandal, she did not let on. For her, as for other politicians caught in her kind of bind, what counts is

personal perpetuation not the public good.

Her party, the misnamed Peoples Democratic Party, was busy trying to beat rebellious legislators (those who want the speaker deposed) back into line—behind Etteh. One newspaper quoted a top official of the party as stating that under no circumstances must the speaker be rusticated. The party would not allow the opposition to ridicule it, the official vowed.

Rather than upbraid the speaker for disesteeming herself and her position, her party's southwest caucus hastened to help her cling to a discredited office. Adopting the logic of "she's ours, right or wrong," the caucus sought to employ the tool of blackmail; it warned that, should Etteh be brushed aside, the caucus, which has a lock on the speaker position, would refuse to put forward a different candidate for the post.

The alliance of tragic choices—by Etteh, her party and her immediate caucus—obscures what ought to be the overriding interest, that of the generality of Nigerians. Why is there in some quarters a narrow fascination with what Etteh's downfall might mean for her, for her party, or for her natal address? Etteh seems to be worrying herself sick about the real or perceived personal misfortune in the event of her resignation or peremptory removal. Her party apparently can't countenance the real or imaginary slight of removing a speaker anointed by ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo. The southwest caucus can't stomach the perceived humiliation of seeing "a daughter of the soil" demoted from political paradise all the way to limbo.

But such knee jerk reactions expose the perfidy of the ruling class. Etteh has made her constituents and other Nigerians poorer to the tune of N628 million. And what compounds this crime is that few Nigerians would credit her with working hard at making the country a better place. The money she thoughtlessly lavished on her own comfort could have been profitably spent on social projects in her constituency. Instead, it's gobbled up in an opulent, self-aggrandizing project. How does the speaker's residence in a gaudily appointed house advance the interests of Nigerians, including those she ostensibly represents? Can she brave a visit to one of the marketplaces in her state, there to sit down with peasants and petty traders, look them straight in the face and then justify spending N628 million of their money to spoil herself with a slice of heaven-in-Abuja?

Living in a country where voters, for all the imperfections in the system, still play some role in elections, Craig grasped the wisdom of resigning. Many (if not most) Nigerian politicians don't bother with voters; they cast their lot with godfathers adept at rigging elections. No wonder that these politicians hardly thank the electorate, preferring to ascribe their victory to "God's doing." Etteh may be holding out because she realizes, deep down, that the voters in her constituency would have little or nothing to do with her political prospects. If it suddenly became the case that, come 2011, voters would insist that Etteh account for every single one of those misspent N628 million, she'd have the fear—not of God—but of the indignant electorate.

## Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

#### Speaking Engagements

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