



# Judging Presidential Character

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## Abstract

This article takes the character issue seriously by addressing how presidents ought to be judged with respect to truthfulness, sexual probity, and promise-keeping. It argues that it is beneficial rather than destructive to examine the faults of political leaders along with their virtues. The analysis concludes that democratic politics makes it unlikely that our leaders will often be moral paragons, and that while we ought not to condone wrongdoing, neither should we expect perfection.

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Americans agree that presidential character is important—just as or more important than intellect, organizational ability, television presence, and effectiveness in public speaking. The values, principles, and habits of behavior that mark an individual will strongly influence his or her behavior, and the stakes are very high in the U.S. presidency. Peggy Noonan states it cogently, if excessively:

In a president, character is everything. A president doesn't have to be brilliant; Harry Truman wasn't brilliant, and he helped save Western Europe from Stalin. He doesn't have to be clever; you can hire clever. . . . But you can't buy courage and decency, you can't rent a strong moral sense. A president must bring those things with him. (1995, 202)

From the perspective of citizen voters, character is crucial because no one can predict the situations in which a president will be placed once in office. The issues that were pressing in a campaign may no longer be important, and the promises made in a campaign may not be appropriate for new circumstances. New and unforeseen crises may face the country. Thus it is more important to select an individual who will apply a sound set of principles and values in unexpected circumstances, someone who citizens can be confident will make the right decision. Robert Teeter<<Teeter?>>, President <<which?>> Bush's pollster, put it this way: "Voters know that the issues a president will have to face will change in time. But his character will always be there" (Shogan 1999, 11).

Character is particularly important in the presidency because the issues reaching the president are often of great consequence and hotly contested. Compelling arguments buttress each side of the issues—if the issues were simple, they would have

been decided at lower levels. Thus the deeper roots of presidential behavior, that is, character, come into play at the most crucial times in a presidency.

The intent of this article is to take the character issue seriously by explicitly addressing how presidents ought to be judged with respect to several crucial aspect of character: truthfulness, sexual probity, and promise-keeping. It will first address different approaches to understanding character—psychological, biographical, popular usage, and comparative behavior. It will then consider how personal morality relates to the duties of public office. An argument will then be made that it is beneficial rather than destructive to examine the faults of political leaders along with their virtues. Finally, the paper will conclude that democratic politics makes it unlikely that our leaders will often be moral paragons, and that while we ought not to condone wrongdoing, neither should we expect perfection.

## Understanding Presidential Character

Paraphrasing Justice Stewart's observation about the definition of pornography, everybody knows good and bad character when they see it, but no one can define it.<sup>1</sup> Scholars are capable of constructing consistent and coherent definitions of character and applying them to different presidents. But no formulation can explain the good and bad aspects of presidential behavior in terms of one definition of character or set of character traits. And no system can encompass consistently the character traits common in popular rhetoric.

### *Psychological Approaches to Presidential Character*

Psychological analyses of character tend to see behavior as conditioned by psychological traits firmly established in early life and reinforced as one matures. The hope is to be able to generalize and to predict behavior based on the character of the individual. In Harold Lasswell's words,

We want to discover what developmental experiences are significant for the political traits and interests of the mature. . . . Can we conceive the development of the human personality as a functioning whole, and discern the turning-points in the growth of various patterns of political life? Can we uncover the typical subjective histories of typical public characters? (1960, 8)

Alexander and Juliette George view presidential personality (or style) as having an important effect on the ways in which presidents structure and manage the policy-making process. The crucial factors, according to them, are the president's cognitive style (i.e., preferred ways of acquiring and using information), sense of efficacy and competence, and orientation toward political conflict. "The need to act on important matters that are characterized by uncertainty and value complexity can be the source of considerable stress for a president" (George and George 1998, 9). Thus the deeper roots of presidential behavior, that is character, come into play at the most crucial times in a presidency. The Georges' analysis is helpful in understanding how presidents conduct themselves in office in routine matters and under pressure, but the focus is more on the effect of personal style on sound decision-making than on character.

Stanley Renshon defines presidential character as patterns of behavior that are deeper than personality and relatively fixed by adulthood. According to Renshon, character is “a consolidated psychological foundation that frames a person’s responses to circumstances . . . the basic foundation upon which personality structures develop and operate.” (1996, 37). Character “is not an open-ended expanse of developmental possibilities, but a consolidated psychological foundation that frames a person’s responses to circumstances and is often responsible for the person’s circumstances themselves” (Renshon 1996, 37). Character is more profound in its impact than mere personality, which denotes “appearance, visible behavior, surface quality,” in contrast to character, which connotes “deep (perhaps inborn), fixed and basic structure” (ibid., 38, quoting Gordon Allport). Character “stands at the core of the person’s psychology and is the basic foundation upon which personality structures develop and operate” (ibid.).

James David Barber (1992) developed a matrix of presidential character along two dimensions in his well-known book on the subject. The active-passive dimension describes how much energy a president invests in the administration’s policy and political agenda. The second dimension, positive-negative, describes how a president feels about being president. Some presidents (positive) enjoy politics, but some (negative) become political leaders through a sense of duty and do not enjoy the job of being president. Barber’s framework can provide insights into presidents and how they approach the office, but it does not try to evaluate them morally in the traditional meaning of good character.

Barber’s categories are based on in-depth analysis of the childhood and political development of the presidents he examines. His analysis of emotional challenges to the presidents is filled with insights about their behavior in office. But his system is unique and has not been extended in the literature on the presidency. In addition, his analysis is aimed at explaining and predicting presidential behavior, not at the moral or traditional meanings of good character.

The psychological approach can lead to useful insights about presidential behavior, but it has not led to any consistent set of criteria by which presidential behavior can be predicted. Nor does it help with a comparative analysis of different presidents. It also neglects the moral issues that common usage attributes to character.

### *Biographical Perspectives on Character*

Biographical studies of presidential character tend to see character as a result of the many influences, experiences, and other factors that make the person who he or she is. Thus early experiences, challenges confronted, and emotional relationships are seen as part of the complex web that makes up an individual’s unique character. The point is not to see the individual as one of a certain type of person, but rather to understand the multiplicity of factors that make up the unique individual within his or her historical context.

In a book edited by Robert A. Wilson, *Character Above All*, prominent biographers analyze the character of every president since Franklin Roosevelt (Wilson 1995). The essays are full of insights from the contributors, who are mostly sympathetic toward their subjects. The problem, from an analytic perspective, is that the authors use their own definitions of character in evaluating the presidents. This leads to interesting analysis, but not much purchase on the comparative evaluation of

presidents. The strength of the biographical approach is that it does the most justice to individual presidents by laying out the full situation facing them, often from a sympathetic perspective, and the background they bring to their challenges. The drawback of this approach is that it is difficult to compare different presidents.

### *Popular Definitions of Character*

Public opinion polls show widespread agreement on the importance of character in the life of the polity. But just as striking is the lack of any clear content to the term. From 81 to 95 percent of respondents agree that the following are important attributes of good character: obeying those in positions of authority, following your own conscience, sacrificing your own interests for the good of others, protecting your own interests, sticking to your own principles no matter what, enjoying yourself.<sup>2</sup> It is immediately evident that these aspects of character are often mutually exclusive.

Despite the lack of consensus on definition, the ordinary usage and commonsense way of talking about a person's character encompasses a number of traits, most with moral connotations (Josephson 1995).

*Trustworthiness* in common usage refers to honesty, which, at the most basic level, means not telling lies, that is, not telling a deliberate untruth. One of the most devastating criticisms one can make of a politician (or of anyone) is that he or she is a liar. *Reliability* implies keeping one's word. If you make a promise, can you be counted on to keep it? This means that if you make a commitment, you will make every reasonable effort to keep the commitment. A common dimension of reliability is consistency, which in a president is related to vision or fixedness of purpose. Americans say that they admire this in political leaders, who too often seem to vacillate with the winds of public opinion. Despite Emerson's admonition that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," politicians would much rather be seen as consistent than as changing (Bartlett 1980, 497).<sup>3</sup>

*Loyalty* is another dimension of character that is important to individuals as well as politicians. One expects that a person will not lightly abandon a friend or ally merely because circumstances make it difficult to remain loyal. Since politics is such a precarious profession, loyalty is deeply valued. An important personal dimension of loyalty is sexual fidelity, especially the keeping of marriage vows. Extramarital sexual activity is seen as betrayal and most often entails lying. *Responsibility*, another dimension of good character, is the willingness to be accountable for one's actions, to strive to do one's job well, and to exercise the restraint necessary for self-control. People admire this in individuals and politicians.

Political *prudence* calls attention to important considerations leaders ought to take into account when exercising power. Prudence includes using disciplined reason and attention to experience when making decisions. It includes a sense of proportion in judging the relationship of means to ends. It entails considering the long-term consequences to the polity as a whole as well as the short-term benefits to a faction or political party. Prudent political leaders will not take inappropriate risks or use inappropriate means to accomplish their political goals (Dobel 1998, 74–81).

*Integrity* implies a wholeness or consistency between one's outward and inner life and a consistent presentation of oneself from group to group. It also implies the avoidance of decisions based on expediency, that is, just for temporary personal or political benefit.

The popular-usage approach to character often carries strong moral connotations. Thus someone who is seen as lacking in trustworthiness, integrity, or responsibility is often seen as immoral, especially with respect to lying and marital fidelity.

### *A Comparative Behavior Approach*

This paper will present an alternative to the psychological and biographical approaches to presidential character that for want of a better term will be called a “comparative behavior” approach. The intent of this approach is to be balanced and fair by examining similar behavior by different presidents (e.g., lying, sexual infidelity).

The popular approach to character entails an explicitly moral tone that makes moral judgments about individuals based on their behavior. A similar moral tone will be adopted here, but the judgments will be limited. That is, limited aspects of the behavior of presidents will be judged in moral terms, but the judgment will not be extended to the whole of a president’s character. The character of presidents as whole individuals will not be rated as good or bad. But certain behaviors of presidents (e.g., lying, sexual infidelity) will be evaluated, criticized, and compared to similar behaviors of other presidents. The implication is that presidents are multi-dimensional and thus may be deficient in one aspect of their character and admirable in others.

The discussion that follows will briefly examine several issues that are central to any general definition of good character: truthfulness, sexual fidelity, and promise-keeping. These issues are prominent in public and private discussions of presidential character. The conclusion will argue that presidents are complex individuals and ought to be evaluated by taking into account their full records as president. On the other hand, a balanced approach to evaluating presidents should not be used to excuse unacceptable behavior.

No claim is made here that the comparative behavior approach is superior to the psychological and biographical approaches; it is merely different. The psychological and biographical approaches are valuable for their purposes and have different strengths. The advantage of the comparative behavior approach is that it explicitly compares presidential behavior in important areas of personal and public morality, and explicitly addresses the moral dimensions of presidential behavior implicit in judgments about presidential character.

### **Public Versus Private Morality**

In judging presidents, the possible differences between private and public morality must be considered. In some cases, public leaders may not be bound by the same ethical strictures as persons acting in private life. Machiavelli argued that leaders are duty bound to violate the mores of private relationships if it will help them serve the stability of the state (Machiavelli 1950, 63–66; Posner 1999, 132–169; Dobel 1998, 115–142; Rhode 1988, 1–19). It is posited for purposes of this analysis that national leaders are not bound by the normal bonds of private morality when they take actions that are necessary for the protection of the national security. For example, lying about the location of U.S. troops or the timing of military operations would be legitimate if it were necessary to protect the safety of our military forces (presuming that the military action has been taken in accord with accepted constitu-

tional processes) (Niebuhr 1949, 157–277). Of course, a private citizen could also justifiably lie in such circumstances.

But on the other hand, it can be argued that public leaders have an *additional* duty to act ethically because of their public office. The consequences for individuals of acting unethically (in addition to the harm they may cause others) are the tarnishing of their reputation and the bad example they may set for others who are aware of

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their bad behavior. But the consequences for public figures, and especially presidents, for acting unethically are multiplied many-fold. Richard Posner (1999) argues that presidents have a dual responsibility comprising executive moral duties and exemplary moral duties.

*Executive* moral duties result from the constitutional duties of the presidency and

include the diligent and prudent exercise of their obligations as head of the executive branch of government. In addition, presidents also have *exemplary* moral duties that relate to the public nature of their behavior. That is, presidents, whether they like it or not, are often seen as role models, especially for children.

The seeking of public office ought to include the understanding that elective office imposes moral obligations beyond those of private behavior and the willingness to accept the additional moral duties of upright behavior. The additional duties of the role of moral exemplar are relevant to the dimensions of character that will now be examined: lies, extramarital sex, and promise-keeping.

### *Truth Telling*

Truth telling is a necessary premise in human societies, for otherwise social cooperation, not to mention healthy economic activity, would be virtually impossible. This is so despite the fact that many lies are told and some of them may be justified in everyday human interactions (Nyberg 1993). Truth telling is important for individuals in order for them to be respected and trusted by others as well as to protect their reputations. It is also important to set a good example for others, including children and young people, whose behavior and values may be influenced by good or poor role models.

The same reasons for truth telling by individuals are magnified in the obligation of public officials, and thus presidents, to tell the truth. The consequences of a bad example by a president are far broader than those of other individuals both because of the wider exposure of the behavior and also because of the role of the president as moral exemplar. This issue (in addition to the legal issues involved) was widely discussed during the impeachment of President Clinton for lying under oath.

But lying takes on broader significance when it is linked to the democratic aspects of presidential leadership. In a democracy, the premise is that the government ought to do what the people want it to do (of course within the constitutional limits to majority rule necessary in any liberal democracy such as the United States). But this premise is seriously undermined if public officials lie to the public by misleading them about the actions of the government and its officials. Thus lies of policy deception are the worst kind of presidential lie.

Some sorts of presidential lies are justified and even obligatory, such as those that might be necessary to protect national security operations. For instance, if President Kennedy had been asked by the press why he was returning to Washington in October 1962 at the beginning of what came to be known as the Cuban missile crisis, he would have been justified in lying. Or if President Carter had been asked in April 1980 whether he was considering a military operation to free the hostages held in Iran, he too would have been justified in lying. But presidents also lie when it is not necessary or justified. Often the lies are trivial, as when President Johnson claimed that some of his ancestors had died at the Alamo or in the battle of San Jacinto. Ronald Reagan told a number of stories that were clearly not true, but these did not do any serious damage, except possibly to his personal credibility.<sup>4</sup>

At a more serious level, President Eisenhower had his spokesmen lie about the U-2 mission over the Soviet Union—he was undone by the survival of the pilot, Gary Powers. Richard Nixon, of course, told many lies about his involvement in Watergate activities. During the 1988 campaign, President George Bush the elder said that he was not “in the loop” when the opening to Iran was planned, but, in fact, he had been present at crucial meetings. President Clinton’s lies under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky were the subject of the articles of impeachment that the House of Representatives passed in 1998.

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The most serious presidential lies are lies of policy deception in which the president says that the government is doing one thing when in fact it is doing another. Such lies undermine the basis for democratic, republican governance. Citizens and voters cannot determine how to vote or how to evaluate those in power if they are deceived about what the policies of the government actually are. Thus Lyndon Johnson was not honest in the 1964 campaign or after his victory in the election. He hid his purposes from the public and lied to Congress as he planned the escalation of the U.S. mission in Vietnam (McMaster 1997, 330). Whether his purpose was to avoid political conflict or protect his Great Society proposals, his deceptions had terrible consequences.

Later in the Vietnam war, shortly after he was elected, Richard Nixon ordered the U.S. Air Force to falsify bombing records to show that the targets it was attacking in Cambodia were really in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese and their allies were not deceived, nor were the Cambodians. The targets of his deception were the Congress and the American people. After secret U.S. arms shipments to Iran were revealed in 1986, President Reagan told the American people that the United States was not trading arms for hostages when, in fact, it was. Reagan also, in several instances in 1987, misled the Tower Commission, which was investigating the Iran-Contra affair. In several cases, Reagan later publicly admitted the inaccuracy of his former statements (Pfiffner 1999, 913–915).

Thus it is not unusual for presidents to tell lies, but not all lies are equivalent. Whether citizen or scholar, one must evaluate each lie in its intent and consequences and set it in the context of its telling. One may deem the circumstances exculpatory or aggravating, but one cannot ignore the lie or argue that all lies are equivalent.

Fairness in understanding and judging presidential character requires an examination of any lies a president tells and a calculation of their impact on an evaluation of the president's overall character.

### *Sexual Fidelity*

With respect to extramarital sex, presidents have the same obligations as private individuals not to cause pain in their families, but they also have duties because of their public office. Personal sexual morality is often based on religious and ethical codes that are important to social stability within societies. Sexual practices vary widely across human cultures, but the bottom line of sexual morality is the duty to act so as not to hurt others (physically or emotionally). Whether one is hurt emotionally, of course, depends importantly on the mores of the society. Thus if polygamy or polyandry is acceptable in a society, its practice may not be considered immoral or cause emotional harm to one's spouse(s). In the United States, marriage is considered to be a serious commitment to be sexually faithful to one's spouse, despite the failure of many to live up to this ideal. Thus presidents as well as other individuals are bound to take seriously their marital vows.

But presidents are bound beyond their interpersonal moral obligations to respect the conventional morality of society with respect to extramarital sex.<sup>5</sup> These obligations apply to a president even if one waives interpersonal obligations. For instance, one might argue that relations between spouses cannot be fully known and therefore we ought not to judge others' private sexual practices. Even if it is stipulated that sexual behavior ought to be private and the privacy of presidents ought to be respected, presidents are still bound to respect conventional sexual morality. The premise of this argument is that the conventions of sexual morality are so strongly held in the United States (in contrast to some other countries) that the consequences of flouting them can have serious consequences for the president's ability to fulfill the duties of the office (Dobel 1998, 74–81).

One consequence of the widely accepted proscriptions on adultery is that politicians who violate them are vulnerable to political attacks that may jeopardize their political future. Thus, engaging in extramarital sex may make a president subject to blackmail or entail national security risks. This argument has been made with respect to John Kennedy's relationship with Judith Campbell Exner at the same time that she had relationships with organized crime figures. Michael Beschloss <<source?>> has argued that John Kennedy's affairs made him vulnerable to blackmail that could have affected public policy. Garry Wills argued that J. Edgar Hoover's knowledge of Robert Kennedy's affairs discouraged Kennedy from reining in Hoover's efforts to harass and undermine Martin Luther King, Jr. (Wills 1981, 34–37; Gentry 1991, 467–481; Powers 1987, 353–366).

In addition, the flouting of conventional morality, regardless of its personal morality (e.g., permission from a spouse), likely will result in public scandal that will undermine the ability of an administration to pursue the policies it was elected to pursue. This became painfully evident in the uproar over President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky, when both the public and the president were distracted from important public policy issues. Thus a president's lack of sexual self-restraint may indicate a lack of commitment to the duties of public office, in terms of both policy goals and moral example (Stark 2000, 142–147).



There is a strong argument to be made that the private lives of public officials ought to be respected and that their sexual behavior is their own business (Thompson 2001). The argument for privacy in intimate affairs is compelling and cannot be easily dismissed. We do not want our neighbors or the government to snoop into our own private lives, so any reason for examining the sexual behavior of public officials must be compelling. On the other hand, people have always been fascinated by the sexual behavior of the rich and famous.

For practical purposes, however, the question of whether extramarital sexual behavior should be taken into account in evaluating presidential character may be moot. Press coverage of sexual scandals involving presidents is inevitable, and the rules of press coverage of these issues have changed over the past several decades (Sabato, Stencel, and Lichter 2000). The self-restraint of the press during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations began to lessen after the cynicism spawned by Vietnam and Watergate. With respect to sexual behavior, the tide turned during the 1984 presidential campaign, when Gary Hart's affair with Donna Rice undermined his presidential bid. During the Clinton presidency, competition to break a story, the Web, and the 24-hour news cycle stretched the bounds of what had been considered the normal rules of press restraint (Thompson 2001).

After the Clinton impeachment, it is difficult if not impossible to ignore marital infidelity when evaluating presidential character. It was Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky that caused the scandal in which there were many calls for his resignation. The decision of the House of Representatives to make public the report of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, with all of its excruciating details about Clinton's intimate sexual activities with Lewinsky, lowered considerably the bar for protecting presidential privacy.

Even though the legal arguments for Clinton's impeachment centered around his lying under oath about his affair, the subtext was Clinton's irresponsibility in having a sexual affair in the White House with a subordinate half his age. Public opinion clearly reflected widespread revulsion over Clinton's behavior and a desire to have him censured, even though the majority were against impeachment. Majorities in opinion polls registered approval of Clinton as president throughout 1998, before and after his impeachment. This public reaction was probably influenced by the healthy state of the economy and by a judgment that the Republican-controlled Congress was going too far. Yet at the same time consistent majorities clearly disapproved of Clinton's character (Andolina and Wilcox 2000). The public, political commentators, and scholars cannot avoid considering Clinton's sexual behavior in judging his character. Whether it is because of his recklessness, his irresponsibility, or his betrayal of his wife, his behavior is directly relevant to his character.

But if it is impossible to avoid taking account of Clinton's sexual behavior when evaluating his character, can the extramarital sexual behavior of other presidents be ignored? While Clinton's behavior may not justify prying into the sexual practices of future presidents, the known extramarital sexual activities of past presidents ought to be taken into account in evaluating their characters. Efforts to judge presidential character ought to apply the same criteria to different presidents. On the other hand, one need not conclude that all extramarital affairs are equivalent.

After looking at what is now known about John Kennedy's multiple sexual affairs and general promiscuity, it is hard to argue that judgments of his character should not be affected. Whether it was his recklessness, his lack of self-restraint, the

effect of his behavior on his wife, or subjecting himself to blackmail, his conduct must affect judgments about his character. Lyndon Johnson's need to dominate others seemed to drive his sexuality, and it is hard to ignore as part of his character. His insensitivity to his wife when he acted out sexually with other women, sometimes in her presence, surely reflects poorly on his character.

In contrast to Kennedy, Johnson, and Clinton, the romantic affairs of Dwight Eisenhower and Franklin Roosevelt can be judged much less harshly. Eisenhower's relationship with his aide, Kay Summersby, during World War II surely was romantic, although they did not consummate their relationship sexually. Franklin Roosevelt had an affair with Lucy Mercer when he was assistant secretary of the Navy and saw her later when he was president. He also had an intimate relationship with Missy LeHand dating from his years as governor of New York until she left the White House in 1941 after suffering a stroke. But these affairs seem to have been genuine romantic involvements rather than compulsive conquests, as in the cases of Kennedy and Clinton, or a need to dominate, as with Johnson. Thus presidents may be judged more or less harshly, but the behavior of presidents is not the same (Pfiffner 1998).

It is evident from a brief review of the modern presidency that sexual probity is not always associated with presidential competence and trustworthiness, and sexually indiscreet presidents are sometimes effective in their conduct of the office. 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 was 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.

### *Promise-Keeping*

The relationship of private to public obligations in promise-keeping runs closely parallel to the obligation to tell the truth. They are not the same, because failing to keep a promise is only a lie if the promise maker does not intend to keep the promise at the time it is made. But if one makes a promise, one is obligated to take it seriously for reasons similar to those pertaining to lying. At a personal level, the failure to keep promises undermines one's credibility and social trust more generally and may cause harm to individuals who expected the promise to be kept. The failure of a president to keep a public promise has a similar but much broader effect. The undermining of trust is more insidious because the president's role as moral exemplar may encourage or seem to excuse similar behavior, and many more people may have taken actions based on a president's public promise.

The broader obligation of promise-keeping by politicians has to do with the nature of democracy. If politicians do not keep their promises after they are elected, how can citizens know who to vote for? Thus blatant promise-breaking undermines faith in politicians and may lead to public cynicism about government, thereby undermining the premises that hold a polity together. This obligation to keep promises is not absolute, and in a system of limited powers, it is understood that politicians are obligated only to make a serious effort to keep their promises, and that other forces in the political system may keep them from fully accomplishing all that they

hope to accomplish. And a certain amount of exaggeration in campaign promises is part of the rhetoric of political campaigns and not always taken literally. In addition, conditions may change, and an elected official may have the obligation not to keep a promise if fulfilling it would lead to bad consequences for the country as a whole.

Conventional wisdom in American public opinion holds that politicians cannot be trusted and seldom keep their promises. A skeptical public, reinforced by negative press coverage, heavily discounts campaign promises, yet feels that it is important for candidates to be consistent and fully intend to keep their promises (Jamiesen 2000, 19–36). Yet contrary to the conventional wisdom, presidents most often do make serious efforts to keep their campaign promises.

In *Presidents and Promises*, a study of presidential promise-keeping, Jeff Fishel (1985) quite rigorously measures the performance of recent presidents in keeping their promises. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, he concludes convincingly that most presidents keep their promises most of the time. Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2000) takes up the issue of campaign promise-keeping, focusing particularly on the 1992 and 1996 elections. Despite general voter skepticism in public opinion polls and media focus on several campaign promises that President Clinton did not keep (e.g., the middle-class tax cut and Haitian refugee status), Clinton's overall record on promise-keeping was quite good (*ibid.*, 33). Several systematic newspaper accounts also found that Clinton had attempted to keep most of his promises (*ibid.*, 33; Cannon 2001, 12–17). Thus despite minor variations, careful analysis reveals an impressive record of presidential efforts to fulfill campaign promises, especially given the number of relatively specific campaign promises that modern presidents make.

One may conclude that presidents generally try to keep their promises and that major character differences between recent presidents cannot be discerned from merely looking at the totals. On the other hand, all promises are not of equal import. Some are clearly major promises on important policy issues facing the country, whereas others are merely attempts to fix things at the margins. Promises on important issues clearly outweigh others and ought to be seriously considered in evaluating any president's record of consistency and promise-keeping.

Franklin Roosevelt did not have a consistent approach to the New Deal, but his experimentation was ultimately successful in alleviating many of the worst effects of the Great Depression. He was not successful in balancing the budget but made serious efforts to do so. His promise in the heat of the 1940 campaign not to send U.S. soldiers to war was imprudent and expedient, yet he was right in his effort to convince the American people that Hitler had to be confronted.

Candidates Eisenhower and Nixon were appropriately ambiguous in their campaign statements about ending the wars in Korea and Vietnam. President Reagan would have liked to keep his promise to balance the budget but was unwilling to admit that he could not cut taxes deeply and increase defense spending greatly at the same time. George H. W. Bush made an imprudent and expedient promise in the 1988 campaign not to increase taxes, yet he was right to break that promise in order to reduce the deficit. Bill Clinton made his commitment to a middle-class tax cut when he thought the economy needed a stimulus, but his early decision to undertake deficit reduction through increased taxes and spending cuts was the right one for the economy. Both Bush and Clinton deserve credit for breaking promises that they originally intended to keep because their changes in policy helped create the unprecedented economic expansion of the late 1990s.

In short, consistency and keeping campaign promises are important, but they are not absolute measures of character.

### Finding Faults in Political Leaders

Some might argue that to investigate instances of presidential misbehavior and abuse serves merely to reduce the stature of former leaders and thus leads to cynicism. They might further argue that pointing out flaws in our leaders stems from an excessive egalitarianism and is intended to “cut them down to our size,” that is, to see them as no better than ourselves. The feared result is that a failure to honor heroes of the past will undermine the conditions that give rise to future virtuous rulers. Thus this “muckraking” will encourage a descent from the glorious days of the past and toward certain decline. It encourages the cynical argument that leaders cannot be virtuous.

But this article argues just the opposite. Insofar as past leaders are exalted to the point of apotheosis or creating icons of them, it becomes easy to see them as super-

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human. In looking at current leaders and finding them wanting in comparison with paragons of the distant past (e.g., Washington, Lincoln, FDR), it is tempting to despair of current real-life human beings being able to achieve the stature of their predecessors. Thus an unrealistic understanding of past leaders can lead to defeatism or a yearning for an idealized past that never existed. As

Roger Wilkins argues in *Jefferson’s Pillow*, those who idealize the nation’s past leaders “diminish the founders by denying them rich human complexity and giving us instead monumental heroes whose actual lives cannot possibly live up to the marble facades that have come down to us through the generations” (Wilkins 2001).

The purpose here is to present a more realistic picture of presidents so that current expectations of the possibilities of political leadership are more realistic and achievable. Pointing out that some past heroes had character flaws does not detract from their true accomplishments, which should be appreciated for what they are. The implication of this argument is that human character, and especially that of political leaders, is complex. The purity of a saint is not often conducive to effective political leadership, especially in a democracy. In a sense, we are stuck with mere human beings for political leaders—there are few paragons without flaws. But the positive side of this perspective is that mere human beings are sometimes capable of great things, as were the great presidents.

To argue that great heroes were faultless can easily lead to despair that any contemporary can ever measure up to them and to the cynicism of “they all do it” when it is discovered that they do in fact have flaws. A realistic understanding of the combination of virtues and flaws in past heroes can lead to an appreciation of the range of people who can provide effective political leadership.

Pointing out that George Washington was a conventional slaveholder who did not show much ambivalence about slavery until late in his life does not detract from the greatness of his many acts of political leadership. It merely calls attention to the fact that he was not perfect. That is, he was human. Thus his virtues

should impress us even more—his courage, his sense of duty, his self-restraints and ability to learn from past mistakes. We should not shrink from admitting that the father of our country had faults by trying to minimize his actions as a slaveholder. He should be given credit for his recognition of the evils of slavery at the end of his life, for freeing and providing for his slaves in his will, and for his many virtues throughout his career.

To realize that Lincoln's public statements on slavery were ambiguous does not detract from his final victory and the emancipation of all slaves. It does call attention to the intractable politics of the slavery issue in the mid-nineteenth century, and it helps us appreciate even more Lincoln's political skills. He was able to accomplish what the abolitionists, because of their intransigence, were not. This does not mean that the abolitionists' activities were wrong or unnecessary to the final victory. What it does mean is that effective political leadership in a democracy must make concessions to the realities of political power. Both the abolitionists and Lincoln made important contributions to the common goal of overcoming slavery—but they were *different* contributions.

Admitting that President Eisenhower lied in the U-2 affair does not seriously undermine his overall integrity and general probity. He was still a great leader and a near-great president. One need not whitewash him to appreciate his virtues. Pointing out that Lyndon Johnson told a number of lies—from the trivial to the serious—does not vitiate his many contributions to civil rights and social welfare policy in the United States. In an overall evaluation of LBJ, his contributions in social policy must be balanced with his failures of leadership in Vietnam—ignoring one and focusing only on the other would be unfair.

It would be shortsighted to argue that no one who has been unfaithful to a spouse deserves to be honored as a political leader. To do so would be to argue that FDR, Ike, JFK, and LBJ should not be honored as *political leaders*. One can honor them as political leaders without necessarily seeing them as paragons of virtue. To ignore their contributions because they have personal flaws of character is to throw out the baby with the bath water.

To recognize and admit that some good presidents have had sexual affairs, however, does not mean that one has to approve or condone their behavior. The appropriate response is to try to understand their behavior within the context of their marriages and to judge them from an informed perspective. One can conclude that their behavior was understandable or unacceptable and factor these conclusions into an overall evaluation of the individual. Presidential character is multi-dimensional, not unified. Thus presidents can be effective political leaders despite personal character flaws (Pfiffner 2000, Thompson 2001).

Certainly presidents have obligations as moral leaders and role models, and when they fail to fulfill their obligations as moral exemplars, they deserve blame. The sexual misbehavior of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton was compounded by their position as president and their failures to fulfill their exemplary duties as president. These failures should dim their luster as national leaders, but should not obviate their positive contributions as presidents.

The intention of this argument is to encourage a realistic appreciation of presidential leadership. By pointing out some flaws in past presidents, it may be possible to arrive at a more realistic standard against which contemporary presidents can be judged. Holding them up to unrealistic standards will not make it easier to attract

better leaders. On the other hand, evidence of flaws or unacceptable behavior in previous leaders (even great ones) does not constitute an excuse for misbehavior by current leaders. Thus Bill Clinton ought not to have used JFK's many affairs as an excuse or justification for his own sexual misbehavior.

Citizens should not cynically conclude that "they all do it" and presidential misbehavior makes no difference. On the contrary, it is the duty of citizens to make difficult judgments about presidential character when deciding who to vote for and which past presidents to honor. It is not necessary to investigate in historical detail what each president did, but if one judges a president on the basis of some flaw or misbehavior, one ought to learn enough about its context to have some confidence that the conclusions are justified.

### Character and Political Survival

Part of the explanation for the lack of pristine moral principles and general human frailty of presidents is that they have survived a very brutal winnowing process.

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Sustaining a successful career in politics is not easy. People who are unwilling to cut corners, shade the truth, compromise, or renege on promises are not likely to arrive at the pinnacle of leadership in democratic politics. The U.S. political system will often not elevate the most noble individuals to the presidency.

Americans have always been ambivalent about political ambition. On the one hand, they deplore the pursuit of public office insofar as it seems to be the selfish seeking of

personal power. On the other hand, they admire persons who seek public office in order to pursue idealistic policies in the public interest. But Americans also admire those who sacrifice public office because they want to remain true to their ideals (to paraphrase Henry Clay, those who would rather be right than be president). And Americans criticize those who seem to subordinate their ideals in order to win political office (i.e., who seem to compromise too much and have no ideals they are willing to stand by, regardless of the consequences).

More than a century ago, Lord James Bryce (1891) wrote a book on American politics in which he entitled one chapter, "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents." Among other reasons, Bryce pointed out that "eminent men make more enemies, and give those enemies more assailable points, than obscure men do. They are therefore in so far less desirable candidates. . . . The famous man has probably attacked some leaders in his own party . . . has perhaps committed errors which are capable of being magnified into offences. . . . Hence, when the choice lies between a brilliant man and a safe man, the safe man is preferred" (Bryce 1891, 74). In addition, the nominating and party system places more value on getting a winning candidate than on the governing abilities of the person once in office. The American voter "likes his candidate to be sensible, vigorous, and, above all, what he calls 'magnetic,' and does not value, because he sees no need for, originality or profundity, a fine culture or a wide knowledge." Thus, "the merits of a President are one

thing and those of a candidate are another thing” (ibid., 75). Bryce’s insights of more than a century ago still ring true today.

It must also be borne in mind that, despite popular stereotypes, the vocation of politics is not an easy one. It calls for sustained efforts to meld conflicting factions and interests into enough consensus to make important decisions about public policy. As Max Weber argued, “Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective” (Gerth and Mills 1946, 128). Weber also observed, “He who lives ‘for’ politics makes politics his life, in an internal sense. Either he enjoys the naked possession of the power he exerts, or his life has meaning in the service of a ‘cause’ ” (ibid., 84). But more probably, many successful politicians enjoy *both* wielding power and fighting for a cause.

Thus the career of politics is difficult and does not appeal to everyone, and those to whom it does appeal tend to be more pragmatic than idealistic. Idealists may be admired, but they do not last very long in democratic politics. In the judgment of Pendleton Herring, successful politicians are not likely to have moral standards greatly higher than those of the people whom they serve. According to Herring (1940, 144), “The differences within the community provide the strands with which the politician weaves a political fabric. If the product is often frayed and soiled, look to the threads as well as the fingers.” Herring observes “Thus, while in the area of belief and discussion voters declare themselves in favor of efficiency and impartiality in the administration of the law, they react quite differently when tagged for parking. *The experienced politician is not disturbed by such inconsistencies. He takes life as he finds it. This is his value and his limitation*” (ibid., 64; emphasis added).

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***Part of the explanation for the lack of pristine moral principles and general human frailty of presidents is that they have survived a very brutal winnowing process.***

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The function of a politician, according to Herring, is less to be a moral exemplar than to enable opposing factions to live together peacefully. Politicians “seek not the ideal but terms of agreement that reduce the chances of violence or coercion.” He then quotes approvingly an observation by T. V. Smith about politicians (Herring 1940, 135):

If they sometimes lie in the strenuous task, it is regrettable but understandable. If they sometimes truckle, that is despicable but tolerable. If they are sometimes bribed, that is more execrable but still not fatal. The vices of our politicians we must compare not with the virtues of the secluded individual but with the vices of dictators. . . . People elsewhere get killed in the conflicts of interest over which our politicians preside with vices short of crimes and with virtues not wholly unakin to magnanimity.

Thus Herring calls for tolerance of the faults of political leaders.

The realities of politics as a career are trying, and as Stephen Hess (1995) observes, with few exceptions in the twentieth century (Wilkie and Eisenhower), only professional politicians have been nominated by the major parties to be president. Hess argues further that the one distinguishing characteristic of all successful presidential candidates is an overweening ambition to be president (ibid., 39–45). Indeed, a potential candidate who does not demonstrate the necessary “fire in the belly” to be willing to put up with the arduous campaign is often dismissed as not serious. While most politicians have a goodly measure of ambition, the gap between the next-highest offices, senator and governor, and the presidency is so great that

only those with excessive ambition even attempt to run for the presidency.

It takes a combination of driving ambition combined with chutzpah to seriously pursue the presidency. In addition, the right to wield power comes along with political achievement. It is also a biological reality that dominant male mammals are often the most attractive to females and are willing to use their power to obtain sexual gratification (Low 2000). In fact, much of human society is organized around the necessity of curbing the sexual inclinations of aggressive men (Fukuyama 1999, 92–111). Taking these factors into account, it should not surprise us, although it may appall us, that sometimes powerful men act as if the normal rules of sexual restraint do not apply to them. This explanation for some presidential behavior certainly does not excuse it, but it may help in understanding it.

Should presidents be moral and ethical paragons as well as effective leaders? As has been argued here, presidents are role models whether they like it or not. Societies need exemplars to look up to and provide inspiration for young and ambitious people seeking public service. This moral leadership role is a trust that presidents ought not to flout. Their example can have profound effects, for good or ill, over generations of American politics and even world leadership. Yet presidents often fail to live up to this leadership obligation. When they do not measure up, we are justifiably disappointed. They have failed in one of the important obligations of political leadership.

This argument for a more “realistic” understanding of presidential character is not meant to justify cynicism or lower standards for the moral behavior of presidents. The American separation of powers system was set up to counter the exercise of arbitrary power. It is well designed to correct problems related to a lack of virtue in leaders. Congress and the courts also share responsibility for political leadership. But the system cannot run of itself—as the *Federalist Papers* make clear, virtue is still necessary for the operation of the system. Recognizing that men are not angels, the system is designed to counteract a lack of virtue in political leaders. But it cannot survive a complete lack of virtue in its leaders. The system can correct for and survive an occasional seriously flawed president who must be removed, but it cannot survive if every president entirely lacks virtue.

Luckily for the United States, we often find virtuous, if not flawless, presidents. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, we have a republic—if we can keep it. And keeping it means that we have to find virtuous presidents even if they are not perfect.

## NOTES

1. From Justice Potter Stewart in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (378 U.S. 184, 197, 1964): “I shall not attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that short-hand description [i.e., hard-core pornography]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I do know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case [*The Lovers*] is not that.”

2. James Davison Hunter and Carl Bowman (2000, 53) conclude: “On the one hand, there is no question that the American public recognizes democracy’s need for strong moral character and its attendant virtues. . . . At the same time, large sectors of the American public lack discrimination and reveal a surprising level of confusion and contradiction in their thinking about character. Character seems to be a catch-all for everything—for anything—commendable or simply positive.”



3. “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” From *Self Reliance* (Bartlett 1980, 497).

4. For instance, on November 29, 1993, Reagan told Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir that he had photographed Nazi death camps at the end of World War II (Cannon 1991, 486–490). Reagan told the story of a Congressional Medal of Honor earned by a B-17 pilot that had never been awarded (White 1988, 12). Reagan told a story of confessing to the referee about his infraction of the rules in a high school football game against Mendota that cost his team the game. But when Dixon High School played Mendota, Mendota won by 24 to nothing (Cannon 1982, 36).

5. The irony of the argument that the president has duties as a moral exemplar is that it applies only to behavior that is publicly known or revealed. In this argument, what the people do not know will not hurt them (Posner 1999, 135). John Kennedy was able to inspire a generation of young people to enter public life for idealistic reasons, despite his deplorable sexual behavior. If this behavior had been revealed while he was president, it is not likely that he would have been as admired as much.

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