

MAKING AMENDS IN PUBLIC LIFE

By Amitai Etzioni

BEFORE THE PRESS GOBBLES UP the next public figure in what is aptly called a “feeding frenzy,” before we throw another individual into the lions’ den—a.k.a. the Senate confirmation process—we need to consider the idea of a popularly accepted statute of limitations for moral transgressions.

Under this new code, moral transgressions that occurred more than, say, seven years ago would be considered off limits—inadmissible in confirmation hearings and unspoken on the campaign trail—on the grounds that it is unfair to hold against a person acts committed and owned up to that long ago.

We already have statutes of limitations for most crimes; it is time to do the same for moral indiscretions. People react to this idea by questioning its feasibility. To what transgressions would it apply? How would such a “statute” be enforced? Who would decide whether someone has honestly repented? But they miss the point. Incessant scandal is having an increasingly enervating effect on public life, and we must find ways to diminish it; to air this idea is a start.

We already make common-sense distinctions about what past behaviors are now acceptable. In a fall 1991 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, only 14 percent of Americans said that “having smoked marijuana while in college” should bar someone from becoming president, yet majorities oppose legalization. Americans disapprove of extramarital affairs, yet in the same poll, two-thirds felt that “having had an extramarital affair” should not be a disqualifier.

Defining the new statute won’t be

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easy. Should Douglas Ginsburg have had to withdraw his nomination to the Supreme Court because he had smoked marijuana in college and later as a Harvard professor? What about Jon R. Grunseth, who was chased out of the Minnesota gubernatorial race in 1990? Two young women signed an affidavit alleging that in 1981 they and other teenagers had swum nude with Grunseth and that he had tried to undress one girl who was reluctant. Once that charge came out, other more recent indiscretions, including an extramarital relationship, were revealed. We may well be less lenient when there is repeated misconduct. The Reverend Jimmy Swaggart apologized a few years ago for consorting with prostitutes but later was found to have continued soliciting.

Making distinctions in matters this complicated will be difficult, but when someone seems to have really changed his or her behavior, perhaps we will find that forgiveness is in order. Think of the case of Cecil Parkinson. When it was revealed in 1983 that he had impregnated his secretary, he apologized, resigned as a Thatcher cabinet member, and began charitable work. Several years later, Mrs. Thatcher brought him back into public life by naming him energy secretary.

Senator Gary Hart would have completed his sentence by now if he had been convicted of adultery. He would have “paid his dues” and would be free to move on. To condemn him to exile in an American Siberia seems extreme. Indeed, a humbler and chaste Hart might be an effective candidate.

To be more forgiving, we must distinguish, as many religions do, between major and minor transgressions. Driving one’s car over the side of a bridge and not attempting to rescue a passenger may distress us to the point that 20 years will not suffice to forgive. But we need not be so strict for everything.

Above all, we need ways for a person to atone and be rehabilitated. When there are no established routes for repen-

tance, people tend to become defiant. When Lyn Nofziger was convicted of influence-peddling (and could not foresee that the conviction would be overturned), he attacked the law as “stupid.” Col. Oliver North has made a new career of telling the country that *he* had done nothing wrong.

Those convicted of crimes during the Watergate years had to map out individual roads to repentance, working on Indian reservations and helping prison inmates. Isn’t it time to invite them back into public life? President Nixon, however, has shown little repentance. He has secured a place for himself in public life but not in the esteem of many Americans. His admission of wrongdoing might change that.

Repentance must be sincere for it to be accepted. We were moved by Lee Atwater’s apology to Michael Dukakis for the “naked cruelty” of a remark he had made during the 1988 election campaign. We can surely assume that his deathbed apology was heartfelt and not aimed to ensure favors in this world.

David Duke’s regrets, on the other hand, are of a different kind. One can forgive someone for racist comments made many years ago; however, when the person who retracts them changes the words but not the message, and when he apologizes at a self-serving time, say in a close election, we should be on our guard. It is not the past that gives us pause; it is the seemingly phony present.

There are good reasons religions allow people who have transgressed and repented to return to the fold: sinners are more willing to confess than to stonewall; a morally sensitive community can treat major and minor offenses differently; those who are trying to clear their names are more likely to accept prevailing values than attack them; and chastened people can go back home. We should be able to do at least as well in the secular world.

