

# Discernment

So that you may be able to discern what is best. *Phil. 1:10*

## Private Lives and Public Leadership

■ For many Americans, the impeachment trial of William Jefferson Clinton is merely another opportunity to express disgust with government and an invasive news media.

Although ample justification exists to regret the impeachment process, I am disappointed in one of the most frequently stated reasons—the wish that Congress would put the president’s personal matters aside and “get on

with the business of the country.” I respond, Why should we separate a president’s moral choices from the business of the country? Aren’t questions of truth-telling, personal integrity, and legal process central to the citizen-formation process?

We must recognize the centrality of character to the very work of a nation. What becomes of the country’s business if character issues are eliminated? Have we let the “business of the country” be reduced to, well, business?

This is an extraordinary test case for raising issues about the morality of governance, and, indeed, the role of character in all of life. Citizens hastily set aside Clinton’s problems only to risk losing an invaluable opportunity for significant moral reflection.

Most of the essays in the following pages were presented at Wheaton College on September 10, 1998, at a CACE forum on “Private Lives and Public Leadership: Where Do We Draw the Line?” This session was before the impeachment hearings in the House, or the trial in the Senate. Our authors avoided speculating on the specifics.

Their focus on the presidency, however, ought not limit the question’s vitality for all spheres of life. What about a pastor, or a teacher?

Can a homemaker live a life secreted away from the family, behind a closed door, without it bearing fruit in the more public parts of one’s house?

In the following pages, our authors sharpen our capacity to judge more justly and compassionately. As we stretch our moral faculty, may our eyes be opened to see God’s eternal wisdom come to bear on the intractable moral decisions of everyday life.

I am pleased to introduce our new editor, Mr. Stan Guthrie. He has big shoes to fill, taking over for our colleague, Mark Fackler. Mark ended his superb run as editor this past summer with his move from Wheaton to Calvin College. Stan is managing editor of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* and *Pulse*, both published by Wheaton’s Billy Graham Center. His work has also appeared in *Christianity Today*, *Moody Magazine*, *Books and*

*Culture*, and elsewhere. Stan will press for the highest quality Christian moral reflection to appear in our pages. Enjoy his column in this issue, and look forward to many more.

As you also notice, this issue introduces a new look for *Discernment*. We thank Ellen Rising Morris, from Wheaton’s publication office, for her outstanding design work. As always, your comments and manuscripts are most welcome. Advocating for Christian ethical reflection requires vigilance and courage. Thanks for joining us in this venture.

Kenneth Chase, director of CACE

“Why should we separate a president’s moral choices from the business of the country?”

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# Where Should We Draw the Line?

By Martin Medhurst, Ph.D.

■ The important question “Private Lives, Public Leadership: Where Should We Draw the Line?” is timely because of the behavior of our current president, Bill Clinton. But we need to keep in mind three pertinent facts: First, Mr. Clinton is not the first president to engage in extramarital sexual relations while in office; second, that sexual morality is only one of several areas where the private lives of our public servants interface with their responsibilities to the public; and third, that almost everything we know about our political leaders is filtered for us through the various media.

From Thomas Jefferson’s alleged affair with Sally Hemings to Jack Kennedy’s well-documented trysts, the presidency has frequently been the site for sordid sexual escapades.

## Sex not Only Issue

But the second point is equally important. Notice that I did not say their public responsibilities, but rather their responsibilities to the public. It involves meeting the expectations of the electorate, fulfilling its vision of public service, embodying the mythos of the office by displaying the ethos—the character—that people associate with the highest and most powerful position in the world. It is not enough for a president simply to do the job.

We expect our leaders to fulfill both functions—and some have: Washington, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, Eisenhower, Reagan. They did far more than simply avoid public sex scandals. They learned how to negotiate the treacherous waters associated with being a private person in public life. What were some of those dangerous areas and how did they manage to accomplish these negotiations?

Four areas, from a historical perspective, have proven troublesome to private/public relationships: (1) family relationships, (2) business transactions, (3) personal health, and (4) individual religious beliefs.

Family relationships have been controversial at least as far back as Dolly Madison. The line between loving spouse and policy advisor has not always been strictly drawn. It seems perfectly reasonable to subject the spouse to the same sort of scrutiny usually reserved for the president and his advisors.

A second area is business transactions. It didn’t start with Whitewater. Throughout presidential history have been numerous instances of presidents and high-ranking politicians engaging in questionable practices—before entering, during, and after leaving office.

Since the moment a vice presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, released his personal income tax returns during the 1952 campaign, the personal business dealings of our political leaders have been fair game for curious inquisitors. The lines are murky, but a key question is this: How does the dispersal of such information affect the leader’s ability to lead and the citizen’s willingness to follow? What does the possession of such information teach us about the policies or character of the leader?

Perhaps a stronger case could be made for knowing about a president’s health. There is nothing more personal, however, than one’s own body. Yet history teaches us that presidential health can have serious implications for the public welfare.

Lincoln suffered terribly from depression during the Civil War; Grant battled alcoholism in the midst of Reconstruction; Wilson had an incapacitating stroke as he tried to realize his dream of a League of Nations. In most cases of presidential ailment, whether Roosevelt’s polio or Eisenhower’s heart attack, a systematic effort has been made to conceal from public view the seriousness, if not the nature, of the disease. Where is the line between the privacy of one’s own body and the good of the body politic?

## Personal Religious Beliefs

Finally, there is the area of personal religious beliefs. Nothing is any more revered or more firmly



*Medhurst says “private” issues have long intruded in the public sphere.*

protected under our form of government than the individual's right to freedom of conscience—freedom to profess some form of religion, or no form at all. But what happens when one enters upon high elective office? Does one lose the right to one's personal beliefs if those beliefs are out of sync with those held by the majority?

The temptation to impose a religious test—an act explicitly forbidden in the United States Constitution—has always been strong, whether in the guise of the Know-Nothing Party, those who marched under the slogan of “Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion,” or those who smeared Al Smith in the 1928 election for the sin of being a Roman Catholic. All of this culminated, of course, in the 1960 campaign, when John Kennedy had to remind voters that he was not, despite repeated newspaper usage, the “Catholic candidate for President,” but was, instead, the Democratic Party's candidate for president who “happened also to be a Catholic.”

It was an effective line, but can anyone just “happen” to be a Christian? Are one's religious and moral beliefs of no more moment than where one “happened” to be born or what one “happened” to be doing on the day Mark McGwire hit his 62nd home run?

The pundits worried out loud about Jimmy Carter, not only because he claimed to be a born again Christian but more so because he acted like one. He was a regular churchgoer, even before becoming president; a Sunday school teacher; a Bible reader. The press was worried. It had a right to be, because true religion affects the way a person thinks, reasons, judges, and acts. In this sense, a president's religious beliefs are clearly a public concern. Religious faith necessarily bridges the private and public realms and as such ought to be subject to analysis and criticism.

### The Media

Finally, we must remember that most of what we know about our leaders comes filtered through the media—newspapers, magazines, and, foremost of all, television. The so-called “fourth estate” is a

dominant, perhaps *the* dominant, player in policing the line between the private and the public in the name of the public—of you and of me. Sometimes they play their role nobly; at other times they leave much to be desired.

The emergence of new communication technologies, the shortening of news cycles, the multiplication of news outlets, the blurring of the line between news and entertainment, the popularity of talk radio and talk TV, the political uses of the Internet, all affect what is considered to be “relevant” on any given day. The power of the national media to shape our perceptions, our beliefs, and our opinions is tremendous. The media matter and they, like the politicians they love to criticize, ought also to be analyzed and critically evaluated, not merely consumed unthinkingly.

“Almost everything we know about our political leaders is filtered for us through the various media.”

### Recommended Principles

I commend the following principles for negotiating the line between the private and the public:

- First, to your own self be true. Know what you believe and why you believe it and be ready to articulate those beliefs in front of friends and foes alike.
- Second, be humble. Entertain the possibility, from time to time, that you may possibly be wrong.
- Third, be loyal—to your principles, your family, your friends, and your country.
- Fourth, be slow to anger and quick to forgive.
- Fifth, study history and the lives of exemplary leaders.
- Sixth, read the Bible.

These principles will not, by themselves, tell you where any particular line should be drawn. They will help you to become someone of wisdom and character, who can weigh situations and people and circumstances and make informed interpretations and judgments. And in the final analysis that is what we must rely on: an informed and principled electorate who will tell the politicians and the media where the lines ought to be drawn.



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# A Case for Telling More

By Deni Elliott

■ The news media help us learn about the so-called private lives of public individuals. During the 1992 political campaign I wrote a piece in *USA Today* called “Memo to the Media” in which I asked the nation’s journalists to save me from another campaign with coverage dominated by selectively disclosed secrets. I offered a “modest proposal” to the press that included the following requests. Tell me everything. Tell me every little secret you can verify. And while you’re at it, tell me where you got the information.

As you can imagine, that piece did not make me very popular with the candidates, their opponents, or, for that matter, the journalists. But I advocated then, as I do now, that journalists confirm and publish any information that they can find regarding a candidate’s or an elected official’s life outside of his or her own home. I maintain that this approach best serves a large, anonymous democracy such as ours. It serves our democracy by providing a way to balance the fact that we are likely not to truly know the people who supposedly represent us. It also holds public officials accountable for the lifestyles they choose to the people who elect them.

Most of my colleagues, however, maintain that journalists should only provide information about candidates’ and elected officials’ private lives if it is relevant to their public duty. Before going further, I need to be clear about what I am not advocating, because I am often misinterpreted.

## What I Don’t Mean

First, I do not advocate that journalists seek to secure and divulge intimate information relating to personal relationships conducted outside of the public sphere. What people do in the privacy of their own home, or in the privacy of their own trash cans, for that matter, is not the public’s business unless one of the participants chooses to make it so.

Nor do I advocate that a person’s health status be reported. I believe the legitimate sphere of privacy includes an individual’s health matters that are commonly known only to the person, her healthcare provider, and the horde of others involved in securing third-party payments. If a candidate can withstand the ravages of a campaign, it is reasonable to expect that she has the mental and physical stamina to conduct herself in office as well. There are very few medical conditions that can be predicted to result in death or professional dysfunction within a two- or four-year term.

Nor am I advocating that journalists give up their important role of assessing the importance of information for publication. Clearly, they need a lot of practice in making editorial judgments. I am simply asking that they not make those editorial judgments about events and proclivities exhibited in the public sphere by elected officials and candidates for public office. Rather than the selective disclosure that we have of candidates’ and officials’ secrets, I am advocating full disclosure.

## The Relevancy Test

Others, of course, seek to draw a more conservative line between private and public life. They use the relevancy test. Dennis Thompson, who directs the ethics program at Harvard University, maintains that “private conduct should be publicized only if it is relevant to the performance in public office.” He pairs this relevancy standard with the need for accountability. Specifically, “citizens should be able to hold public officials accountable for their decisions and policies [that is, public office], and therefore citizens must have information that would enable them to judge how well officials are doing or are likely to do their job.”

Accountability, according to Thompson, “provides a reason to override or diminish the right of privacy that officials would otherwise have” and provides a reason to limit publicity about private lives.

Publicity over private matters diminishes accountability, according to Thompson, when it takes



*Elliott says too often journalists substitute their editorial judgment for the public’s right to choose its representatives according to its own criteria.*

precedence over reporting that is more relevant to the official's public office. And certainly if we take a look at the reporting about the Lewinsky affair, we can see how focus on the president's private life has certainly taken precedence over important discussions about domestic policy. Thompson argues that the accountability standard shifts the focus of the decision regarding disclosure from "conduct that affects job performance to conduct that citizens need [in order] to assess job performance."

### The Media

The first problem I see in this approach is that it makes little sense to talk about what a citizen should base his or her judgment on regarding "how well officials are doing or are likely to do their job." One of the joys of our representative democracy is that I, as a voter, get to decide who best represents me. I get to make that decision on any basis I wish.

Now, I have never seen a candidate who completely, truly represents me. So, it is up to me to decide which representative and nonrepresentative factors matter most. Does it matter if my would-be representative uses tobacco products in public, supports televangelism, has no openly gay friends, or sends her child to a private school? Maybe. Ultimately, these factors may not matter as much to me as the candidate's voting record on tobacco subsidies or abortion or gay rights or private school vouchers, but in a close call, any of these factors may be a deciding one for me.

On the other hand, journalists who decide which personal traits or choices are relevant for me to know, and which are not, are substituting their editorial judgment for my right to choose my representative on whatever basis I wish. Worse, those who decide which candidate's sexual orientation, behavior, or other personal habits get reported are less often reporters and editors and more often candidates with the best spin doctors. Candidates work to present a public persona; opponents work to interest journalists in information that spoils that public persona; and citizens are left wondering just who it is they are voting for to represent them.

The better solution, I believe, is to report to voters everything that happens in the public sphere, or that is disclosed by a person with first hand knowledge. The source of the information ought be reported as well.

And, the information does not need to be reported with banner headlines and months of hour-long nightly television analysis. In fact, the more often small details are reported, the less startling they seem. This sort of openness cuts through the created images and the anonymity that candidates for public office have sought to use to distance their real selves from voters. Whomever I vote into public office should be a person rather than a persona.

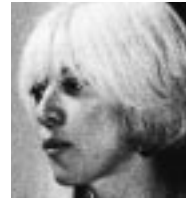
The test I suggest journalists apply is simple. They should ask themselves, "If my readers or viewers lived down the street from this candidate, if they ate at the same restaurants and shopped at the same stores, and their kids played on the same Little League team, what would they know about her?" Then I want the journalists to tell me that, please. What has commonly been referred to as "private information" about candidates and officials has often been information known to a whole slew of insider politicians and journalists that the candidates and officials want to conceal from their constituents back home.

The notion of privacy, however, was never intended to be a barrier to social knowledge and interaction. It is intended to define a sphere in which someone can move freely. Privacy defines a sphere of information that the individual can choose not to share.

The good news about the new technology is that electronic footprints that we leave via caller ID, e-mail, voice-mail, and our wanderings through the World Wide Web town square cut down on the unnatural anonymity we have developed over the past hundred years.

A virtual return to small town America helps define an arguable sphere of privacy—information and individual conduct in a nonpublic arena. This sphere of privacy ought be protected by and for every individual, whatever one's professional or public role.

"Tell me everything. Tell me every little secret you can verify. And while you're at it, tell me where you got the information."



Deni Elliott is the University Professor of Ethics and director of the Practical Ethics Center at the University of Montana. She was founding director of the Dartmouth College Ethics Institute. Her latest book is *Journalism Ethics: Contemporary Issues* (1998).

# God Cannot Be Privatized

By Rodney Clapp

■ “Private Lives and Public Leadership: Where Do We Draw the Line?” For Christians, the better question is not where we draw the lines, but which lines we will draw. The strict separation between private and public that our culture assumes is a relatively recent development in history, growing largely out of the Industrial Revolution.

Before this, the home was a center of production as well as consumption. People were farmers, craftsmen, cobblers, weavers of rugs. There were duties and activities even the young children could participate

in, such as gathering kindling for the fire or helping herd the small animals.

## The Separation of Public and Private

Private lives and public lives were not separated. Homes were places that fulfilled economic and other productive functions that we now call “public,” such as producing goods, educating the young, and seeing to the welfare of the old and the destitute. With the Industrial Revolution, however, the single wage earner was created. The man, the husband, the father of the household, was sent out to work, typically in a factory, to bring home the means for bread and subsistence for the rest of the family. And so was drawn the strict division between the public and the private.

Public activities were engaged in outside the home. The home activities were confined to what we came to call the private realm. In this compartmentalization scheme, over time the public world was made the rightful realm of males, politics, science, and facts. And confined to the private realm were females, child rearing, values, and religion. Yahweh, the God of Israel, was made a household god.

I want to suggest how objectionable this should be to Christians. Although we are terribly inured to it, we are all modernists, we are all individualists, we are all classical liberals, and we have in different ways deeply ingrained in ourselves the separation between public and private. Perhaps it is time to recognize how problematic this is in light of our convictions.

## Christians Live in Community

Christians have little stake in the private as modernity has defined and enacted it. Our lives do not belong to us. The God of Israel is the Creator and Redeemer of the universe. He cannot be privatized. Jesus is Lord of our private lives first, and most importantly, because He is Lord of the universe.

Our lives belong to God and to God’s people. We are members of a community called the church, the Body of Christ. For Christians, sex and a lot of other things are community concerns. This is why we marry in public in front of witnesses who will uphold us and support us in our vows.

Thus, as Christians, we can have little truck with President Clinton’s compartmentalization of his public responsibilities and his private life. Whether or not his sex life is a public matter, it is, because he is a professing Christian, a communal matter. It is the church’s business what its members do with their pots and pans, their wallets, and their genitals. And thus, I think it is a sign of how accommodated to modernity’s sharp separation of private and public we all are that no one, so far as I know at least, has seriously asked whether or not Mr. Clinton should be liable to church discipline. Where are the Southern Baptists when we need them?

Of course, I recognize that we are a long way from a proper churchly and communal Christian life. We are deeply affected by modernity and are all too individualized to simply enact Christian community standards tomorrow.

By community, I mean persons with common interests and goals. For Christians, the common interest is the kingdom of God and the goal



*Rodney Clapp says that in our discussions of public and private, we ought not overlook community.*

is serving that kingdom's aims. Community is not the same as public, at least as public has come to be defined. Public now means "that which persons ostensibly hold somehow in common but without any sense of personal belonging or responsibility." Because we sense that no one really belongs to or is responsible for the upkeep of public transportation or public parks, for instance, we litter buses and deface parks. Everyone's responsibility, especially in an age of tax revolts, is no one's responsibility.

The public is a realm in which we do not have the sort of interconnection that I think Deni Elliott hopes that modern technology, like the Internet, may push us toward, where we somehow are able to regain some knowledge of how people really are. In any event, the public is not communal. It is not a site in which we know that other people take some sort of personal responsibility for us, for our welfare, and for our common welfare.

Community is also in distinction from the private, which denotes individuals pursuing their own interest apart from and even in antagonism to the interests of others and of any common good. In the private realm we shield ourselves from any real or direct knowledge of who we really are.

Now, in light of President Clinton's public accountability, to some degree I sympathize with his chafing that his sexual misdeeds or peccadilloes have been made "public." With his passel of conflicts of interest and his heading of an investigation that began with Whitewater and somehow ended up with its nose in Monica Lewinsky's dress, I don't think Kenneth Starr has any profound sense of communal responsibility to President Clinton or the rest of the country. I think it reasonable in that light for President Clinton to feel that Kenneth Starr is defacing him in much in the same way a vandal spray paints graffiti on a park restroom.

### The Role of the Media

Where do the so-called "fourth estate," the media,

fit into this? From the Proverbs to the upholding of the truthful Logos in the Gospel of John, the biblical concern is for wisdom. Wisdom, however, is not synonymous with information. Wisdom is not about possessing an abundance of bits of knowledge, but about possessing a sense of discernment, proportion, and proper deployment of truly edifying and useful knowledge. As Martin Medhurst suggests, the media are simply out of control in giving us "news." We have 24-hour news cycles. Fifteen years ago journalists could count on a seven- or eight-hour break in the news cycle to catch their breaths and consider

their next step. Now their breaks, if they exist at all, are literally in terms of minutes.

News is a business with an insatiable maw. Do we really believe that truly significant things happen every hour on the hour? Do we really believe that simply because a newspaper has to provide its subscribers an issue every morning, something genuinely significant happened the day before? If yesterday's newspaper is not worth reading today, how much of our time did it genuinely deserve 24 hours before?

We are not staying soberly and properly informed, but swimming in a poisonous glut of innuendo, rumor, sensationalism, and prurience.

Part of the responsibility lies with the media, the editors and journalists who bring news to us. But that is only one link in the chain. We are the people who, as it is now said, "consume" the news. We are the people who pay for the newspaper, view the television, and keep up the Nielsen ratings to sell the advertising. We can decide for wisdom rather than for mere information.

The rebuilding of true and authoritative Christian community is a long-term task, a task of decades or even centuries. Perhaps it is time we got started.

What you can do tonight is cancel your newspaper subscription, skip the 10 o'clock news, and retune your radios to a good jazz station.

"We are not staying soberly and properly informed, but swimming in a poisonous glut of innuendo, rumor, sensationalism, and prurience."



Rodney Clapp is senior editor at InterVarsity Press. He has won numerous writing and reporting awards. Mr. Clapp's most recent book is *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and Consumer Culture* (InterVarsity Press, 1998).

# Panelists Explore Theme During Roundtable

■ C. Everett Koop, Deni Elliott, Martin Medhurst, and Rodney Clapp fleshed out the theme of “Private Lives and Public Leadership” at a roundtable discussion on September 10, 1998, at Wheaton College. The following is an edited transcript of their exchange.



*Panelists (l. to r.) Clapp, Elliott, Medhurst, and Koop explore the ramifications of “private lives and public leadership.”*

Medhurst: I have a question for Rodney. I was taken with your indictment of modernity. But it strikes me that even if the Southern Baptist Convention were to in some way discipline President Clinton we would then run up against the problem of, which I alluded to in my remarks, how to handle the public dimension of religious belief.

Clapp: Well, we are talking about changes over decades. Part of the issue is the very sharp privatization of Christian faith and understanding that it does not directly have political relevance. I think that we are now in an increasingly, at least, post-Christian society. Recognizing that if the church and Christians are going to have a distinctive, if you will, public or “out there” presence, it will be through the church. We can no longer lean on

the state to do that. One of the things that will be involved in trying to work that out is the whole issue of authority. It is extremely thorny. I didn't mention the Southern Baptists to suggest that if they acted, all of our problems with the Lewinsky situation would be out of the way or taken care of, but simply as an example of how far along we are.

So I cannot give you a direct answer except to say it would have to do with working out extremely complex issues of authority and an understanding of the relation of two, if you will, polises. I am concerned that the church reclaim its identity as a polis rather than depending on Christian witnesses being a purely individual or personal matter.

*Dr. Koop then mentioned how sexual sins and lying are regarded differently in popular culture and in the Bible.*

Medhurst: I think you are absolutely right in the sense that from a public perspective, matters such as perjury or obstruction of justice, or subornation of perjury, are much more important for the public's ability to make judgments about its leaders than are the more private sins of sexual immorality. Now Rodney may disagree with that because that sort of flies in the face of his analysis, but I think most people would agree that those other matters are of more public moment.

Clapp: I would want to make clear that Christians must be in a sense bilingual, and as long as we are in a culture that has certain kinds of categories, private and public, we need to know how to work with that language. That doesn't mean we don't have another language, if you will, a first language, a language of the gospel that shapes how we deal with that second language. But Christians are always, in a sense, missionaries. You go into a culture, and in some ways, find things you can agree with, other things that are problematic, but you have to learn to speak the language and understand the mores and the ways of that other culture.

Elliott: I'd like to suggest that when we frame the question as either Clinton's private sexual life or a violation of public law, we leave out an important area, and that is that there is a problem of judgment. If we want to take a look at a leader, I think that we need to wonder about the judgment of one who would make himself so incredibly vulnerable to the Linda Tripp of this world.

*The participants then discuss the media.*

Elliott: I'd like to know how serious Rodney was about just ignoring the media. It seems to me that the media are the key players in this whole discussion of privacy. I happen to think that



the modern world, with its electronic footprints as I call them, is really a good thing. I love caller ID. I think that's good for society, as is e-mail.

Clapp: I do not want to suggest that we ignore the media. I do think the steady diet—day to day, hour to hour—is not something we need to be well informed about national and local affairs. Reading a good magazine, or perhaps the Sunday newspaper instead of every issue of the newspaper, can help us to be reasonably well informed. What we've got now is a lot of misinformation and disinformation along with genuine information. I am not interested in people totally ignoring the press. I don't think we could do that if we tried, and I don't think that is advisable. I do think, though, that we are grossly addicted to it. It continues to function as it is, partly because it gets the support of the marketplace. So I am serious about suggesting that we look at "Do we really need to listen to news stations every day, do we really need to tune into CNN hour by hour, and, yes, do we need to read a daily newspaper?"

Koop: I went to Washington as a favorite son of Philadelphia. I went from being Philadelphia's best known, most beloved, most whatever doctor to suddenly being in Washington where I went through being Dr. Koop to Dr. Kook. I said publicly several times that I had come to know what was the definition of a truly investigative reporter. He is someone who read in yesterday's news-

paper an unverified story about me and repeated it today.

The other thing that I have always been concerned about with the press is that not only do they not verify things, but they love to put labels on people. So I had a bunch of labels that really had nothing to do with my job as surgeon general. They were always in quotations. I was a "pro-life zealot," I was a "fundamentalist Christian," and I was also incompetent, which was not in quotations. Not in the 11 months I was waiting to be confirmed did I see one newspaper article that was in my favor, and there were a lot of newspaper articles. Inasmuch as my chief sin was said to be incompetence, no one had a whit of evidence to show what that incompetence was.

Medhurst: Probably the reason was that you had not been a bureaucrat or appointee, and the routinization in D.C. is that "if you are not a part of us, you are automatically not qualified." The same thing is true in the media.

Clapp: The media give at least two defenses when their ethics are challenged. One is relevance. That has been mentioned tonight and has come in for a bit of a beating I think, and not least because something becomes "relevant" in the news media as soon as anyone reports it. So Matt Drudge has become an important player in part of the Clinton-Lewinsky story because he released some of this material on the Internet, and it became something more "respectable" news outlets had to report on because

"now it has become relevant, now it's news." What makes something genuinely relevant? How relevant is it simply because someone else is going to scoop you with it?

The other is the matter of judgment. Just as relevance has become a weasel word to get more viewers, and sell more papers, I am afraid, Dr. Elliott, that if we say with Clinton, or anyone else, "what he has done in this case may reflect on poor judgment, and in that sense poor judgment may carry over to other governmental tasks," then who decides what signals a poor sense of judgment? Who challenges that call? Again I wonder in some cases if judgment isn't an after-the-case rationalization that was introduced by people who wanted to rush into the spotlight with a story.

Elliott: I agree with the concerns about the press, at least many of them. I do know that poor judgment is often a political call. I think that we can look back into our own childhoods and we can see how our parents taught us about consequentialist thinking. "Now let's think what might happen if you do such and such..." I am talking about a really basic kind of judgment here. That is, we learn early on not to put ourselves in positions in which we are vulnerable to really, really bad consequences. That kind of judgment, it seems to me, is something that we would hope would be part of the general moral developmental process of an adult.

"Do we really need to listen to news stations every day, do we really need to tune into CNN hour by hour, and, yes, do we need to read a daily newspaper?"

# The Link Between Private Lives and Public Leadership

By Stan Guthrie

■ Geraldo, Montel, and Jerry notwithstanding, Americans generally don't like to pry into the private lives of others. Concerning the Lewinsky scandal, citizens have consistently told the pollsters that high employment and a rising Dow count for much more than an "inappropriate" relationship. Most citizens have dismissed the investigation as being "just about sex."

## The Bible and Sex

The Bible, however, never puts the word "just" in front of "sex." Sex is ultimately a spiritual act with practical consequences. David's kingdom was shaken to the core after his affair with the wife of an officer.

In the church, overseers "must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2). The apostle Paul asked, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:5) The obvious answer is, he can't. The modern dichotomy between public leadership and private lives is an artifice.

## A "Leading Indicator"

In his book *The American Leadership Tradition: Moral Vision from Washington to Clinton*, Marvin Olasky, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, notes the link between private and public infidelity exhibited by Presidents Clinton, Wilson,

Harding, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy. "Faithlessness," Olasky stated, "is a leading indicator of trouble. Small betrayals in marriage generally lead to larger betrayals, and leaders who break a large vow to one person generally find it easy to break relatively small vows to millions."

Or, to put it another way, if a person has not been faithful in a relatively "minor" thing such as his marriage, why should he be entrusted with the larger responsibilities of public leadership?

British historian Paul Johnson, in his 1988 book *Intellectuals*, chronicles the personal moral bankruptcy of the secular architects of modern society. It's hard not to notice the link between their "private" lives and "public" policies.

For example, Karl Marx lived an angry and frustrated existence, depending on the handouts of others. A contemporary said of him, "Marx does not believe in God but he does believe in himself and makes everyone serve himself. His heart is not full of love but of bitterness and he has very little sympathy for the human race." Perhaps if more people had taken a hard look at Marx's "private" life, they might have had some warning.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the self-styled "friend of mankind," perfectly lived out the humorous adage, "I love mankind; it's people I can't stand." He abandoned to

almost certain death the first four children he fathered by his companion Thérèse. How much credibility does someone—who would govern the lives of millions—possess if his own private life is a shambles?

Widespread public suspicion about last December's air strikes against Iraq, on the eve of the House impeachment vote, shows how dishonesty about "private" matters can spill into the public arena. Peter J. Wallison, a former counsel to Ronald Reagan, wrote in the December 17 *Wall Street Journal*, "What more powerful demonstration can there be that personal actions—lying—by a President can destroy his ability to discharge the most important functions of the office he holds?"

## Public Exposure

A tree is known by its fruit, in private and in public. Perhaps it is time for citizens to take a closer look at the private lives of their public leaders. While there is certainly a time for forgiveness and "moving on," maybe shame needs to make a comeback in our culture. Public exposure of marital infidelity and other "private" acts has its uses, because shamelessness has been a major factor in our unconscionably high levels of adultery, divorce, poverty, and youth delinquency.

Yet there must be limits, or our political culture will permanently descend to the level of Larry Flynt. The traditional

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measure has been relevance, but since private conduct is inherently relevant to public leadership, we must be more precise. Here are a few guideposts.

(1) Bearing on official duties and commitment to the law. If the infidelity (of whatever kind) leads to lawbreaking or to a diminished capacity to do the job, it is relevant.

(2) When and where it occurred. Did the unfaithfulness happen decades ago, when the public leader was less wise and mature, or did it occur recently? More weight should be given to the latter.

(3) With whom it occurred. Did the incident involve a young subordinate or a professional and social equal? The first is worse.

(4) Results. Has the incident already been “paid for”? Has the offender made restitution and amends? If not, then he or she should be held accountable.

### Spotlight on Character

These guidelines, admittedly, do not guarantee that irrelevant incidents will not come to light, since their application requires judgment. Nor do they remove the press’s gate-keeping function. The goal, however, should not be to

neuter the media, but to reform them, to move them to discernment. In an era in which political candidates routinely release their income tax returns, public officials really don’t have private lives anyway.

While marital fidelity does not ensure a public servant will be honest, or even competent, it does tell voters something important about that person’s character and credibility. Deliberate ignorance about a public official’s character is not bliss. As James Q. Wilson noted in his book *On Character*, “The public interest depends on private virtue.”



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## Quotes

“Franklin Roosevelt successfully covered up affairs with Lucy Mercer and Missy Le Hand, and used the same techniques to cover up affairs of state. Turner Catledge of the *New York Times* told friends that Roosevelt’s first instinct was always to lie; sometimes in mid-sentence he would switch to accuracy because he realized he could get away with the truth in that particular instance.”

■ Marvin Olasky, “*Sex and the Presidency*,” January 26, 1998, Wall Street Journal.

“The proposition that the public has no right to condemn private behavior except when that behavior causes harm to others is deeply ingrained in liberal culture. It even has bipartisan appeal.”

■ Roger Kimball, “*Forget Ken Starr. The House Should Call John Stuart Mill*,” November 18, 1998, Wall Street Journal.

“I want private life and public life to be under God, transformed and guided by faith, responsible for justice and faithfulness in all relations. For the sake of setting a healthy moral example for private life as well as effective leadership in just and ethical politics, I urge us not to drag the sex lives of politicians into partisan politics.”

■ Glen Harold Stassen, “*Accountability in and for Forgiveness*,” Judgment Day at the White House (*Eerdmans*, 1999).

“Yet, those of us who condemn (Larry) Flynt, we national media types who would never stoop to such journalism, ought to pause for a moment and wonder if Flynt is not following, in his own contemptible way, the path we establishment types have already blazed.

“... I particularly deplore what Flynt is doing, but say what you will about him, he at least lacks pretense. Say what you will about establishment journalism, you could never say that.”

■ Richard Cohen, “*Thin Line Between Journalism, Flynt*,” published in the January 16, 1999, Daily Herald.

“We urge the society as a whole to take account of the ethical commitments necessary for a civil society and to seek the integrity of both public and private morality. While partisan conflicts have usually dominated past debates over public morality, we now confront a much deeper crisis, whether the moral basis of the constitutional system itself will be lost.”

■ From the “*Declaration Concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis in the Clinton Presidency*,” published in the November 30, 1998, Wall Street Journal.

“As human beings, we all have moral failings. But presidents should help us strive to meet impossible ideals and prepare us for sacrifice when peace and prosperity do not abound.”

■ Henry Ruth, “*Clinton Has Corrupted His Party’s Soul*,” December 8, 1998, Wall Street Journal.

## Coming Events

March 17–19, 1999

### Dialogue Workshops: “Recovering Personal Responsibility”

Our annual “Dialogue” event promises to inspire and challenge. Our keynoter will be Mr. Don Eberly, director of the Civil Society Project and founder of the National Fatherhood Initiative. He will speak both Wednesday and Thursday evenings. Other sessions, with speakers on education, fitness, and genetic engineering, are scheduled throughout the conference. For a brochure or other information, contact the CACE office at (630) 752-5886.

March 25, 1999

### “Health Care Among the Poor: A Christian Calling”

A special evening featuring Dr. C. Everett Koop, sponsored by CACE, Wheaton’s Health Professions, the Christian Community Health Fellowship, and Lawndale Christian Health Center. Along with a distinguished panel of experts, Dr. Koop will discuss the possibilities and difficulties in applying medical skills to the underserved populations in the United States. All Chicagoland health care students are invited to attend. The dinner and sessions will be held in the Lawndale complex. For invitations and other information, contact the CACE office at (630) 752-5886.

## Discernment

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