

Should We Care That Politicians Do Dirty Things?

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, JUL 24 2013

We live in a mass media culture where there is often no divide between public and private. Even what appears 'private' is no longer private thanks to such instances as phone hacking and government snooping. As I work on drawing up a module on U.S. politics that I will be teaching during the coming academic year I am drawn to a debate that is once again rearing its head in the U.S. media – male politicians being caught doing 'dirty things'.

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton's experiences with revelations of the string of women he dallied with in the 1990s, most notably Monica Lewinsky, catapulted triviality and sexual scandal into politics at the highest level. The now famous image of the dress that was splattered with Clinton's semen, retained unlaundered by Lewinsky, remains the sticky-sickly image of the entire affair as it played out in the global media. The reality of the Clinton scandal was the revelation that even the most powerful man in the world does dirty things.

Should a public servant go through that kind of public humiliation? Is our modern condition, which craves gossip and scandal, productive? Should we not just say 'what people do in their private life has nothing to do with their jobs'? After all, if a manager decided to measure your performance at work based on what you do in your own time... would you consider that fair? I doubt it. I also doubt that an employment tribunal would agree. This line of reasoning does not seek to defend those acts that transpire in scandal situations, but only to assert that they do not always materially affect the politicking of the individual at hand.

People who get to the top in politics are driven, smart (most of the time) and as flawed as the rest of us. Yet, in today's media culture, those flaws are often exposed in ways that are cruel rather than constructive. Former U.S. Congressman Anthony Wiener's serial sexting and flirting with various women on the internet echoes similar cases in the UK such as with the Labour MP Chris Bryant. Similarly, Former New York governor Elliot Spitzer's downfall due to his taste for prostitutes echoes the scandal currently sweeping through Italy concerning former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Finally, the old staple of the politician's extra marital affair interfering in a political career brings so many cases to mind that listing them would make this blog post book-length.

The fact is, the vast majority of these cases have nothing to do with the public service of these elected officials. The revelations are, instead, the product of an appetite for scandal driven by the media – and willingly consumed by the public. In that climate, anyone is fair game – without regard for the consequences. Some affected officials simply resign, others lie (as Clinton did) – which is an understandable human reaction to such accusations. Of course, the lie then becomes the act that often seals their fate as the evidence becomes undeniable – rather than the dirty act itself.

The reason for writing this blog post was the news that Wiener and Spitzer are both back on the campaign trail seeking a return to public office. This is good news for politics as it hopefully proves (as it did in the case of Clinton and Bryant) that a well informed public can rise above the gutter press sensibility and measure elected officials on their public record, not their personal faults in their private life.

However, there will always be those who demand higher standards in elected officials. This tendency to look up to public figures is a product of attitudes outgrown from tradition and religion – neither of which are entirely trustworthy in making sound political judgements. Elected officials are flawed – as are all figureheads – even religious ones. They are flawed because they are human beings. If they screw up, we should not be happy about it... but we should not

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expect them to resign because they do dirty things. We absolutely should hold them to account when they are corrupt, engaged in illegal activities, and so forth. It would be great if we lived with a media that placed their focus into true political scandals yet to be uncovered rather than the endless revolving door of trivial sexual scandals. A Wiener is not a Watergate.

If the media continues along the path of titillation and scandal, and the public continues to consume that media, the effect will only be to discourage people from public service. That is the real tragedy at the heart of this matter. Will McAvoy would agree!

About the author:

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