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## POLITICAL MEMO

### A Palin Wedding Is Off, and a Not-So-Private Family Matter Stays Public

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

It is news at the intersection of politics, sociology and gossip: Gov. Sarah Palin's teenage daughter Bristol and her boyfriend, Levi Johnston, have called off their engagement, about 10 weeks after the birth of their child.

But it also speaks to the larger question of where the private becomes the public and whether, once the line is crossed, it is pos-

sible to go back.

When news broke at the Republican convention last year that Bristol Palin, then 17 and the unmarried daughter of the vice-presidential nominee, was five months pregnant, political handlers moved quickly to limit the damage. Senator John McCain's presidential campaign persuaded many conventiongoers and Republicans across the country to shrug it off. Life happens, they said. It just showed that

Governor Palin could relate in a real way to real families.

The McCain-Palin forces released the news themselves and whisked Mr. Johnston, then 18, from Alaska to the convention in Minnesota. In a series of riveting images on the tarmac, Mr. McCain embraced Ms. Palin and grasped Mr. Johnston's arm.

The couple was engaged and a wedding was supposedly in the offing — perhaps in the White House. In a culture of “Juno” and

Jamie Lynn Spears, teenage pregnancy had already lost some of its stigma.

“That’s the best you can do, turn it into a narrative that tells the American people a positive story,” said Paul Costello, a Democratic consultant who was the spokesman for Kitty Dukakis when her husband, Michael, was the Democratic nominee for president in 1988 and she was battling addiction.

“Unfortunately,” Mr. Costello

added, “when the campaign ends, the residue, the collateral damage, can be pretty stark.”

Once the McCain-Palin ticket lost and the spotlight faded, so too, apparently, did the romance. The baby came along at the end of December and a wedding never materialized. Ms. Palin recently made a cheery statement that Mr. Johnston was a “hands-on” dad. But on Wednesday he confirmed to the Associated Press a Star magazine report that he and

Ms. Palin mutually decided “a while ago” to call things off. They then moved on to public recriminations, with Ms. Palin issuing a statement suggesting that her former betrothed and his sister had been trying to “cash in” on the Palin name.

From Mrs. Dukakis to Betty Ford, the families of politicians have watched their lives become tabloid fodder; some politicians,

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BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI

Levi Johnston and Bristol Palin, at the convention.

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from Bill Clinton to former Senators John Edwards of North Carolina and Larry E. Craig of Idaho, have created the fodder themselves. In the past, when a campaign or term in office has ended, the families, at least, have been able to go back to their private lives. But that seems harder now in the 24/7 media culture and will probably be difficult for Ms. Palin, whose mother is still governor of Alaska and has hinted at a future run for national office.

After modern campaigns, Mr. Costello said, “Your narrative is still alive, and your narrative still gets eaten alive.”

There is no way to know how the relationship might have turned out had Governor Palin been elected vice president. As the comedian Tina Fey put it in a parody last year of Governor Palin's views: “I believe marriage is meant to be a sacred institution between two unwilling teenagers.”

What is clear is that most pregnant teenagers are not married

when their children are born. “The tale of Bristol Palin is not rare at all,” said Bill Albert, a spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. He said that fewer than 8 percent of teenage mothers marry the baby's father within a year. And those who do marry can face a rocky road: teenage marriages are twice as likely to fail as those in which the woman is at least 25.

If Ms. Palin's out-of-wedlock pregnancy was not exactly a campaign issue last year, some voters questioned Governor Pa-

lin as a parent. She had just been introduced to the country as someone with five children, including a baby with Down syndrome; why, they wondered, was she putting herself (and family) through a grueling campaign? Others dismissed the question as sexist.

Alex Castellanos, a Republican media consultant, said polling during the campaign showed that some voters, especially some working mothers, thought the governor was paying too high a personal price for her political ambitions.

“You hope that a political leader can provide stability and direction at home if they would attempt to provide it for the country,” he said.

Mr. Castellanos said Ms. Palin's pregnancy and breakup might still shape voters' perceptions if her mother strives for higher office. “There's a process that defeated leaders go through — you retire to the wilderness, go through introspection and you come back having learned something,” he said. “We'll see if Sarah Palin has learned anything from this.”