

# Should we judge a politician on sexual behavior?



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President Clinton is caught with his pants down again, at least if we are to believe a suit by an Arkansas state employee who says he made "unwanted sexual advances" toward her in 1991.

The lawsuit has brought up a question as old as politics itself: Should we judge a politician on his or her sexual behavior?

Sex and politics historically have been inseparable. Potency means power, even in the literal sense. In ancient cultures, phallic sculptures represented power and authority.

History is full of examples of authority figures with insatiable sexual appetites. In 1534, Henry VIII broke England's ties with the Catholic Church because he wanted to get a divorce. But he soon grew tired of his new wife and had her executed for adultery. Through the years the king regularly dissolved his marriages either by divorce or by executions, declaring his wives "adulterous" or simply "too ugly."

Political republicanism doesn't ensure fidelity either, as evidenced by the sexual behavior of American presidents. Franklin D. Roosevelt's train from Washington to New York would always stop on a New Jersey siding for a rendezvous with the President's mistress. John F. Kennedy would call up on two of his secretaries to work for him at unusual hours, even if it required transcontinental transportation on Air Force planes. Lyndon B. Johnson would spend nights in the bed-

rooms of his guests at his Texas ranch house.

Why, even George Bush, the "family values" president, had to fight rumors that he was involved with an old friend over at the State Department.

And who can forget about Gennifer Flowers, who would describe her alleged encounters with Bill Clinton in sordid details to anyone who would listen. And listen they did, everyone from the New York tabloids to *60 Minutes*. Flowers, it seemed, got more than her 15 minutes' share of fame.

The strange thing isn't that politicians have affairs. They are, after all, only human, and the affair is an institution older than marriage itself. Even the Virgin Mary had an affair, though involuntarily.

No, the strange thing is that we still seem to think that a politician's sexual behavior matters. In an age of self-proclaimed sexual liberalism, we still expect our leaders to be role models both in the office and in the bedroom.

But sex and politics aren't so much a question of morality any longer. With the possible exception of a few people in Springfield, nobody is going to point a finger at Clinton and condemn him to eternal punishment for breaking the Sixth Commandment.

The reason why politicians' sexual behavior still matters is the constant flux in the patterns of gender relations. Sexual harassment, a term unfamiliar to almost everyone a few years ago, has become an omnipresent factor in gender relations in this country. Twenty years ago, Senator Bob Packwood may have been called a "charmer" and a "flirt" for pinching a staff worker's behind. Today, we'd call him a "pig."

Now, when a woman sues the President for "unwanted sexual behavior," many people are confused. Some of the conservative

politicians who once called Anita Hill a "liar" are supporting Paula Corbin Jones, whose accusations against Bill Clinton read like a blueprint of those leveled against Clarence Thomas. Likewise, some of Hill's defenders can't quite bring themselves to criticize the president, if what he did was exactly the same as Thomas.

What's more, there's not much noise coming from the people who have demanded that Packwood resign because of the accusations of sexual harassment. Of course, there is a difference in the magnitude of the charges leveled against Clinton and Packwood, but they boil down to the same thing: sexual harassment.

What makes charges of sexual harassment so difficult is not merely the sensitive nature of the offense but also the difficulty of producing evidence. As with rape cases, sexual harassment cases often force the jury to make a verdict based solely on credibility because there is no more evidence than the accuser's word against the defendant. But while rape can sometimes be proved with physical evidence such as sperm samples, sexual harassment is usually even more difficult to prove.

This gives rise to two serious problems. One, the victims of sexual harassment have virtually no way of proving their case in court. Two, the victims of false accusations have no way of defending themselves.

But Jones's lawyers say they have evidence. They say Jones is able to describe "distinguishing characteristics" in Clinton's genital area. Now they want to photograph the president's genitals as evidence. This is what the police did to Michael Jackson when he was accused of child abuse.

How times have changed. During the Kennedy administration the White House staff was

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charmed by the President's "mischievous" adventures upstairs. The media didn't write anything about presidential adultery, at least not until the president was dead.

Twenty years later, the president may have to disgrace himself so much as to have his genitals photographed by police officers. And even solid institutions of journalism such as the *New York Times* bring reports of the president's alleged sexual behavior.

It's probably not going to happen, but just the idea of having the president's genitals photographed should make us stop and think for a moment. The argument that it would disgrace the presidency just doesn't hold water because no one, not even the president, is above the law. If photographing the president's genitals is a bad idea, then it's a bad idea for anyone.

But we don't want sexual harassment to be a vehicle with which the accuser can inflict pain and emotional distress on anyone he or she doesn't like. Before going to the step of photographing somebody's genitals, the prosecution should be able to provide

evidence that there is reason to believe that the defendant may be guilty.

Whether there is reason to believe that President Clinton is guilty is, of course, an open question. And even if it is proved that Jones can describe his genitals, that doesn't necessarily prove that the president is guilty of sexual harassment.

But if it were proved that the president, or any other politician for that matter, is guilty of sexual harassment, that is a legitimate cause for concern. It is not so much a question of morality as it is of personal integrity and judgment.

Politics, like so much else in life, rests primarily on credibility. It is ludicrous to think that the presidency and the person who fulfills the role of the president are separable. What the president does in his or her personal life will reflect on his or her ability to perform in office.

And in this sense the voters not only have a right, but an obligation, to judge a politician by his or her sexual behavior.

*Marius Meland is a columnist for the Emerald.*

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