Presidential Character and the Clinton Presidency: The Double-Edged Sword

By Robert Shogan

"Those whose character is really an issue are those who would divert the attention of the people, who destroy the reputations of their opponents and divide the country we love." This is the argument President Clinton has made since he first sought the White House in response to the charge that his personal conduct is a sign of character defects which debase the presidency. His behavior off the job, Clinton has maintained when under attack, is irrelevant to the way he performs as president.

This defense is rich in unintended irony. Character, of course, has been a part of the American presidency since George Washington and the cherry tree. Moreover, Clinton's political career has dramatized, like no one before him, the growing salience of presidential character as a weapon that can inspire the electorate but that also can wreck a presidency.

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Character Becomes the Ultimate Weapon in Modern Politics

The American people have always expected their presidents to serve as role models of personal behavior and have looked to the characters of their chief executives for clues to their political performance. Absent the Founding Fathers' faith in Washington, they would not have granted the president even the limited powers that devolved upon that office. Thomas Jefferson's sinuous nature lent a Machiavellian dimension to the presidency; Andrew Jackson's bellicosity established the presidency's populist side and Franklin Roosevelt's sublime self-assurance made the nation's highest office an every-day reality in the average citizen's life.

In the second half of the 20th century, with the enfeeblement of traditional political institutions and the explosion of electronic media, John F. Kennedy used his character to cross a new frontier into the era of the personal presidency. Democrat Kennedy blazed a trail in image manipulation which Republican Ronald Reagan then carried to new heights. To lead the Democrats back into the White House that seemed to have become a Republican fiefdom, Clinton presented himself as a paragon of middle class values who always "played by the rules." Clinton forced the character issue to the top of the political agenda in all its bifurcated complexity. No president before him has been so calculating and determined in exploiting his personal life and values; yet no chief executive in modern times has been so reviled and condemned because of his personal behavior.

Clinton's tenure in the White House has demonstrated that the so-called character issue is a double-edged sword—an instrument that can discredit a president and destroy his credibility, but also that a president can use to establish his political identity and mobilize support. In sum character has become the ultimate weapon in modern American politics.

The "New Democrat" Emerges

An understanding of Clinton and the character issue begins with the Reagan-Bush era. Reagan's success in captivating the electorate was due in large measure to his ability to make his personality the embodiment of his beliefs. This was no mere movie actor trick. Reagan's message was persuasive because it was consistent with the messenger. George Bush did not have Ronald Reagan's gifts for communicating or his strong convictions. But he broke new ground on the character issue in his race against Democratic standard bearer Michael Dukakis. Instead of attacking Dukakis's character directly, Bush attacked his values, which he implied were evidence of the hapless Dukakis's character defects.

Pounding away at a series of episodes in Dukakis's record as Massachusetts governor, he depicted Dukakis as a figure outside the middle class mainstream. Democrats accused Bush of cheap shots and distortion. But they recognized that his thrusts struck home with the voters.

In the wake of Dukakis's defeat, pollster Stanley Greenberg concluded that the campaign had left Bush's "savage caricature" as the dominant image of the Democratic party—short on patriotism and indifferent to the values of work and family. Yet at the same time that the country was supposedly caught up in a pervasive conservative mood, Greenberg noted, polling data showed that voters favored an activist agenda for government.

What was needed to take advantage of these liberal impulses, Greenberg argued, was a Democratic

model to replace the New Deal and the Great Society and reach the middle class voters who had left the party. This diagnosis set the stage for the "New Democrat" paradigm, which helped carry Bill Clinton to the White House. Along with a bundle of policy proposals, the model relied heavily on values and character as embodied by Clinton to touch the emotions and win the hearts of the voters. The problem with this strategy is that Clinton has had trouble living up to his part of it.

Clinton's Make-over

His 1992 candidacy was dogged by allegations of infidelity and draft evasion, not to mention the beginnings of the Whitewater brouhaha. In response, Clinton claimed these allegations were a false alarm, diverting attention away from the policy questions that confronted the country. His spouse provided enthusiastic and essential support. "Is anything about our marriage important enough to the people of New Hampshire as whether or not they will have a chance to keep their own families together?" Hillary Rodham Clinton asked the voters of the then recession-ridden Granite State.

Blessed with remarkably weak opposition, Clinton stumbled through to the nomination. But he was "damaged goods," as his pollster Stanley Greenberg later admitted, and to repair that damage his advisers set out by hook and by crook to change the public's view of Clinton. "We had decided that biography was critical," Greenberg said.

Clinton himself played the dominant role in this make-over. Whereas once he had complained that "too much of this election has been about me," now he could hardly get enough of himself into his speeches. At every turn he stressed his humble origins and the fortitude he displayed in rising above such handicaps. "My life is a testament to the fact that the American dream works," he cried. "I got to live by the rules that work in America and I wound up here today running for President of the United States of America."

For all the reshaping of his image, Clinton's own view of the character issue remained unreconstructed. The candidate who urged black welfare mothers to be more responsible himself accepted no responsibility for his actions. Instead he blamed his troubles on his political opponents and on the low esteem in which Americans held his chosen profession. "We live in a time when the politics of personal destruction have been proved very effective," Clinton told the editors of *Time* during the convention. He predicted that the 1992 election would test not only his character but, more important, "the character of the American people."

The Characters of Clinton and the American People Are Tested

That forecast turned out to be a rare understatement. As it has turned out, not only that campaign but also the presidency that followed became a character test for him and for his fellow citizens, and for the political system as well. For Clinton the test was whether his inherent gifts for leadership would outweigh the darker impulses of his nature. For the country the issue was what standards of personal behavior Americans would accept from their president. And for the system the challenge was whether it could react responsibly to the tensions created by the controversies over Clinton's character.

As this is written these tests are still on going, but Americans have already learned some important lessons from the trials to which this president has subjected himself and them. Probably the most important lesson is that presidential character does matter a great deal. Simply put, if what Clinton did made no difference, why did he lie about it? Of course his behavior made a difference, and Clinton understood that. This was the reason for the carefully crafted dissembling which marked his initial response to the charges against him, followed by the months of stonewalling and denial.

Regardless of how citizens responded when asked by pollsters whether Clinton's sexual dalliances mattered to them, the impact of this sort of behavior cannot be measured by a simple yes or no question. The evidence of polls and focus groups since Clinton's first national campaign in 1992 is that such things are freighted with significance and tend to erode credibility and trust in the president and the political system over the long run.

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It is true that despite the self-inflicted wounds on his reputation Clinton won two presidential elections and has been able as this is written to so far survive the Lewinsky controversy. But such outcomes are a consequence of a variety of factors besides character, mainly the condition of the economy and the quality of his principal adversaries, George Bush, Bob Dole and in effect Kenneth Starr. Clinton's success in elections and in surviving scandal is only part of the story of his presidency. It does not reflect the damage done to the public's attitude toward political institutions and toward the political system. Nor does it take into account the opportunities lost and the potential unfulfilled for betterment of the national condition. The president, as the *Washington Post* pointed out, "has mortgaged the policies in which he ostensibly believes and the people, many of them vulnerable, whom these policies are

meant to help, to his own considerable personal vulnerability and self-indulgence. There has been a lot of talk, not least within the White House, about this president's legacy. That heavy mortgage is an important part of it."

Hollywood's Take

Yet another part of Clinton's legacy is the moral confusion created by his presidency and heightened by the storms that broke over the White House in 1998. Nothing so symbolized this confusion as the motion picture *Primary Colors* released in the midst of the White House sex scandals. Like Joe Klein's novel from which it was drawn, the movie seemed to revel in the sexual exploits of its protagonist, Jack Stanton, aka Bill Clinton. But the bite that marked the best parts of Klein's book was missing from the motion picture which was dominated by the grandly permissive view of its director Mike Nichols.

Primary Colors, Nichols confided to an interviewer, "is about honor. It asks the question where does honor lie now that things are as we know them to be." Interesting question, but not one that either the movie or Nichols really attempts to answer. Indeed Nichols did not seem to think an answer was required. In Nichols's mind, somewhat clouded by half-baked Freudian concepts, the furor surrounding the president was more indicative of the immaturity of the president's critics than of anything about Clinton himself. "In France, they have no problem," he claimed. "Private acts are private acts. They long ago figured out that men who get a lot accomplished have powerful libidos. What's the problem?"

One problem with the film was that it echoed the defense strategy of the White House spin doctors, who trumpeted the idea that any sin charged against Clinton was also committed by some of his predecessors.

"You don't think Abraham Lincoln was a whore before he was a president?" Governor Jack Stanton (aka Bill Clinton) asks a disillusioned aide who confronts him over the revelation of his latest indiscretion. But whatever wrongs Lincoln committed, Stanton contends, "he did it all just so he'd get the opportunity to stand in front of the nation and appeal to the better angels of our nature."

Although Nichols' movie was a box office bust, the outlook that he and it espoused and reflected was bound to give encouragement to other men with powerful libidos—Bob Packwood for one. Three years after he was driven from the Senate in disgrace over accusations of sexual misconduct, Packwood let it be known that he was thinking about running for office again—not the United States Senate, but maybe the state legislature in 2000. Deanna Smith, chairwoman of the Oregon Republican Party, could see no reason to gainsay him. "It's so ridiculous now that Clinton has been exonerated and Packwood did nothing near what Clinton did," she said. "I don't know why Packwood can't run. He was one of the best senators we ever had."

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Confronting Stark Realities

Whether or not Packwood actually does run, the environment created by the controversies over Clinton's behavior will remain to vex our culture and our politics for a long time to come for Americans have had a hard time dealing with the test that Clinton foresaw his character would make them endure. The contradictions among the public on Clinton and the character issue were underlined with polling data which on one hand show that while most Americans believe the president lied about his sexual behavior and many feel he may have even committed perjury, few want him removed from office. The awareness of serious wrongdoing in the nation's highest office on one hand coexisting with the willingness to tolerate it on the other hand represents a stark contradiction which is bound to distort both our moral standards and our politics.

Greatly contributing to this fog are the president's defenders who argue that it is unfair to single him out for criticism when a number of his predecessors were later found also to have been involved in behavior that conflicted with traditional standards. The difference is that whatever John Kennedy and Franklin Roosevelt and the others did, they did not get caught in the act while they were in office. Clinton operated under a far different system where prying into the president's personal life and the president's exploitation of his personal life were both far more common. He knew that and should have disciplined his behavior accordingly, all the more so since he exploited the personalization of the presidency to his political advantage.

Fellow New Democrats Level Stinging Criticism

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the political salience of Clinton's conduct was Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman's now famous speech on the Senate floor denouncing Clinton's conduct as not just "inappropriate," the term favored by Clinton is his grudging and ill conceived televised non-confession, but downright "immoral."

To understand the significance of this statement, which for all its hedges and qualifications represented the first substantial reproof of Clinton by a fellow Democrat, it is important to bear in mind the ideological background. This assault on Clinton, as the White House

surely saw it, came not from the ideological left of the Democrats, the one time stronghold of party discontent and dissent and the forces who a generation ago brought down incumbent Democratic chief executive Lyndon Johnson at the height of his power. Instead it was a leader of the Democratic right, who spoke out. Lieberman, it needs to be remembered, is the sort of Democrat who favors private school vouchers and who is the present head of the Democratic Leadership Council, the organization created 15 years ago to steer the party back toward the supposed political center. And it is of course the organization which Clinton himself used as a springboard for his march to the 1992 nomination. In short Lieberman is not just a fellow Democrat, he is a fellow *New* Democrat. And as such he spoke for the forces in the party who were most threatened by the contradiction between Clinton's behavior and the paradigm of middle class values which they believe had paved the way for the Democratic reconquest of the White House after the long years in the wilderness during the Reagan-Bush epoch.

"Look, part of what troubled me about this whole episode is that one of the great things the president has done for our country and, if I may say, speaking as a Democrat for our party, is that in his public statements and in the programs he's advocated, he has reconnected the Democratic Party to the mainstream of American values from which we were disconnected," Lieberman explained after his oration. " This misconduct, behavior that is both immoral and untruthful, undercuts that..."

In a way Lieberman's speech can be compared, on a much smaller historical scale of course, to the momentous address Mikhail Gorbachev delivered at the Kremlin on the 70th anniversary of the November Revolution, when the fate of Perestroikia and the destiny of the Russian people were very much in doubt. The big question was what judgment he would render on Stalin's rule. Gorbachev filled his address with praise of the old tyrant, just as Lieberman took every opportunity to commend Clinton. But ultimately Gorbachev said what he had to say about Stalin's terrible guilt to promote his own political survival, just as Lieberman said what political necessity demanded be said about Clinton's culpability.

"Intellectually, politically and morally the speech would play a critical role in undermining the Stalinist system of coercion and empire," David Remnick writes in *Lenin's Tomb*. Similarly, Lieberman's address opened the way for Democrats to end their amoral disregard of the consequences of Clinton's behavior.

The Resilient Presidency

The proposition that morality is irrelevant to performance, so long propounded by Clinton and his defenders, can be simply tested. All it requires is a candidate for the presidency to say something along the following lines: "I'll do everything possible to promote prosperity and protect national security. And I will speak out vigorously in favor of truth, honor and other traditional values. But, just so you're not surprised, I want you to know that in my personal life I feel free to cheat and lie and enjoy whatever pleasures of the flesh are available." The first time a candidate makes such a statement the political world will know that presidential character no longer matters.

But of course this is highly unlikely because it would represent a fundamental contradiction of the American political tradition and the 200-year history of the presidency. Those two centuries instruct us that the presidency is an eminently resilient and dynamic institution. From George Washington to Bill Clinton, just as the presidency has suffered from the flaws of presidents, it has thrived on their strengths and virtues. The lesson for the public is to monitor both sides of their behavior closely. In preparing to leave office, Washington, referring to the mistakes he supposed that he had made, called upon God "to avert or mitigate the evils" he might have caused. Looking beyond the feckless conduct of Bill Clinton, it makes sense for Americans to join in that prayer, counting for its fulfillment not only on Divine Providence but also on their own vigilance and judgment.

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