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IS FERRARO BEING BLAMED FOR ZACCARO'S ACTIONS?

Geraldine Ferraro may not be smart about understanding her husband's finances, but she certainly has been clever about harnessing the news media to shift the focus of national debate. Instead of talking about her own actions, she has used the media to reframe the question about her finances and disclosures to, "Should a woman candidate be responsible for her husband's financial mistakes?"

Liberal commentators are still giving her rave reviews for her 90-minute news conference when she discussed her income tax disclosures. She didn't answer the questions very well, but the press admired the way she kept cool under pressure.

She produced a reaction very similar to the famous interrogation that candidate John F. Kennedy faced from a group of Protestant ministers in 1960. He didn't answer the questions very well, either, but the Catholics were impressed with his courage in the face of hostile questioning.

Tom Braden is typical of the liberal commentators who have poured fulsome praise on Ferraro. Comparing her performance to the famous speech by which Richard Nixon saved himself from being bounced off the 1952 national ticket as Dwight Eisenhower's running mate, Braden wrote: "She didn't do it with a Checkers speech. She never once talked about her background of poverty. There was no cloth coat, no dog."

Ferraro's own "Checkers/cloth coat speech" actually came a week later in her interview with Connie Chung. That interview was craftily manipulated (a) to evoke sympathy ("I'm hurting. My kids are devastated."), and (b) to lead her media fans into defending her on the specious ground that she was being unfairly blamed for her husband's actions ("They took my husband who was standing on the side, pulled him into the ring.").

I agree that Ferraro shouldn't have to answer for her husband's business actions and mistakes. But she clearly should have to answer for her own actions and mistakes.

In six annual financial disclosures filed with the U.S. House of Representatives, Ferraro checked the box claiming an exemption from disclosing her husband's finances. To

check this box, under penalty of perjury, means that the member of Congress swears that he (a) has "no knowledge" of his/her spouse's business or assets, and (b) "neither derives, nor expects to derive, any financial or economic benefit" from the business or assets.

The rules warn that the "benefit" test should be interpreted in the strictest way and that the definition of "benefit" includes "vacations, the education of dependents, the maintenance of a home, etc." The narrowness of the exemption is indicated by the fact that it is claimed by only 16 of 435 House members and only three of 100 Senators.

Yet, Ferraro was the secretary-treasurer of her husband's company, a director, and a stockholder, and lived in several houses paid for by her husband's income. If it is true that Ferraro had "no knowledge" of John Zaccaro's business for which she was listed as an officer and stockholder, then she has no credibility as a lawyer and as a person capable of managing a responsible office.

If it is not true that she had no knowledge of her husband's business, then the same harsh rules should be applied to her that were applied to her fellow member of Congress, George Hansen (R-Idaho), who now faces a prison term of five to 15 months and a $40,000 fine for failing to disclose his wife's financial assets. If Ferraro didn't have to disclose Zaccaro's assets, President Reagan should immediately pardon George Hansen.

What about the shenanigans by which she raised the money for her first campaign for Congress? All within one year, Ferraro bought a piece of real estate in Manhattan from a company owned by Zaccaro for $25,000 cash plus mortgage, then sold it to Zaccaro's partner for a profit of $75,000 (neglecting to pay income taxes on the gain) and used the money to pay back Zaccaro for the illegal loan by which he financed her Congressional campaign (who then bought back the property from his partner); then she persuaded the Federal Election Commission to give her campaign only a slap on the wrist (a $750 fine) on the basis of her claim that she had been advised by a former FEC lawyer that the loan from Zaccaro was OK, which the FEC lawyer now denies. Who is telling the truth?

Finally, there is the matter of the porn peddler who rents space in a New York building managed by the Zaccaro real estate company for which Ferraro is the secretary treasurer. Can the secretary-treasurer not know who the rent payments are coming from?

Ferraro shouldn't have to answer for Zaccaro's actions--just her own. But if she really doesn't know what is going on, how could she cope with the Vice Presidency?