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Beyond Peeping Toms

A subtle change is taking place in Washington, and this time it is for the better: congressional leaders are reportedly moving to return to the days when the private affairs of members of the House and Senate were considered their personal matters. After a decade or more of passing judgment and meting out reprimands, congressional leaders are deeply concerned. Recently they entangled themselves not only in the case of a congressional member hiring a gay hooker and procurer as his personal secretary (although not on congressional payroll) but also in a case of a representative who made persistent passes at one (some say two) of his employees.

Congress's renewed respect for privacy may well reflect practical, expedient interests. Members seem to feel, quite correctly, that if moral standards are drawn too tightly, most of them may find at least one skeleton in their own closet. And they realize that the country, which is not holding members of Congress in high regard to begin with, may lose still more respect if the press bombards the people with daily reports about the personal deceitfulness of congressmen. Members of Congress followed closely the demise of the once highly regarded Barney Frank, as many of his long-time supporters fell away.

Nobody is suggesting that personal ethics do not deserve reexamination. After decades of moral confusion, there is a great need for clarification. However, these are matters one needs to discuss with friends, neighbors, spouses, and one's self; for instance, one may ask, What is the contemporary standing of "old" virtues such as fidelity in marriage and drinking in moderation?

Indeed, the nineties may well see an even-greater return to traditional values, not only because of the spreading of AIDS and rising teen pregnancies, but also because of the inherent stress built into the dual-income family structure, and the struggle of such couples to be decent parents. However, these are all matters to be worked out within local communities, not in Washington, state capitals, or city halls.

It may be said that it is one of the tasks of public leaders to be role models for the rest of us. Unfortunately, America cannot return to those simple days of small communities in which one could emulate the village elders. While it would be a sociological bonus if the president and other public officials were also exemplary spouses, boy scout leaders, faithful churchgoers, and animal lovers, there are even more important values to uphold in their public capacity. Thus, it is far more important that they not use military threats (which might escalate into nuclear war) to sell legislation to special interests which pay them honoraria and contribute to their political campaigns; that they refrain from appointing incompetent friends to positions which require expertise; and so on. Indeed, the public already accepts much of this wisdom, having chosen a divorced president whose relationship with his children is far from exemplary and who was hardly a regular churchgoer—and having supported other elected officials who have revealed that they are gay, have experimented with marijuana, or who womanize as much as Kennedy or drink as much as Moynihan. One need not be indifferent to marital infidelity and other such personal transgressions to realize that if we hound out of office all

those who slip either in public office and/or in personal matters, the halls of Congress may be very empty or hold only those who are exceptionally pious. At least we need to start with public duty before turning to more personal virtues, as dear as they may be.

Under special circumstances, officials' personal vagaries *are* relevant: when they intrude into the performance of their *public* duties. Thus, it is legitimate to question whether an excessive drinker who consorts with women of Eastern European origin, while on duty overseas, could make a reliable secretary of defense. And, while it seems inappropriate to determine whether or not a presidential candidate is unfaithful to his wife, once caught, it is relevant whether he deals frankly and openly with the press, and through it, with the electorate, or instead tries to stall.

Historically, the turning point seems to have come with the Wright case and the North trial. The examination of Jim Wright's wrongdoing properly turned attention to what Americans expect from their elected officials in their public roles, in contrast to what is expected from friends, neighbors, and self. Specifically, it was asked, Should those who hold the public's trust accept financial favors from the individuals or groups that have special interests in congressional legislation? Among other things, Democrat Wright used the "sale" of his book to circumvent limitations on honoraria. The Wright case is important precisely because many other legislators have accepted a large variety of special fees and favors to illicitly increase their personal income, raising questions about resulting obligations to special interests versus the requirements of their sworn duty. As to Wright's accepting campaign contributions from savings-and-loans banks in exchange for legislative support and influential telephone calls to governmental agencies, it is much easier to list those in Congress who are not involved in similar breaches than those who are. Thus, the Wright case is not about just one person, but about the whole national legislature, which a sensitized public insists must be cleaned up.

Similarly, Oliver North was censured, first and foremost, because in his misguided zeal to serve his master and country, he violated his oath to uphold the law; and secondly, because he dipped into public funds. The issue here is as fundamental as in Wright's case. Is the White House subject to the same scrutiny as the rest of the executive branch? Should not the president's men, and the president himself, be required to uphold the law too, even though there may be no doubt about the loftiness of their purpose and though Congress may hobble their thrust? Few if any will question that these issues are much more important and pertinent to discharging one's public duty than was the nature of North's personal relationship with his secretary.

Indeed, there are further signs that the country is tiring of the endless revelations of details about the personal lives of its public leaders. When Ralph David Abernathy undertook to discuss in his recent book the affairs of Martin Luther King, Jr., despite the dramatic details (The night before he was shot, King is reported to have waked up in the bedroom of a supporter's Memphis home; and he arrived at his hotel room in the morning only to be

greeted by another woman, enraged that King had not been in his own bed the night before.), many Black leaders were outraged—in part by Abernathy's disloyalty to a revered figure, but above all, by the irrelevancy of his remarks. It would have been a different matter if Abernathy had shown that King was, say, on the FBI payroll. While that also would have reduced reverence, it would have been relevant. Increasingly, the public wants to focus on matters that have consequences in the public realm.

An extremely rare example of sincere public apology was made—in the February 1991 issue of *Life* magazine—precisely on the issue at hand, dirty politics, by Lee Atwater, the chairman of the Republican National Committee. He apologized to Michael S. Dukakis for the "naked cruelty" of a remark Atwater made during the 1989 election campaign. Atwater regretted having said that "I would strip the bark off the little . . . (expletive deleted)," and "make Willie Horton his running mate." Atwater elaborated that while he did not invent negative politics, he was one of its most ardent practitioners. Since his cancer, Atwater had much time to reflect on what is moral and proper. He set a model of new conduct in his apology.

New charges were filed in October of 1989 against House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich, all of which are on target according to the evolving criteria. The accusations concern violation of disclosure laws (which enabled Gingrich to gain political funds without notice) and use of his office to promote a book for private gain, as also to promote other private interests.

Now that the Wright and North affairs have ended, to maintain the focus on public duty, to deal with the many other elective and appointive public offices that should also be on the docket, and above all, to strengthen the taboos against violating one's public office, the country may require a major civic movement. It will have to be a broadly-based one, akin to the civil rights or environmental movement, if American politics are to be cleaned up. It could model itself on the Progressive movement of the early 1900s, and would similarly encompass not only the national government in Washington, but also the numerous city and many state governments that need large-scale reforms. Unlike many recent social movements, and unlike that of the Populists, this Neo-Progressive movement would have to draw from across the political spectrum, not just from the left or liberal end. Its immediate focus might be to curb the flow of private money into public hands and tighten the oversight of White House staffers. Its ultimate goal might be to bring into public office more individuals dedicated to upholding, not circumventing, the laws of the land. And whatever they do in their spare time, as long as it does not intrude into their public duties, will be considered, again, their own business. ■

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