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# Sexual Probity and Presidential Character

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In 1998, members of the Clinton administration found themselves playing roles in a drama that the president had created, but they were not sure whether they were involved in a farce or a tragedy. In truth, the sexual imbroglio the president had created contained elements of both farce and tragedy.

The farcical elements resembled an eighteenth-century situation comedy in which the main character is caught in a sexual affair with a woman not his wife and is greatly embarrassed by the discovery. Clinton's affair also had some of the far-fetched coincidences reminiscent of musical comedy. The president is brought to court by a woman (Paula Jones) who felt that her honor had been impugned by the president's lawyer and who charged that Governor Clinton's rejected sexual proposition to her and its aftermath constituted sexual harassment.

Another woman (Linda Tripp), scorned by the president's lawyer, taped the maunderings of a young woman (Monica Lewinsky) who was love struck and felt neglected by the president. With tapes of the claimed affair in hand, Jones's lawyers laid a trap for Clinton by asking him in front of the grand jury if he had had an affair with Lewinsky. Caught unaware, the president answered in the negative. The judge later ruled that the Lewinsky affair was not relevant to the case and also threw the sexual harassment case out of court. But the damage was done, the press was in a feeding frenzy, and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr was hot on the trail of Clinton for perjury.

The farcical aspects of the situation were evident because it seemed so petty. That the president would risk his whole administration and legacy for a little sexual gratification was incredible. If the situation were presented in a work of fiction, the motivation and plot would not have been credible.

But important issues were also at stake. Compounding the legal but morally dubious affair, the president was accused of perjury and obstruction of justice. His refusal to come forth with evidence and explanations raised the question of whether the president was above the law and could resist legal inquiry. In a series of legal showdowns, courts decided that neither executive privilege nor lawyer-client privilege could protect the president's aides from giving their testimony. Even Secret Service agents were forced to testify about the president's actions. Questions about the president's personal integrity were raised, and it became apparent that he had lied to the public, his closest aides, and members of his cabinet, as well as the grand jury.

Thus, President Clinton also found himself in a tragic situation in the classical sense that his potential for greatness was squandered because of a character flaw. Bill Clinton was one of the most intelligent presidents and one of the most gifted politicians of the twentieth century. While he might not have ranked among the great presidents in U.S. history, he had the potential to accomplish much during his two terms in office. But

he risked all of this, not to mention his personal reputation and his family, for a few moments of pleasure.

For some, the private sexual behavior of presidents should not be a public issue, since it does not have to do with the performance of official duties or public policy. From this perspective, there should be a zone of privacy that journalists ought to respect unless there is a clear connection with the official duties of the president. Regardless of the personal morality of the behavior, this view holds, it is not the public's business to be concerned with the sexual conduct of presidents. This general norm was largely respected by the press into the 1970s.

On the other hand, the argument that sexual behavior is relevant to presidential performance argues that character is seamless. Sexual infidelity is seen as a breach of trust, and trust is seen as one of the most important dimensions of the relation of citizens to their government. If a president cannot be trusted to be faithful to his spouse, how can we have confidence that he will tell the truth to the American people? One criticism of Bill Clinton in the 1992 campaign was, "You can't be one kind of man and another kind of President."<sup>1</sup> This line of argument leads to the conclusion that inappropriate sexual behavior is an important element of presidential character, that its uncovering is a legitimate focus of journalistic inquiry, and that the public ought to use the information in judging a president's fitness for holding office.

It is worth noting that Bill Clinton is not the first president accused of sexual misbehavior. To take a prominent example in the twentieth century, President Harding was by any standard an egregious philanderer. Harding had numerous affairs with a variety of women before and during his presidency. He conceived a child with Nan Britton and was almost caught in a room off the Oval Office with her by his wife. He also had paid money to support a child he had with Susan Hodder. His former mistress, Carrie Fulton Phillips, blackmailed the president with his love letters to her. Secret Service agents assisted Harding in his assignations with numerous women while he was in office, often at a house on H Street used for presidential parties. His friends set up secret bank accounts for payments to women threatening to reveal their relationships with him as well as for Nan Britton and their daughter. Harding's laxity in his personal behavior spilled over into the rest of his administration.<sup>2</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt had a relationship with Lucy Mercer Rutherford when she was his wife's social secretary and he was assistant secretary of the Navy. When Eleanor discovered the relationship, FDR broke off with Mercer and did not see her until the last years of his life. President Roosevelt also had an ongoing relationship with his personal secretary, Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, who had been with the Roosevelts since FDR had been governor of New York and for a part of his presidency functioned in many ways as his "wife."<sup>3</sup> During World War II, Dwight Eisenhower was widely rumored to have had an affair with his driver and aide, Kay Summersby. Although they were often seen together in public, they were seldom alone together. In her memoirs, Summersby said that they had fallen in love but that they never consummated their relationship sexually.<sup>4</sup>

According to many reports, John Kennedy was a reckless philanderer, before and during his presidency. If only some of the allegations about John Kennedy's sex life reported by Seymour Hersh in *The Dark Side of Camelot* are true, Kennedy was reckless and irresponsible in his sexual exploits while in office.<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that

Kennedy's relationship with Judith Campbell Exner compromised Kennedy because she also was connected to organized crime figures. While there were some rumors of JFK's sexual behavior circulating while he was in office, the press was not aggressive in investigating them nor in reporting on what was then considered private behavior.

Lyndon Johnson was said to have had a number of sexual relationships while he was president, continuing a pattern in his political life. According to biographer Robert Dallek, "throughout his Senate and vice-presidential years, he remained an exhibitionist and a philanderer who didn't mind flaunting his conquests."<sup>6</sup> Johnson reportedly bragged, "I had more women by accident than he [Kennedy] has had on purpose."<sup>7</sup> The 1970s were slack years for presidential sex scandals, with Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter seemingly faithful spouses. George Bush, especially during the 1992 campaign, was dogged by rumors about an alleged sexual relationship with Jennifer Fitzgerald, an aide to Bush at the Republican National Committee, and when he was in China, although no improper relationship was ever proved.<sup>8</sup>

In looking at past presidential sexual behavior and character, it is not obvious that sexual probity is always associated with presidential competence and trustworthiness. Nor is sexual indiscretion always associated with poor presidential performance. Certainly, President Harding was sexually profligate and not a particularly effective president, with his administration suffering from a number of major scandals. But Franklin Roosevelt, with his acknowledged relationships with Lucy Mercer and Missy LeHand, is generally rated as one of the great presidents. John Kennedy, while sexually irresponsible, was an effective president and is certainly one of our most popular chief executives. There was no hint of any sexual impropriety in Jimmy Carter's presidency, yet he was not considered more effective than FDR or JFK. Richard Nixon was surely faithful to Patricia Nixon in the White House, yet other aspects of his character led to Watergate and campaign abuses.

Thus, while sexual probity may be an important aspect of presidential character, it does not guarantee morality or competence in the Oval Office. And sexual impropriety can be found in presidents who are clearly competent in affairs of state.

While conceding that some presidents were competent even while engaging in sexual activity outside of their marriages, we might still want to judge whether their behavior in this area was appropriate or moral. If the basis of moral judgment is the breaking of marriage fidelity vows, a surface judgment can be made with little understanding of the circumstances. From this absolutist perspective that sex outside of marriage is always wrong, it should not matter in judging presidential character whether the behavior took place before or after election. Adultery is adultery, and character is the bedrock of a person's behavior. Adultery at any time reveals flaws that, according to the absolutist interpretation, brings into question a person's fitness for office. Those who take this perspective must thus take into account how Eisenhower and Reagan's pre-presidential sexual behavior might have affected their presidential character.<sup>9</sup>

If, however, the moral judgment is based on how a president treats other human beings, a more nuanced response may be necessary. For instance, one could argue that affairs of the heart—that is, a long-term romantic relationship—should be judged differently than one-night stands with prostitutes or brief acquaintances. Thus, we might look differently at FDR's long-term romance with Missy LeHand than we would at

JFK's short dalliances with women brought to him solely for his sexual pleasure. We might also consider the relationship between the president and his wife and how the adultery affected their marriage. But to make a judgment about these complex relationships, one would need to know in some detail the nature of the relationship. This depth of knowledge is difficult to come by except in a detailed historical analysis of the relationship. Such an analysis of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt is the subject of Doris Kearns Goodwin's, *No Ordinary Time*.<sup>10</sup> Her subtle probing over time of the relationship of Franklin and Eleanor gives the reader enough information to make some judgments and come to some understanding of the relative responsibility of the couple in their relationships and thus Franklin's level of culpability in his relationship with other women.

A similar depth of analysis about the relationship of Warren and Florence Harding is available in *Florence Harding* by Carl Sferrazza Anthony.<sup>11</sup> Anthony concludes about their relationship,

They made some sort of agreement. . . . In every way except through sexual fidelity, and his honesty about that. . . . He would honor, cherish, and obey if she asked no questions. Her jealousy never actually abated, but her attempts to keep him from other women became more a matter of protecting his career and *their* work on the career's behalf. There was what one friend gently termed "the perfect understanding" which existed between them.<sup>12</sup>

Such an analysis of the Clintons' marriage is not yet available, but that does not mean that we cannot make judgments about President Clinton's sexual behavior. The basis for judgment, rather than an absolute prohibition of adultery or the morality of relationships, would be a question of prudential judgment and self-restraint. While conceding that we might not know enough to be able to judge the relationship between two people, we might still make harsh judgments about a president's sexual behavior outside of marriage.

This judgment would be based on the premise that public morality, however hypocritical it might be, proscribes adultery and sexual profligacy. And it is predictable that public reaction to discovered sexual impropriety will be harsh and threaten the reputation of a president and his administration. Given this reality of American politics, any president who violates these public norms is liable to judgment for risking his reputation and the success of his policy and political agenda.

The implication here is that a president ought to realize that any sexual indiscretion while in office may very well be uncovered, and if it is, much more is at risk than personal reputation; the political and policy legacy of the administration is also in jeopardy. The predictable ensuing political scandal will, at the least, distract him and, at the most, engulf his administration. He will be spending time plotting with lawyers how to confront charges rather than pursuing his public policy goals.

It is from this perspective that we can judge Bill Clinton; his sexual relationship (of whatever kind) with a young woman in the White House can be judged to be reckless and irresponsible. At a personal level, Clinton's indiscretions were predictably embarrassing to his wife and daughter. In satisfying his own pleasure, he undermined public

trust in him; he made himself vulnerable to the distractions of defending himself, and he put at risk his political agenda and legacy.

This helps explain the bitterness of many of his followers who felt betrayed by Clinton's seeming recklessness. They felt that all of their work and hopes over the years were put in jeopardy because of the personal self-indulgence of the president. In the words of one member of his administration, "What a shame it would be if he was remembered for having sex with some kid from Beverly Hills. It just makes me sad. All that opportunity lost. And I blame him. Who else is there to blame?"<sup>13</sup> Former Clinton confidant George Stephanopoulos wrote, "But if the Lewinsky charges are valid, I know this: I'm livid. It's a terrible waste of years of work by thousands of people with the support of millions more."<sup>14</sup> Former Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers said, "We don't know everything but we know that she visited the White House 37 times. We know they exchanged gifts. I don't need to know any more than that to know that he put himself at risk. It was reckless."<sup>15</sup>

In attempting to explain the seeming lack of public outrage over the Lewinsky scandal and continued high presidential approval ratings, some analysts suggested that a majority of the public did not care about Clinton's sexual infidelity or lying. There were pundit lamentations about the decline of public morals. Yet, despite public opinion polls showing a lack of enthusiasm to remove Clinton from office, it is hard to believe that most Americans found it acceptable for a president to have an affair with a young White House intern. Most Americans probably felt that it was wrong and irresponsible. But they were willing to separate their personal judgment about Clinton's private character from their judgment about his public character and policy agenda.

Even after Clinton admitted his sexual relationship with Lewinsky, the fact of his lying alone was unlikely to be sufficient to lead to his impeachment and removal from office. After his confession, the pattern of majority public approval of his presidential performance continued along with majorities believing he was not honest or trustworthy and widespread disgust with his personal behavior. A key distinction was that there was no partisan or policy motive behind Clinton's lying. His actions were more sordid than sinister. He was not hiding affairs of state but rather his personal affairs. He was not trying to gain political advantage but to avoid personal embarrassment. Clinton's denials, although wrong, were understandable to many Americans, and most people could imagine circumstances under which they would lie about sex. Thus, Clinton's behavior, while deserving of public opprobrium, was not likely to lead to impeachment and removal from office.

The more likely explanation for Americans' disinclination to favor Clinton's impeachment was pragmatic; what were the alternatives to his staying in office? The Watergate proceedings were so traumatic that there was a bipartisan consensus during the Iran-Contra scandal not to seriously consider impeachment. But in addition, if Clinton were impeached and removed from office, what would be the consequences? At the public level, Clinton was perceived to be a competent president, and his policy agenda was acceptable to most Americans. It was not obvious to Clinton supporters that a change to President Gore would improve things, and to Republicans in Congress it was not obvious that their 2000 presidential election chances would be better with an experienced Gore in office than a wounded Clinton.

If, however, the Lewinsky scandal had become public before the 1996 elections, there would have been serious doubt about Clinton's reelection. In that case, there would have been an alternative readily available without the trauma of impeachment hearings. In such a case, voters might very well have considered Clinton's sexual behavior relevant in their decisions about whether to return him to office. Thus, the lack of public support for impeachment did not imply public approval of Clinton's sexual behavior but rather was due to approval of his presidential performance and the lack of a practical alternative to his continuance in office.

### Notes

1. Lynn Martin, secretary of labor for George Bush, quoted by Michael Beschloss, "George Bush," in *Character above All*, ed. Robert A. Wilson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 242.
2. For details and documentation of Harding's affairs, see Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *Florence Harding* (New York: William Morrow, 1998). Nan Britton wrote a book about her affair with Harding, *The President's Daughter* (New York: Elizabeth Ann Guild, 1927).
3. For a sensitive and insightful analysis of the Roosevelts's marriage and their extramarital relationships, see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); on the role of Misy LeHand, see pages 20-22.
4. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 102-03, 125. See also Kay Summersby, *Eisenhower Was My Boss* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1948).
5. Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997). For a skeptical review of Hersh, see Garry Wills, "A Second Assassination," *New York Review of Books*, December 18, 1997, pp. 4-8.
6. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 186.
7. Nigel Cawthorne, *Sex Lives of the Presidents* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), p. 236.
8. See Herbert Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), pp. 178-79, 239-49).
9. Those who argue that character is seamless would also have to assess Eisenhower and Reagan's truthfulness. It may be understandable that the Eisenhower administration at first claimed that Gary Powers's U-2 flight was not a spy mission. But it is harder to explain President Reagan's claim to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir on November 29, 1983 that he (Reagan) had photographed Nazi death camps at the end of World War II when he, in fact, had never left the country. See Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 486-90.
10. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
11. Anthony, *Florence Harding*.
12. Anthony, *Florence Harding*, p. 98.
13. Quoted in David Remnick, "Is Sex Necessary?" *The New Yorker*, February 2, 1998, p. 32.
14. George Stephanopoulos, "A Question of Betrayal," *Newsweek*, February 2, 1998, p. 50-51.
15. Institute of Governmental Studies, U.C. Berkeley, "Jay Gatsby in the Oval Office," *Public Affairs Report* 39, no. 4 (July 1998): 7.