

## Opinion

### All the president's confidantes

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October 17, 2005—"Confidante." Confidante? What's a confidante? In what social milieu do "confidantes" thrive? Is it a profession? Is it a legal or political term? It has a whiff of reaction.

I think of Cesare Borgia. Wasn't Lucrezia the alleged poisoner, his sister, possibly his lover, his "confidante"? It certainly is sexist. No one called the male advisors of Renaissance princes "confidants"—perish the thought. They were called "consiglieri" [advice-givers]. They became "parliamentarians" in the bourgeois era. Imagine calling Kissinger Nixon's "confidant"! I mean, to be a man's "confidant" signifies being a female receptacle of the great man's secrets. It means to be an intellectual mistress—a sort of passive gossip tart.

It also means being deluded about acting independently as "the power behind the throne"—in reality serving as a mirror in which the man confessing can see himself enlarged. It means reflecting back the man's opinion with tender and respectful approval. How odd that the term should be bandied about as a positive signifier for political worth in the industrial democracy of the United States!

"Confidante": a sofa with a bar in the middle. The furniture firm of Hepplewhite made them. No, that's not it. Or perhaps it is. A legal "bar"? A secret drinks "bar"? Hmmm! Too allusive. Besides, you wouldn't want to appoint an actual sofa to the Supreme Court, risking speculative chatter as to who sits at either side of the "bar" during confidential sessions on how to repeal Roe versus Wade!

"Confidante." Here's a possibility: a special kind of courtier, which is itself an ancient profession. Once the part of a ruling household, the courtier's functions today endure as the personal "confidantes" and assistants of hereditary rulers. "Hereditary rulers"? A Bush-family brat? Possible. "The rewarded campaign donors of the political system of the United States of America form a more modern group of de facto courtiers," says one of my obscure sources, I don't know how authoritatively. Karen Hughes. Condoleezza Rice. Now Harriet Miers. All the president's confidantes—rewarded for their contribution of loyalty or cash. Quite a harem of confidantes! One would think this president has an infinite need for women's ears—or is it adulation and mothering?

Arguably, the most accomplished "confidante" in the ancient world was Pericles' brilliant rhetorician, Aspasia. She almost certainly wrote Pericles' "Funeral Oration" for fallen Athenian soldiers. George W. Bush is not likely to require a "confidante" of that sort because he doesn't attend the funerals of fallen soldiers.

And it's not like these Bush "confidantes" have much in the way of social tact, a traditional requirement for achieving the exalted status of "confidantes" of distinguished men. Mme. Rice was spending thousands of dollars for shoes in New York City while Hurricane Katrina stripped New Orleans of shoe shops and much else. That's called a social solecism in the circles where "confidantes" reigned. Nor is talent, another must-have of the classically witty and verbally nimble "confidante," much in evidence. Karen Hughes, charged with propping up the "image" of the United States, found on a recent "diplomatic" tour of the Middle East that people there were not interested in her advertisement slogans. They're tuned in to reality. They take no commercial breaks. Abu Ghraib—and "democracy" in Iraq—is a pretty sobering

advertisement for the United States of America, thank you very much! The "confidante" was much disconcerted, as well she might be, having conflated image and reality in the course of her servile service of obfuscation to her confider!

As a "confidante" Mme. Miers is a judicial "blank." This makes me think of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," in which Viola, in drag, becomes the "confidante" of Duke Orsino and falls in love with him. She tells Orsino that a hypothetical woman (in fact, herself) might very well fall in love with him. He asks, "What is her story?" "A blank, my lord," she truthfully answers. "Truthfully" because "confidantes" cannot afford to have stories apart from the one in which their masters star.

Why the Mme? Well, because "confidantes" were the phenomenon of the French salons—glittering social clubs, where brilliant men unwound under the vigilant care and ever-ready ear of accomplished hostesses. The "confidante" is an overwhelmingly French affair. Mme. de la Fayette, Mme. Recamier, Mme de Beaumont, Mlle. de Gournay, Mlle. de Lespinasse, Mme de Stael, et al. They ate duck and drank Armagnac together with the great men in sumptuous rooms. The club-footed attempts of these right-wing cultural yobs to invent terms outside the common parlance—and outside our democratic culture—seem destined to reveal their social gaucheness. On the one hand, they ban french fries from the House of Representatives' cafeterias; on the other they introduce Gallicisms to the White House out of sheer linguistic desperation to mask their will to install regime favorites—courtiers and confidantes—in positions they can then control.

About expert "confidantes" Voltaire said, "The decline of their beauty revealed the dawn of their intellect." This is unkind and sexist, of course, but sexist functions elicit sexist responses.

Now, Harriett Meiers looks like a pretty enough woman, though her eyeliner could either be removed or improved in order to inspire more confidence in her ability to read the Constitution without seeing it through a film of "confidante" smudge, but one will fervently hope, if she joins the Supreme Court Salon, that, as her beauty declines, her intellect will, in fact, materialize! We have no proof of it to speak of now. But that is, after all, the role of "confidantes"—to have no "story," to be a public "blank."

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