

News

Letterman saga fuels debate over sex, hypocrisy

by **Matea Gold and Scott Collins** - Oct. 2, 2009 07:27 PM
Los Angeles Times

NEW YORK - [David Letterman](#) has milked plenty of sex scandals for laughs. But it remains to be seen whether the CBS comic's admission Thursday that he had sexual liaisons with female employees while he was involved with his now-wife, the mother of his five-year-old son, will fade away with a few late-night punch lines.

While Letterman focused on his role as the victim of a would-be extortionist who demanded \$2 million to keep the details of his affairs secret, the episode sparked impassioned discussion Friday about sex in the workplace and hypocrisy.

After years of mocking other public figures for their sexual indiscretions, Letterman, 62, is now facing scrutiny for behavior that is verboten in many workplaces. Conservative critics, in particular, expressed disgust with the comedian, whose frequent potshots at former GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin - including a crude joke he made in June about one of her daughters - have infuriated many on the right.

"There is irony here," commentator Michelle Malkin said on the Fox News [morning show](#) "Fox & Friends." "It's hard not to have a smidge of schadenfreude for somebody who's shown contempt for women in public, in his monologues continuously and repeatedly, especially over the campaign, and how he's treated Sarah Palin and her family."

The episode comes as Letterman is enjoying newfound momentum in the late night television ratings race. With Conan O'Brien now hosting NBC's "Tonight Show," the CBS comic surged past his rival during the first week of the season, attracting an average of 5 million total viewers, up 28 percent compared with the same period last year. "Tonight Show" plunged 49 percent, to 2.4 million viewers. Preliminary ratings for Thursday's show were up 22 percent over his average for the year.

Analysts said that they don't expect the revelations about his personal behavior to prompt many viewers to abandon him.

"Dave's true audience is cynical," said Kathy Sharpe, chief executive of the New York-based marketing company Sharpe Partners. "They may be a little disappointed, like, Dave, how can you be so dumb?" ... But they'll still watch."

In fact, by confronting the matter himself on the air, Letterman may have largely contained the damage, said John Rash, a TV programming analyst for the Minneapolis-based ad company Campbell Mithun.

"It makes him an even more compelling character," he said. "Despite the circumstances, it actually humanizes him, which is different than his often-icy image."

Indeed, most of the focus Friday remained on bizarre actions by the alleged extortionist, Robert Joel Halderman, a veteran producer at the CBS newsmagazine "48 Hours Mystery," who left Letterman a letter and a proposed screenplay in the back seat of his car early the morning of Sept. 9, threatening to write a [movie](#) exposing the comic's affairs. After attempting to cash a fake check for \$2 million given to him by Letterman's attorney, Halderman was arrested Thursday afternoon outside the CBS News offices on West 57th Street. He pleaded not guilty Friday to one count of attempted grand larceny in the first degree, a crime punishable by up to 5 to 15 years in prison. He has been suspended from CBS.

Still, many were taken aback by the casual tone Letterman used to describe his sexual relationships with female employees. While saying that he felt "menaced" by Halderman during an extraordinary 10-minute-long segment on Thursday's show, the comic did not express any contrition for cheating on his wife, Regina Lasko, who he dated for 23 years before their marriage in March.

"I have had sex with women who worked on this show," he told the audience matter-of-factly. "And would it be embarrassing if it were made public? Perhaps it would. Especially for the women."

Erin Matson, action vice president for the National Organization for Women, called Letterman's jocularly offensive.

"That plays into same old sex stereotypes that men can do whatever but women should be ashamed of their sexuality," she said. "We're just disgusted that all these Hollywood men think they can do whatever they want."

Coming on the heels of apologetic confessions of infidelity by politicians such as South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford, U.S. Sen. John Ensign of Nevada and former presidential candidate John Edwards, Letterman's decision not to offer a mea culpa was striking, said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo who specializes in media and popular culture.

"There are so many of these scandals, and they all show at least some apology or embarrassment, and this guy decided to control the damage by making it into a joke," she said. "I was actually quite astonished. I would hope that he would be in some way brought to his senses. He seemed ignorant of the issue of sexual harassment. These women worked for him."

A spokesman for Worldwide Pants, Letterman's production company, said the company's sexual harassment policy does not prohibit sexual relationships between managers and employees.

"We have a written policy in our employee manual that covers harassment," the spokesman said in a statement. "It is circulated to every employee every year. Dave is not in violation of our policy, and no one has ever raised a complaint against him."

The spokesman declined to comment on how many women Letterman was involved with or the time span of the relationships.

The news that Halderman was behind the extortion attempt was the talk Friday of the shocked CBS newsroom, where employees puzzled over what could have caused the 51-year-old to behave so recklessly. The longtime producer, who worked for the news division for more than 20 years and went by Joe, was known as a brash but competent newsman who had covered foreign stories out of the Moscow and London bureaus. He was part of an Emmy-winning team that covered the Sept. 11 attacks and directed the Showtime [documentary](#) "Three Days in September" about the Chechen assault of a school in Beslan.

"Everybody is stunned and very sad," said one of his colleagues.

Letterman's indiscretions appear to have come to Halderman's attention through his relationship with a former assistant to the comic, 34-year-old Stephanie Birkitt, who also worked as an [associate producer](#) at "48 Hours." According to voter registration records, Birkitt was residing at Halderman's home in Norwalk, Conn., as recently as last fall. TMZ reported that Halderman was in possession of diaries and correspondence belonging to Birkitt detailing a relationship she had with Letterman.

In the letter he left in Letterman's car, Halderman said he needed to "make a large chunk of money" and included a one-page screenplay treatment describing how the "Late Show" host would have a "ruined reputation" after he exposed details of his private life. He demanded that Letterman call him by 8 a.m. to strike a deal.

Instead, the comic called his attorney, who met with Halderman on Sept. 15. At that time, the CBS producer demanded \$2 million to keep quiet. In coordination with the Manhattan district attorney's office, Letterman's attorney held two more meetings with Halderman at the Jumeirah Essex House, a posh New York hotel, and secretly taped his demands.

After testifying before the grand jury Thursday, Letterman described the experience for his audience.

"This whole thing has been quite scary," he said. "I was worried for myself; I was worried for my family. I felt menaced by this."

Letterman may not have offered a politician's apology for his behavior, but he handled the matter right out of a political playbook, said Dan Schnur, [director](#) of University of Southern California's Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics and a veteran political strategist. "By bringing up the information himself rather than letting it come out from other sources and being forced to react to it, he did a lot to protect himself."