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Wednesday, Aug. 13, 2014



# Schapiro: Aides tried to protect McDonnells from themselves

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Posted: Tuesday, August 12, 2014 11:26 pm

By JEFF E. SCHAPIRO  
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Three weeks and 38 witnesses into the Bob-and-Maureen McDonnell corruption trial, constants are emerging: The couple's finances were out of control. The first lady was out of control. Jonnie Williams Sr. was out of control.

Another constant, one less noticeable, is state employees' efforts at damage control - for the McDonnells and for state government.

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"Perhaps the only gratifying aspect of the trial last week was the extraordinary professionalism of the Virginia bureaucracy," Bob Holsworth, a longtime political analyst who follows the trial from a back-row seat in Judge James Spencer's

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sprawling courtroom, told the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

A parade of high-ranking government officials – current and former – have testified for the prosecution that they were wary of Williams; that they shared their suspicions about the diet-pill promoter with the McDonnells; that they feared the McDonnell-Williams entanglement would ultimately tarnish Virginia.

These public employees knew, long before the public did, that a cancer was growing on the governorship.

It's not the first time those on the lower rungs of state government have – in the public's interest – raised discomfoting questions for those at the top.

In 1997, a whistleblower named Anthony Graziano resisted pressure from the Allen administration to keep silent about the near-bankruptcy of the then-\$300 million state employee health-insurance fund. His warnings – Graziano was the fund's administrator -- were ultimately borne out by the facts.

An important stipulation: The state workers federal prosecutors called at the McDonnell trial are not typical career civil servants whose jobs are largely insulated from politics. They don't spend their days in cubicles, shuffling paper.

They are appointees who serve at the whim of the governor. Theirs are lofty positions. Some are paid six figures. Some are now in the private sector. That's where access to government offices they occupied is part of doing business – and where six figures can be chump change.

Many of the officials and aides who testified not only know Bob McDonnell as a politician and policymaker; they know him as a person – even if they didn't know about his secret arrangements with Williams.

And It pains them to publicly exclaim that, when it comes to the tacky mess for which McDonnell will be remembered, they spoke truth to power – some of them, before McDonnell assumed power.

Jasen Eige was the governor's counsel, having previously worked for McDonnell when the Republican was attorney general. Eige was responsible for making sure whatever the boss did – or wanted to do – was legal. Eige's jurisdiction extended to the boss' wife.

It was Eige who put the kibosh on the Williams-procured Oscar de la Renta gown that Maureen was planning to wear to the inaugural ball in January 2010. Her expectations dashed by a nerdy, bespectacled lawyer, Maureen threw a nutty. It was the first of many.

Eige ruled that haute couture was inconsistent with the I-feel-your-pain image the incoming governor had successfully conveyed as a candidate to recession-weary Virginians.

Implicit in Eige's recommendation: It's distasteful, if not legally perilous, for members of the first family to be scrounging for handouts.

The McDonnells are learning in explicit detail just how legally perilous it can be. Facing

Ed Gillespie "supports a personhood amendment." – Mark Warner



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RTD political reporter and columnist, **Jeff Schapiro** has covered Virginia elections and the state Capitol for 30 years. Read his [column](#) and follow him on [Twitter](#).

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an adversary with nearly unlimited resources – the U.S. Department of Justice – Bob and Maureen must explain why taking more than \$150,000 in unreported gifts and loans from Williams, while helping promote his supposed cure-all, Anatabloc, does not qualify as corruption.

The government's troubling narrative was fleshed out in the testimony of Bill Hazel, secretary of health and human resources; Tucker Martin, McDonnell's communication's chief; Lisa Hicks-Thomas, secretary of administration; Sara Redding Wilson, the state's personnel director, as well as aides to Maureen: Mary-Shea Sutherland and Sarah Scarbrough.

All of these people were paid by taxpayers not just to deliver public services, but to serve the governor and first lady. That meant sharing with him and her their best advice – even if the McDonnells weren't prepared to take it.

Martin Kent was Bob's chief of staff; in effect, the deputy governor. Another alumnus of the McDonnell attorney general's office, Kent – morning, noon and night – put policy in motion by pushing the buttons and pulling the levers of government. And he still managed to make breakfast every day for his school-age daughters.

Paces from Kent's office is the conference room where Williams and McDonnell – unbeknownst to the chief of staff -- discussed an elaborate stock-and-loan scheme under which the former would give the latter shares in Star Scientific. McDonnell could use the stock as collateral for loans to keep afloat his cash-hemorrhaging resort properties in Virginia Beach.

Williams dropped the idea because he'd have to disclose the stock giveaway to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, blowing his cover on the hush-hush arrangements with the McDonnells.

Kent identified the governor's handwritten notes from that meeting, telegraphing frustration, maybe even fury, that his loyalty had led him to an unlikely place: a wood-paneled witness box in which he was testifying against the man who'd put him on the map.

It was Kent's loyalty that compelled him to scold Bob for shaking off his state police bodyguard to cruise back to Richmond in Williams' white Ferrari California after spending an all-expense-paid weekend with his family at the executive's lakeside country house.

It was escapism befitting Ferris Bueller, not the governor of Virginia.

Kent knew it. If only Bob had listened.

Contact Jeff E. Schapiro at [jschapiro@timesdispatch.com](mailto:jschapiro@timesdispatch.com) or (804) 649-6814. His column appears Wednesday and Sunday. Watch his video column Thursday on TimesDispatch.com. Follow him on Twitter.com, @RTDSchapiro. Listen to his analysis 8:33 a.m. Friday on WCVE (88.9 FM).

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