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POLITICO

The backstory: Weiner's final undoing

By: Jonathan Allen and Maggie Haberman

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In the end, Rep. Anthony Weiner stood alone, where he has always wanted to be — in the glare of the national media spotlight. And though he didn't say it at a Thursday news conference in New York, he hinted he may at some point be back.

The night before, away from the crush of the media and the company of colleagues who were partying at the annual White House congressional picnic, Weiner called fellow New York Democrat Steve Israel, who handles campaign politics for House Democrats. Israel, who had attended Weiner's wedding last July, handed the phone to Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) at the picnic so that Weiner could tell both of them that he would resign from the House seat that he has held since 1999.

It was a quiet end to a nearly 20-year political career that started when Weiner, at 27, became the youngest person at the time ever elected to the New York City Council. A 100-car freight train of a sex scandal with no actual sex involved — marked by near-daily revelations of racy text messages and photographs — would finally come to a stop.

With his wife back in town, his party's leaders plotting new ways to force him out and rank-and-file colleagues anxious to rid themselves of an unseemly three-week distraction, Weiner faced reporters one last time at a rowdy news conference in the same Brooklyn venue from which he launched that first municipal campaign.

"I had hoped to be able to continue the work that the citizens of my district elected me to do," Weiner said. "Unfortunately, the distraction that I have created has made that impossible."

He said his wife, Huma Abedin, supported him throughout — sources said she had watched his first tearful news conference two weeks ago on TV — but she did not show up for Thursday's media circus.

So on his final day in office, nobody was by his side.

The Clintons — Abedin works for Hillary Clinton — were disgusted with him. Three Democratic National Committee chairmen, a former House speaker and a raft of his rank-and-file colleagues told him, in public statements, to submit his resignation. The president of the United States said he would step down under the same circumstances.

The whole imbroglio had turned into the kind of long-running spectacle that could only be produced in the media nexus of New York and Washington. More than the salaciousness, more than the deception, more than anything else, Weiner's undoing was that the story simply wouldn't go away.

Weiner was the typecast star of a 21st-century sex scandal featuring a political insider who sought affirmation but had a one-way sense of the media — he knew how to get attention but not how to deflect it. When the original photo surfaced, he booked a round of interviews and then lied about what he had done.

Before the scandal, he was known for political savvy and a mastery of modern media: He delivered bombastic speeches on the House floor aimed at evening news audiences, took to cable television to castigate party leaders for not pushing a more progressive line on health care and acquired tens of thousands of friends and followers on Facebook and Twitter — a handful of whom would be his downfall.

Frustrated colleagues developed a consensus view of Weiner: So smart, and so stupid.

Still, there may have been a bit of strategy in his resignation.

He spoke of his work to represent "middle-class values," the kind of campaign mantra that suggests he sees a comeback down the road. Some supporters quietly intimated he could someday make another run for public office, although in the interim he will need to find a job in a private sector he's never been a part of.

"He might run in Alaska," joked Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-N.J.) before turning more serious. "I don't think it's a good idea that he think about it in the next five years, but who's to say what's going to happen in five years."

On Thursday, even friends were happy to see him exit. No one in politics would stand with him, literally or figuratively.

Abedin, reportedly watched his first news conference — in which he acknowledged sending sexually charged text messages and photographs to six women over three years — with her best friend, Doug Band.

Band, the longtime top aide to President Bill Clinton, and his wife served as counselors to Abedin as the scandal unfolded, despite what was described as revulsion with her husband for what he'd done. Abedin returned from a trip to Africa with her boss, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday. It's not yet clear what effect she had on his decision to step down.

The Clintons, who consider Abedin a "second daughter," made clear their disgust with Weiner. But they also articulated clear support for his wife, while not engaging the

congressman on what he should do (a report that the former president urged Weiner to leave office, sources said, was untrue).

"They are livid," said one source affiliated with Hillary Clinton.

Rep. Joe Crowley (D-N.Y.), one of a handful of House members who attended the Weiner-Abedin wedding, had nothing to say to reporters in the Capitol on Thursday, avoiding a small pack that followed his movements on the House floor attempting to get some reaction or insight.

His silence throughout the scandal was widely taken as a sign of loyalty to Weiner.

Once his friend had resigned, Crowley released a sympathetic statement.

"Anthony has been a strong advocate for his community and an influential legislator. Although I was deeply disappointed in his behavior, this is a sad way to end his congressional service," Crowley said. "I know Anthony and Huma well and I know brighter days are ahead for them and their family. I wish them the best during what is surely a difficult time in their lives."

Another pal who declined to join calls for Weiner's resignation, Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson, said "it's difficult to watch the self-destruction of a friend and to witness the breaking of hearts over what can only be categorized as reprehensible behavior and bad judgment."

Even if Weiner wanted to hold out and stay in office, the tipping point came Wednesday. Abedin had returned to the United States from her trip abroad and party leaders were plotting to strip him of his assignment to the Energy and Commerce Committee. They were powerless to expel him but intent on forcing him out.

In an impromptu session with Capitol Hill reporters, Israel declined to detail their conversation but noted that Weiner had knocked the party off message.

"There's no question that our ability to communicate on motivating issues," such as Social Security and Medicare, "has been impaired by Mr. Weiner's behavior," Israel said.

By the time he took the stage Thursday, Weiner seemed far more at peace than he has at any time since the scandal broke. He delivered a prepared script and declined to take questions.

But it was an uncomfortable scene.

At times, he could barely be heard above lewd questions shouted from fringe members of the media.

"Are you more than 7 inches?" one yelled.

In the Capitol, New York Reps. Jerry Nadler and Nita Lowey, both Democrats, shrugged when asked whether Weiner has a future in New York politics.

"It's very sad, the whole thing is very sad. It's a tragedy and I wish him well," Nadler said.

“What else can I say?”

Lawmakers attributed Weiner’s failure to survive the scandal to a unique combination of factors: The racy pictures and texts were publicly available, he lied privately, publicly, proactively and repeatedly, and he had alienated many of his colleagues over the years with abrasive conduct, including a propensity to treat them and his own staff poorly.

Other than a handful of close friends who spoke up for him behind closed doors, no one was anxious to help break his fall.

On Thursday, political professionals marveled at Weiner's decision to gather the media once again just so he could announce his resignation.

Perhaps he felt a commitment to the many liberals who had encouraged him to stay in office on cable television programs and in blog posts and Tweets.

Actor Danny DeVito had encouraged him to stay in office and progressive television personalities attacked his detractors by noting that other lawmakers had been allowed to stay in office after committing acts of malfeasance and sexual misconduct.

Perhaps Weiner just couldn’t stand not to win one more media cycle.

Either way, the denouement was classic Weiner: Live and on national television.



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