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Clinton's 'Hidden' Handicap

Why the Morality Issue May Still Matter to Voters

By Sally Quinn

A man and a woman were deep in conversation, gasping conspiratorially, when a friend approached. "What Clinton rumor are you talking about?" she joked.

"We can't tell," they said. "We're sworn to secrecy."

"Trade ya," she said.

LIKE BASEBALL cards, gossip about one or both of the Clintons has become a sort of currency in Washington—and the more vicious, the more valuable. The stories may not, of course, be true. Nevertheless, in offices, at parties, in shops, at hairdressers, Clinton tales abound. Some are new, many are old ones with a new slant. Some are scurrilous, some preposterous. But for people who have lived in Washington for any length of time, these stories are unprecedented.

Certainly there has always been gossip about First Families. Mamie Eisenhower, it was said, had a drinking problem; the rumors were particularly vicious about Eleanor Roosevelt. Historians have since told us much about the sexual appetites of Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy. But no blonde with her roots showing ever played any tapes—at least not when the principals were alive and in power. Nothing, in this new age of openness and information, can be compared to the old days.

But why such a proliferation of gossip about the Clintons? Because the issue, I believe, is often in the back of people's minds—the stream of allegations out of Little Rock has taken its toll. That undercurrent surfaces in two ways: the silly gossip and, far more importantly, an erosion of confidence in the important purposes of the

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ues, down from 50 percent a year ago. In a Time/CNN poll conducted last week just 40 percent of respondents said Clinton was a "leader they could trust" while 56 percent had "doubts and reservations."

It has become fashionable in the '90s for people to say they aren't interested in the president's personal life. What he does in private, this view holds, should be his own business as long as it doesn't interfere with how he governs. That Bill Clinton was elected by a plurality of voters after the Gennifer Flowers episode suggests that many Americans consider such matters less important than the way a person handles himself in public life.

Yet, at the same time, there seems to me to be an atmosphere of denial about the subject. Like the three monkeys, the press, the public and the Congress hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. And that unwillingness to confront the issue directly can have costs for the president.

Says Doris Kearns Goodwin, a biographer of LBJ and the Kennedys, "With Gennifer Flowers, the people didn't believe [Clinton] was telling the truth and the press put it deeper down, so that when it comes back, with the state troopers' story, it's like a slap in the face . . . There's an undercurrent of feeling that he is not telling the truth, then or now, and that leaves a residue of queasy, uneasy feelings."

Confronting the question of morals indirectly is a different story. Bill Clinton's alleged infidelities have become a matter of accepted folk wisdom, on a par with Dan Quayle's alleged dimness and Gerald Ford's alleged clumsiness. David Letterman jokes about it (among Top Ten things overheard on Clinton's duck hunting excursion: "You look great in that negligee. By the way, Hillary thinks I'm duck hunting"). So do "Saturday Night Live"

and Jay Leno. And even last week's "Doonesbury." For late-night comics, the Gennifer Flowers tapes, the "60 Minutes" appearance (in which Clinton acknowledged "causing pain" in his marriage) and the widely reported allegations by Arkansas state troopers that they facilitated liaisons for then-Gov. Clinton are enough to validate the jokes.

I suspect, although it is probably impossible to prove, that some of the criticism of the Clintons' public performance has become far more poisonous because critics are reluctant to seriously deal with such a personal question as a president's alleged infidelities. If this theory is valid, then a \$200 haircut, a doomed Cabinet appointment, a budget fight, a foreign policy snafu—even questions about the Clintons' financial involvement in the Whitewater land development deals—are emphasized because of an underlying feeling of resentment over the need to pretend that the Emperor has clothes. Newsweek's Evan Thomas uses the language of the pool hall to describe this. It's a "two-bank shot," says Thomas. "Because journalists can't go after Clinton on the sex, they're going after him on the finances."

This "displacement" phenomenon has been noted by historian Michael R. Beschloss, who says, "The knowledge of this [Clinton's alleged philandering] makes Republicans like Bob Dole and other critics think Clinton is illegitimate. They can't say this forthrightly, so that injects a degree of venom into the opposition that might not otherwise be there if he were a Reagan-like figure who commanded respect and affection and support . . ."

"For that reason, on election night, Bob Dole was able to get away with saying there was no honeymoon, that 57 percent of the electorate opposed Clinton and that he would oppose him at every turn. There was enough of an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with Bill Clinton as a person from the start that he could get away with it."

Much the same view is held by historian



CHRISTOPHE VORLET FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

presidency. When Clinton asks us to trust him on Bosnia or the defense budget or even welfare or health reform, some of us feel uneasy. Words like "character" and "trust" become codes for the president's private behavior.

You can see this confusion in some polls earlier this month that, Washington Post director of polling Richard Morin says, "showed Clinton's job approval rating going up while the favorable impression of him was going down." More recently, following Clinton's trip abroad and good economic news, his favorable rating has bounced up (to a high of 60 percent in last week's Washington Post-ABC News poll). Still, a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll from a week earlier showed only 33 percent of Americans gave him good marks for his ethical and moral val-

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Goodwin, who observes, "This whole issue is not supposed to be important, so it gets projected onto other things, and therefore Clinton is not getting the positive benefits from the good things he does."

And the Clintons do good things. In my view, they are among the brightest, most attractive, most articulate people in the country. They appear concerned and compassionate; they have enormous energy. So many things they have tried to tackle are things that most politicians would not go near, for fear of not getting reelected. Their position on gays in the military took courage, as did their stand on abortion rights. The budget package, the passing of NAFTA, the determination to take on health care reform and crime are impressive. And God knows they seem to work harder than any two we've ever had in the White House. They could be poised to accomplish much for the country.

But against that background, there remains that "undercurrent" that Goodwin speaks about. And that, I believe, is what concerns

not only Clinton's political opponents but his supporters when they confront the distractions of alleged sexual improprieties in the past. It's like a giant oil slick on top of a beautiful pond.

It's also what concerns those who have studied our recent history and who believe that the public needs to come to grips with its confusion and conflict over the issue of private behavior and public appearance.

In this view, there is a huge gulf between what the public wants in a president in terms of moral authority, values and ethics, and what it actually expects: We expect our leaders to be smarter, better informed and more experienced than us, but we're reluctant about demanding that they be held to high personal standards. And we're asked to trust them on monumental issues, even when their private behavior seems confusing, upsetting and contradictory.

The Rev. Bryan Hehir, former head of Georgetown University's Kennedy Institute of Ethics, understands that when he says, "The notion that in the mind of the public generally—and even in the minds of the elites—there is an absolute split between the public performance of officials and issues of personal life is not accurate."

Hehir, now a professor at Harvard Divinity School, adds, "The public wants to know about questions of character because character runs through the core of how a public figure will perform over time."

I suspect that the public may not want to know everything—that there is a reluctance to actually confront the question of a president's past personal transgressions for fear that will make them true. In this way, as long as we don't give the question official credence, don't take it more seriously than laughing at the nightly jokes, the soul of the presidency will not be tarnished. Such feelings, too, are reflected in those polls that hint of the "undercurrent" (e.g., the recent USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll showing public approval of Clinton rising while the percentage who think he is trustworthy falls). Is it possible that this undercurrent also encourages a Ted Koppel to admonish the president with familiarity and a Bobby Ray Inman to meditate aloud about his "comfort level" with the commander-in-chief? All of this contributes to a loss of presidential stature.

Another response is to discredit the messenger. Gennifer Flowers was discredited for selling her story in spite of compromising-sounding tapes—and Clinton's admission that his voice was on them. Two of the Arkansas state troopers had transgressions in their own pasts exposed. David Brock, the American Spectator reporter of the original trooper story, was attacked for sloppy journalism, but also as a conservative lackey. Yet the detailed Los Angeles Times version of the troopers' story has not gotten much attention. Nor has that account been discredited.

Certainly American taboos are changing (e.g., is "womanizing" a character issue?), but we're probably not ready to have a head of state appear in public with a mistress. In the case of adultery, we may be where gays in the military are—at the "don't ask, don't tell" stage. We're tolerant, polls tell us, but disappearing.

During the campaign, my admittedly unscientific sampling suggested that men seemed more disturbed over the draft issue, women over the womanizing issue. But in newsrooms, the draft issue prevailed. Uneasy though many women were, this was not a hard sell. After all, Clinton's wife seemed to know about whatever he was acknowledging on "60 Minutes" and to have put it behind her. In addition, Clinton's positions on women's issues were impeccable. Finally, after Gary Hart, it was impossible to believe that he was still carrying on while running for the presidency. It wasn't a story.

But for many people, it was—and is—a story. Brookings analyst Stephen Hess told the Wall Street Journal that an "inside-the-Belt-

way mentality" exaggerates the importance of the story, given that only 29 percent of Americans tell pollsters they believe the troopers' allegations to be "important." But another way to look at it is this: Nearly a third of Americans say they are disturbed enough by allegations about Clinton's past behavior to judge them "important" when the pollster comes to call.

Then there is the question of the president's wife. What does Hillary Clinton really know and when did she know it? When she stood up for her husband on "60 Minutes," two Super Bowls ago, a typical reaction was that if she could deal with it, we could deal with it. She was strong and protective and very convincing. Without that overt support, he probably would not have been elected.

This time, after the trooper allegations, there was no real denial. This time, Hillary said, "I find it not an accident that every time he is on the verge of fulfilling his commitment to the American people . . . out comes yet a new round of these outrageous, terrible stories." The president said, "We . . . we did, if, the, the, I, I, the stories are just as they have been said. They're outrageous and they're not so." And then, once again, the all-too-familiar, painful spectacle of the wronged wife, a frozen smile on her face, stiffly serving cookies.

On paper Hillary Clinton is the perfect First Lady for our times: wife, mother, lawyer, community activist, committed and concerned. Yet her approval rating is about the same as her husband's (last week it was about five points lower than his). Is it because she is perceived as more radical ideologically than he? Or could it be because she's been forced to choose the role of accomplice over victim?

Last spring, in a New York Times Magazine interview, Mrs. Clinton talked about how America was suffering from a "sleeping sickness of the soul . . . We lack some core level meaning in our individual lives and meaning collectively . . ." She also said, "If you break down the Golden Rule or if you take Christ's commandment—Love thy neighbor as thyself—there is an underlying assumption that you will value yourself, that you will be a responsible being who will live by certain behaviors that enable you to have self-respect, because, then, out of that self-respect comes the capacity for you to respect and care for other people."

Could she possibly have been referring to the conflict in her own relationship?

In talking about the "politics of meaning," she was certainly talking about dilemmas many of us face. A few years ago, my son walked into a room while a reporter on a political talk show asserted that a president had lied.

"Mom?" my son asked. "You mean the president lied?" He was stricken, and so was I because I didn't know what to say. As adults, we understand moral conflicts, but how do we explain them to children? Kids 12 and 13 (Chelsea Clinton presumably too, though I hope not) are watching "Saturday Night Live" and Letterman. What do they think? What messages are they getting? What, finally, is our moral choke point?

After the fact, the country has learned that it tolerated and survived many presidents who flouted conventional morality in private. Americans are ambivalent about passing moral judgments, but Clinton poses a new challenge: Will Americans respect and support a leader whose private behavior before entering the White House has become more public than his predecessors' and whose peccadillos, real or imagined, continue to attract the press, the late-night comics and the water-cooler gossips? Last week's rising approval ratings don't speak to that question, but eventually the voters will.