What Happened to Sex Scandals? 
Politics and Peccadilloes, 
Jefferson to Kennedy

John H. Summers

"Any man familiar with public life realizes the foul gossip which ripples just under the surface about almost every public man, and especially about every President," observed Theodore Roosevelt in 1913. Varieties of "foul gossip" have plagued officeholders from the founding of the Republic to the present day, as Roosevelt suggested. Yet the nature, effects, and reach of gossip have undergone curious and sometimes striking transformations over the years. Think of one especially common topic of discussion: a politician's reputation for sexual rectitude. In the early republic and throughout the nineteenth century, American political culture subjected the sexual character of officeholders to close, steady, and often unflattering scrutiny, as most voters insisted a man of virtue constituted "the only safe depository of public trust." By the beginning of the twentieth century, by contrast, revelations of sexual turpitude among the most prominent elected officials had begun to disappear from public life. Whereas Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Grover Cleveland, and other members of the nineteenth-century political elite negotiated their reputations among a broad array of publics, in the new era men such as Warren G. Harding, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy benefited from this more circumspect pattern in political speech. Theodore Roosevelt's remark is doubly useful in this respect. For if "foul gossip" could still circulate in 1913, it had already started to travel, not openly, but rather "just under the surface" of public life.

What explains this transformation? Historians regularly observe that during the first decades of the century, gossip, confession, and exposure arose as distinctive attributes of mass communication, corroding Victorian modesty in virtually every

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This paper originated and took shape in presentations to the graduate history faculty at the University of Rochester. Thanks in particular to Joan Rubin and Robert Westbrook, who have given the paper and its author close and careful attention. Barbara Melosh, Daniel Moses, David Nord, Roy Rosenzweig, Michael Schudson, Richard Shenkman, David Thelen, and the anonymous JAH reviewers read various versions and returned many more interesting comments and questions than I can possibly address. Yet their astute reactions have improved the argument considerably, and I thank them, too, for their help.

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1Theodore Roosevelt, "A Disagreeable Duty," Outlook, June 14, 1913, p. 316; Albany Argus, July 2, 1844, p. 2.
arena of American life. Indeed, a “repeal of reticence” helps define this era and its aftermath. So why could the leading figures in American politics increasingly expect political culture to spare their sexual transgressions from the popular scrutiny endured by their predecessors? In examining this, the guiding problem of the essay, I consider and reject a number of possible explanations and finally settle on two key developments: changes in the ideology and practice of professional journalism and the psychology of insulation that accompanied the emergence of a newly nationalized political elite at the dawn of the last century.2

Criticism of the sexual rectitude of politicians first surfaced as a regular part of American public life in the acrimonious milieu of the 1780s and 1790s. During those transitional decades, while John Adams and other leading officials entreated the electorate for “Decency, and Respect, and Veneration . . . for Persons in Authority,” older notions of deference and reticence began to recede. In their place emerged a fierce brand of political combat that regarded personal morality as a legitimate field of battle. James Callender, in his History of the United States for 1796, ruminated about the “real character of some people”; charges he made elsewhere drew public attention to the supposed extramarital affairs of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Personalized attacks of this sort provoked bitter objections. The Federalist-inspired Sedition Act (1798)—the early republic’s most notable attempt to quell clamorous political dialogue—treated “scandalous and malicious writing or writings against” any elected official as treasonous behavior. However odious the motivations of the Federalists, even staunch defenders of a free press bemoaned the growing frequency of personal invective. “If by the Liberty of the Press were understood merely the Liberty of discussing the Propriety of Public Measures and political opinions, let us have as much of it as you please,” Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1789, petitioning the Pennsylvania legislature for a civil libel statute. “But if it means the Liberty of affronting, calumniating, and defaming one another, I, for my part . . . shall cheerfully consent to exchange my Liberty of Abusing others for the Privilege of not being abus’d myself.”3

2 On the “repeal of reticence” and its implications, see Rochelle Gurstein, The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America’s Cultural and Legal Struggles over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art (New York, 1996). The scope of this article is restricted to the ideology and collective psychology of the national political elite. A fuller investigation would attempt to account for differences related to region, section, gender, ethnicity, and race and would show how other domains of private character might affect the argument. Until now no sustained, scholarly analysis of sex scandals in American history has existed. For an informal history of political gossip that furnishes useful documentary evidence but no serious explanatory framework, see Gail Collins, Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics (New York, 1998).


Nevertheless, American politics relentlessly scrutinized the personal morality of politicians for much of the next century, and sexual misbehavior became a favorite topic. A well-orchestrated campaign of defamation marked the election of 1800—the first modern presidential contest—as Federalists furiously circulated tales of “Mr. Jefferson’s Congo Harem.” Opponents of Andrew Jackson in 1828 and Grover Cleveland in 1884 likewise undertook to question the fidelity and chastity, respectively, of the candidates. Few influential figures of the nineteenth century escaped such imputations. William Henry Harrison was supposed to have fathered several illegitimate children—the Ohio Statesman said he was “the seducer of a young and unprotected female”—and John Quincy Adams allegedly “attempted to make use of a beautiful girl to seduce the passion of the [Russian] Emperor Alexander and sway him to political purposes.” Adams, echoing Franklin, complained about this “new form of slander—one of the thousand malicious lies which outvomit all the worms of Nile, and are circulated in every part of the country in newspapers and pamphlets.”

Seemingly every politician claimed to be “peculiarly an object of persecution”—as Alexander Hamilton groused about James Callender’s charges—or, like Harrison, affected astonishment at the sheer number and variety of canards. “I am the most persecuted and calumniated person now living,” he complained during the 1840 presidential campaign. “To the European, a public officer represents a superior force: to an American, he represents a right,” explained Alexis de Tocqueville, who lamented the tendency of journalists to “assail the character of individuals, to track them into private life, and disclose all their weaknesses and vices.” Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, writing in 1851, made a similar observation. The American “abuse of the authorities and people in office is beyond all idea violent,” she wrote. “The most unmerciful vituperations are poured forth against some of their most eminent men; really if you did not see their names you would sometimes think they were speaking of the most atrocious criminals.”

What explains this close attention to the personal character of politicians? In part, the highly personalized inflection of political speech emanated from the partisanship of nineteenth-century public life. By the antebellum era partisanship had become the “first commandment” of American politics and had found its greatest expression in the mass-based parties. Dominating elections and furnishing a widely shared lexicon for political participation, the parties typically favored “aggressive,

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demonstrative, contentious, and often vicious” techniques of politicking. In this milieu, personal abuse was a natural weapon, and libelous editorials—as an expression of partisan fealty—adorned the nation’s party newspapers, forming a central ingredient in the crucible of what historians have labeled “popular politics.”

That parties often waged ferocious elections, however, does not explain their choice of weapons. Why did the character of politicians matter at all? Why were personal scruples such as marital fidelity considered legitimate topics for open discussion? If the emergence of a discordant, competitive party system guaranteed extensive circulation to tales of moral iniquity, the scrutiny of personal life stemmed from a conviction that transcended partisan loyalties: that a just and orderly polity required evidence of personal virtue among its elected leaders.

Like so many other habits of American political culture, this impetus to demand virtue in leaders derived from multiple traditions. American republicanism—a readily available vocabulary from which a wide array of political actors drew succor—regarded solid moral character as a sine qua non of good government. Repudiating older, hierarchical notions of authority and service, republicans made personal virtue a foundation of representation and insisted that only persons of exemplary rectitude should occupy positions of power. For without personal integrity, leaders could hardly withstand the temptation of corruption and the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Virtue facilitated tasks widely considered vital to the protection of freedom in consent-based regimes: warding off corruption, checking tyranny, ensuring an enlightened citizenry, and thereby promoting the general welfare. Thus republicans in the antebellum independent press, reflecting the outlook of many of the Founders, forcefully articulated concerns about public morality. “We have just been through the U.S. and with the exception of Louisiana and Georgia, we saw nothing but fraud, violence and oppression—distress of all sorts, and vice the most abandoned,” wrote Anne Royall, whose nationally circulating gossip sheet, Paul Pry, achieved a wide and uneasy readership among congressmen. “The President, we fancy, does not pry into these things as we do, though he need not go out of Washington to find ignorance, vice and distress.” For Royall and other republicans, scrutinizing moral character and exposing unscrupulousness when necessary constituted a public good, a guarantor against corruption and moral decay. “Take warning, gentlemen,” Royall cautioned in 1831, “I have the honor to be the public’s most devoted friend.”


Evangelical Protestantism also persuaded nineteenth-century voters to seek for public service men of esteemed character. "Human governments are plainly recognized in the Bible as a part of the moral government of God," insisted the revivalist Charles Grandison Finney. "It is nonsense to admit that Christians are under an obligation to obey human government, and still have nothing to do with the choice of those who shall govern." Following Finney, nineteenth-century apostles of energetic religion urged upon voters "honest, well-known men of sound morals." Placing the idea of the sacred covenant near the center of American politics, these self-proclaimed "Christian patriots" brought pressure to bear on elected officials who neglected virtues such as chastity and self-restraint. Richard M. Johnson, for instance, was denied the formal nomination for the vice presidency in 1840 partly due to fears that his unusual marital arrangement—Johnson lived openly with his mulatto common-law wife—would offend not only proponents of racial inequality but also the many voters for whom religious morality constituted the first and final criterion for elevating the citizens to public service. Politicians who disdained religious views might also face direct opposition, for throughout the 1850s increasing numbers of evangelicals stood for public office. Self-rule, evangelicals cried, would ultimately become impossible without virtuous leaders. "If general intelligence, public and private virtue, sink to that point below which self-control becomes practically impossible, we must fall back into monarchy, limited or absolute; or into civil or military despotism," maintained Finney, forging a potent synthesis of republican and evangelical sentiment. "This is as certain as that God governs the world."

Politicians of both parties heeded such admonitions and presented themselves to voters as men of sexual virtue, honor, integrity, and good judgment. The growth of political society, however, soon introduced an awkward problem: If good character conferred legitimacy upon governmental authority, as evangelicals and republicans each contended, what prevented officeholders from wearing virtue as a disguise? By the antebellum period, after all, America's increasingly anonymous society had made "reputation" an unstable concept, easy to counterfeit. "In order to secure my character and credit as a tradesman," Benjamin Franklin wrote in a famous passage in his Autobiography, "I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid all appearances to the contrary." That wily politicians might adopt Franklin's distinction between appearance and reality to become inscrutable confidence men did not seem to trouble him. Nineteenth-century Americans, however, met the promise of self-making with considerable anxiety, fearing that public figures would cultivate fraudulent images of moral probity. Davy Crockett importuned the readers


8 The Whigs in particular crafted images of Christian moralism for their party's candidates. See Daniel Walker Howe, The Political Culture of the American Whigs (Chicago, 1979), esp. 11–42, 150–70.
of his popular biography of Martin Van Buren to recognize that Van Buren was "not the man he is cracked up to be; and if he is made president of the United States, he will have reached a place to which he is not entitled, either by sense or sincerity." Neither republicanism nor Protestantism afforded the ideological tools with which to relieve such dilemmas—classical republicanism called for a rigid separation of public and private conduct, and hierarchy and deference long had proven constitutive features of both traditions.9

Voters, then, relieved trepidation over the specter of the politician as dissembling confidence man by calling upon a vigorous democratic political culture. Nineteenth-century Americans, that is, filtered republican and Protestant world views through a lens of popular democracy that required all claims, public and private, to confront "the broad light of day," as Tocqueville witnessed. Popular democracy, wary of usurpers and contemptuous of deference, everywhere manifested an "insistence on transparency" and refused to countenance political secrecy in any form. This helps account for the widespread appeal of such writers as Anne Royall and the nonpartisan humorist Seba Smith, whose immensely popular Jack Downing series aimed to expose the "strange doings" and "ridiculous" affects of officials in power. As Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe patrolled the mysterious underworld of urban culture, Royall, Smith, and their colleagues inspected sincerity among politicians. The repudiation of secrecy by popular democrats also explains why alarms about hypocrisy nearly always accompanied allegations of immoral conduct, and why charges of illegitimacy and adultery (by definition sins of deceit and seduction) occupied pride of place in this era. Republicanism and evangelical Protestantism demanded virtue among leaders, but the active, intensely public search for sullied sexual character derived from the democratic incarnations of these traditions.10

The Civil War traumatized American public culture, and historians, accordingly, often find discrete endings and beginnings in its aftermath. Yet the hunt for adulterers, illegitimate fathers, and other moral miscreants in political life proceeded apace in the last half of the century. Henry Ward Beecher discovered as much when Victoria Woodhull divulged the politically active minister's dalliances with Elizabeth Tilton. As this "Scandal of the Age" erupted in the early 1870s, charges of hypocrisy and immorality poured forth from an affronted press. Even before the disclosure of Beecher's transgressions horrified his followers and gladdened his enemies, the Nation denounced America's "insane culture of publicity" and lamented its ten-


dency to treat public figures as tawdry objects of abuse. The magazine soon joined the *North American Review*, the *Forum*, and other similarly disposed organs of the 1880s and 1890s in righteous protest against the invasive journalism that gripped these decades.\(^{11}\)

Private character, despite their dissent, continued to serve as a useful implement of partisan battle, especially among those disinclined simply to presume the legitimacy of American political authority. In *Caesar’s Column*, Ignatius Donnelly’s 1890 novel, the narrative pivots around the concubine of the Prince of Cabano—the president of the Council of the Plutocracy—whose personal moral corruption constitutes a sure measure of his political wickedness. At the book’s conclusion, Donnelly signifies Caesar’s own moral enervation by having him take mistresses. “This is my palace. I am a king! Look-a-there,” he said, with a roll and a leer, pointing over his shoulder at the shrinking and terrified women; ‘ain’t they beauties—hic—all mine—every one of ’em.” In 1892, Tom Watson, while serving as Populist congressman from Georgia, ignited a furor by mocking the pretensions of rectitude proffered by his colleagues in the House of Representatives. Relating “their capacity to live in idleness” to their need to “gratify sensual pleasures,” Watson reported that “drunken members have reeled about the aisles—a disgrace to the Republic. Drunken speakers have debated grave issues on the Floor and in the midst of maulin rumbles have been heard to ask, ‘Mr. Speaker, where was I at?’” In the election of 1900, Prohibitionist party literature imputed sexual corruption and other “exhibitions of moral filth” to Democratic and Republican leaders alike. Delegates to the Republican presidential convention, charged one exposé, trafficked with “scarlet women much in evidence,” as prostitutes in “suspiciously scanty attire” “found a ready, even eager, patronage.” “The party which chooses such men for its representatives, and which is led not to say ‘bossed’ by men of such character, is not worthy of the confidence or support of intelligent men.”\(^{12}\)

The major parties returned such aspersions in kind. Throughout the Gilded Age, “Republicans regularly leveled charges of lewdness and sexual depravity” against their political adversaries. Although the GOP was more likely to target offenders against sexual morality, some prominent Democrats also acknowledged the connection between private virtue and political legitimacy. The *Albany Argus* wrote in 1844, “The sentiment that a man pure and upright in his private character, is the only safe depository of public trust, is one that commends itself to the American People.” “It is obvious that the vices and immoralities of private life will be carried

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into the public administration, and that one who has been notoriously immoral and reckless in his personal gratifications, cannot be less reckless and selfish in his public capacity." A half century later, William C. P. Breckinridge, a legislator from Kentucky and a rising star in the Democratic party, renewed this proclamation. "Pure homes make pure governments," he once instructed pupils at an all-female college. "Chastity is the foundation, the corner-stone of human society." Unfortunately for him, Madeline Pollard—his longtime mistress and the mother of his illegitimate children—betrayed the hollowness of this advice when she sued him for breach of promise in 1893. The trial became a humiliating national spectacle for Breckinridge. Still, the congressman determined to run for reelection the next year, prompting Susan B. Anthony to predict that "exposed and confessed unchastity won't win." She proved correct. Hitherto the influential Breckinridge had faced little opposition for the Democratic nomination, but this time his bid attracted a list of contenders. The election generated the largest turnout ever for a primary in that district.13

Like Republicans, the Democrats did not hesitate to attack rivals, internal and external, for iniquity. Nor did they fail to trumpet the personal integrity of deserving candidates, as the 1884 presidential election indicates. That campaign, in fact,

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What Happened to Sex Scandals?

... amply demonstrates the convergence of partisan, republican, religious, and democratic exigencies around the notion of sexual virtue. Throughout his brief career in politics, the Democrats' nominee, Grover Cleveland, had deliberately projected moral uprightness and unassailable honesty. The bachelor son of a minister, "Grover the Good" had devoted ample attention to questions of professional ethics, capturing the governorship of New York in 1882 with a pledge to end the corruption of urban machines. Two years later, as he prepared to battle Republican James G. Blaine for the presidency, campaign biographies emphasized Cleveland's "indubitable strength of character." "There is but little fiction in his make-up," they assured readers. In late July 1884, however, a minister from Buffalo implored to Cleveland "habitual immorality with women." Writing in the *Buffalo Evening Telegraph*, the Reverend George Ball claimed that Cleveland had once made the acquaintance of a "beautiful, virtuous, and intelligent young lady" named Maria Halpin, who worked in the cloak department of a Buffalo department store. Swiftly Cleveland "won her confidence and finally seduced her." Halpin became pregnant, but Cleveland withdrew his promise to marry her, then "employed two detectives and a doctor of bad repute to spirit the woman away and dispose of the child."

These sensational charges, quickly transmitted throughout the nation, generated a tempest of debate, eliciting heated commentary from ministers, partisans, and independents alike. Cleveland's "election would argue a low state of morals among the people, and be a burning shame and never-to-be-forgotten disgrace to the nation," insisted the *Independent* soon after the news broke. "No man with such a private character as is shown in respect to him is fit to fill any office in the gift of the people." Sympathetic clergymen such as Henry Ward Beecher conducted investigations into Cleveland's overall character, even as less charitable ministers fulminated against his candidacy from pulpits in major cities. The Halpin affair meanwhile generated an unprecedented number of letters to suffragist Lucy Stone's *Woman's Journal*. Articulating a theme with republican resonances, Stone herself lamented the "revolting facts" and insisted that "he should be dropped at once." "In such a contest women must be opposed, at all other cost, to that which is the destruction of the home," she wrote. "They know with unerring instinct that the purity and safety of the home means purity and safety to the state and nation." The scandal, of course, also proved a wellspring of material for partisan theater. Republican stalwarts gleefully branded Cleveland a "moral leper," chanted "Ma, Ma, Where's My Pa?" and pushed carriages containing baby dolls in city parades. Democratic party operatives retaliated by circulating a claim that Blaine's wife had given birth to her son only three months after the couple's marriage. Already battling charges of cupidity, Blaine was now asked to answer an allegation about his sexual rectitude. As the ardently Democratic *Indianapolis Sentinel* fumed, "there is hardly an intelligent man in the country

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14 Benjamin La Fevre, *Campaign of '84* (San Francisco, 1884), 27; Deechler Welch, *Stephen Grover Cleveland: A Sketch of His Life* (New York, 1884), iii; *Buffalo Evening Telegraph*, July 21, 1884, p. 1. The story added that Cleveland also cavorted with other women—as any "respectable citizen" would confirm—and, lest readers miss the point, that he had been seen around town "beastly drunk." The authorship of the piece has not been established conclusively; at the least, Ball served as the chief investigator and source of the gossip.
This famous cartoon, by Frank Beard, appeared in *Judge* on September 27, 1884, approximately two months after the Halpin scandal broke. Here “Grover the Good” refuses to confront his alleged illegitimate child, who is held by a teary Maria Halpin. *Courtesy Library of Congress, #LC-USZ62-34246.*

who has not heard that James G. Blaine betrayed the girl whom he married and then only married her at the muzzle of a shotgun.175

The election eventually turned on the question of sincerity. In exposing Cleveland’s “habitual immorality with women,” George Ball suggested that the Democrats had attempted to foist a fictional reputation upon an unsuspecting electorate. “Since his candidacy is being pushed on the assumption of irreproachable morals,” avowed Ball, “it would be criminal to allow the virtuous to vote for so vile a man as thus under a false impression that he is pure and honorable.” “The American people have a right to know,” Cleveland’s candor persuaded enough voters to secure a November victory. On July 23, he telegraphed a message to his managers in Buffalo, admitting a rendezvous with Halpin and confessing that he might have fathered a child to her. (The rest of the gossip—especially the lurid particulars about insane asylums—he insisted rang false.) “Whatever you do,” implored the telegram, “tell the truth.”

Although the Blaine forces kept the Halpin story alive until the eve of the election, Cleveland’s timely admission restored much of his credibility.\textsuperscript{16}

Shortly after the 1884 election, a bitter Grover Cleveland wrote to a friend about the uproar over Maria Halpin. “I intend to cultivate the Christian virtue of charity toward all men except the dirty class that defiled themselves with filthy scandal and Ballism,” he swore. “I don’t believe God will ever forgive them and I am determined not to do so.” Cleveland held firm to his promise, flaying the popular press with mordant criticism throughout the remainder of his life. The Halpin affair, however, proved the last major scandal of its kind for more than one hundred years. Sexual rectitude remained a topic for open debate well into the 1890s, but willingness to expose the unsavory habits of influential politicians yielded steadily, haltingly, to a new mood in American political culture—a return of reticence.\textsuperscript{17} Partisan rivals and “paul pry” journalists continued to gossip uncharitably about Cleveland, yet both averted their gaze from his successor, Benjamin Harrison, whose moral worthiness suffered no significant assaults. The aloof William McKinley also enjoyed a gossip-free administration. So, too, did William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson escape from the discomfort of entering public debate about their sexual peccadilloes. Cartoonists poked fun at Taft’s impressive girth, but no major allegations against his sexual character surfaced in the mainstream press. Wilson’s tenure in the White House occasioned several gossip-worthy personal events, including the death of his first wife and his remarriage to Edith Bolling Galt. In 1911, unflattering rumors about his amorous connection to Mary Allen Peck were “whispered about the corridors of the Democratic National Convention,” as the journalist David Lawrence remembered. Speculation about Peck indeed snaked through Washington salons and convention corridors, and Wilson prepared for an embarrassing scandal by drafting an apologetic memorandum about his “passage of folly and gross impertinence,” for which he was “deeply ashamed and repentant.” Surprisingly, the memorandum proved unnecessary. No one trafficked openly in the Peck matter. Does this constitute a major departure from nineteenth-century habits of scrutiny?\textsuperscript{18}

Certainly the case of Warren G. Harding suggests a new mood in political cul-


\textsuperscript{17} Cleveland to Winston S. Bissell, Nov. 13, 1884, in Letters of Cleveland, ed. Nevins, 48. Gail Collins also finds a shift toward reticence in this period, although her explanation—that “people seemed to prefer regarding their political leaders as virtuous, and rather distant”—strikes me as a broad and unwarranted inference. See Collins, Scorpion Tongues, 130.

ture. At the 1920 presidential nominating convention, Republican operative George Harvey asked Harding to a private meeting, where Harvey asked the candidate about his personal habits. "We think you may be nominated tomorrow," warned Harvey. "Before acting finally we think you should tell us ... whether there is anything that might be brought against you that would embarrass the party, any impediment that might disqualify you or make you inexpedient." That the married Harding had proven morally destitute in his sexual affairs understates the situation. Early in his political career, he embarked on a long-term romance with Carrie Phillips, wife of a Marion, Ohio, department store owner and a family friend. In 1917, while he continued his clandestine assignations with Phillips, Harding found a second paramour, an unmarried eighteen-year-old woman named Nan Britton. In 1919, Britton bore him a daughter. Gossip about Harding's "two women" had traveled about the Capitol and among the salons of Washington society, and by the standards of the nineteenth century, the candidate was ripe for exposure. Yet, upon returning from a mere ten minutes of solitary reflection, Harding answered George Harvey with a resolute no, clearing the way for the nomination.19

Perhaps Harding guessed that his proclivities for illicit sex would not become an issue during the campaign. Whatever his reasoning, the decision proved politically safe, for neither journalists nor rival Democrats disclosed his philandering to voters, though both ruminated privately about the matter. One major magazine profile even claimed that the Hardings projected "a certain idyllic quality that happily married partnerships have." (The author also neglected to mention that both Florence Harding and James Cox, the Democratic nominee, were once divorced.) Harding suffered multiple posthumous indignities: Nan Britton wrote a widely circulated exposé, The President's Daughter (1927), and the writer Samuel Hopkins Adams and the investigator Gaston Means issued scathing attacks on other examples of the administration's ethical laxity. Yet during his entire term in office, voters did not read anything about Harding's adultery. The charges and more general suggestions of turpitude waited for his demise and the disgrace of his administration. Even then, the dead president's detractors became targets of state repression, and reluctant reviewers of Britton's book discerned no important lessons in her tale. H. L. Mencken, who routinely decried the "progressive degeneration of the honesty and honour" of American politicians, admitted his indifference to their sexual peccadilloes. "This tale, I confess, does not interest me greatly."20

Why did rivals and newspapermen alike vouchsafe silence about Harding's affairs? Why did Wilson's relationship with Peck fail to make headlines or otherwise to complicate his ambitions? Those who wished to discredit either man might have appealed to the long tradition in American politics of attacking disreputable sexual character. A public discussion of adultery, further, would have flattered the irreverent temper of the early century. Muckraking reformers promised that "we will spare no man and no institution, we will revere nothing, but look the facts in the eye and speak out what we think" and assailed corruption among high officials. Tabloid newspapers and respectable publications, each in their own way, parodied the raiments of private life before readers. "Wherever one turned the Greenwich Village ideas were making their way," Malcolm Cowley wrote of the 1920s. "Even the Saturday Evening Post was feeling their influence. It allowed drinking, petting, and unfaithfulness to be mentioned in the stories it published." Vice societies and censorship efforts foundered, and sex reformers inaugurated a franker discussion of intimate matters during these years. Celebrities, too, emerged as harbingers of the modern age. Movie stars such as Douglas Fairbanks and Rudolph Valentino, sports heroes such as Babe Ruth—even religious figures such as "Sister" Aimee Semple McPherson—watched as an ethos of "terrible honesty" laid claim to their private activities and relentlessly probed and devoured their most intimate exertions. Babe Ruth gathered many fewer enemies than either Wilson or Harding, yet the slugger grew exasperated at the coverage his turbulent sex life occasionally provoked. Ruth once scolded a pack of New York City reporters: "What really gets me sore is those stories about me and women, and the pictures. I can take the baseball stories, but can't you lay off the woman stuff? I'd be very much obliged if you boys stuck to my baseball troubles and left my marital affairs alone."21

If the relentless stream of articles, speeches, and pamphlets probing for hypocrisy and sexual immorality among politicians of national repute had slowed by the 1920s, it had largely stopped by the New Deal years. Franklin Roosevelt ordered a

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special car to take his mistress, Lucy Mercer Rutherford, to his 1932 inauguration. More than a dozen years later, Rutherford was present at the president’s bedside when he died. Correspondents, Republican publishers, and others traded gossip about the relationship but made no mention of either Rutherford or Missy LeHand—another of the president’s paramours—during Roosevelt’s entire time in office. The “friendship” between Rutherford and Roosevelt did not become public knowledge until 1949, the “romance” not until 1966. When John F. Kennedy ascended to the presidency, reticence had become a fixed principle of American political exchange, according to the journalist Jules Witcover.

The accepted attitude was that a political figure’s private life was his own business unless it affected the performance of his public duties, and therefore reporters did not go out of their way to learn about that private life. Only if a senator fell down drunk on the floor of the Senate might that fact be reported. If another senator had a mistress on the side and continued to do his job, the press figured—so what?

Kennedy, known in certain circles for his habitual and reckless womanizing, enjoyed protection both from the national press corps and from political rivals, who sometimes attempted to document his liaisons but who never organized a public campaign to discredit him—even though, as the Catholic husband of a widely esteemed First Lady, the president was doubly vulnerable to exposure. In 1963 the Profumo sex scandal devastated Harold Macmillan’s Conservative government in Great Britain. By contrast, President Kennedy’s assignations with Judith Campbell Exner, Marilyn Monroe, Ellen Rometsch, and Durie Malcolm (and many others) remained secrets, their concealment central to the popular image of Camelot. As the 1884 election of Grover Cleveland marked the culmination of one pattern in political speech, so did Kennedy’s tenure in the White House mark the apotheosis of another.22

What explains this transformation? Did evidence of good character cease to matter as a prerequisite for political office in the United States? The preponderance of existing historiography suggests as much. In a remarkably durable formulation, Warren I. Susman charged early-twentieth-century public culture with “somewhat less interest in moral imperatives.” In the 1900s and 1910s, Susman noted, a “culture of personality” began to displace an older “culture of character,” as traits such as magnetism, attrac-

tiveness, and self-realization began to command attention. Other scholars, proffering important corollary arguments, have maintained that the very idea of virtue underwent dramatic transformations throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Once a masculine endowment, virtue, they argue, steadily found its provenance in women’s “separate sphere.” Still others insist that republican aspirations for a shared public morality diminished during the late Gilded Age, owing to the brutality of the Civil War, persistent economic and political corruption, and the steady rationalization of social and intellectual life. According to these scholars, virtue became an attribute for individual, private display. 23

These are perceptive claims that remind us that the notion of sexual virtue does not constitute an altogether stable variable. But their advocates overstate the case by maintaining that the advent of “personality” and the weakening of public morality together meant a thoroughgoing depoliticization and privatization of character—“the end of virtue as a comprehensible category for public discourse.” Which American politician affected indifference to his reputation for sexual rectitude? Officials understood that scruples still mattered to many voters at election time and continued to present themselves as men of “impeccable moral character,” “unostentatious piety,” and “sturdy republican virtue,” as one study of campaign biographies published between 1824 and 1960 concluded. Theodore Roosevelt regarded the presidency as a morally informed “bully pulpit” and asserted that only an individual “foundation of character” could lead to “national greatness.” “No man can lead a public career really worth leading . . . if he himself is vulnerable in his private character,” Roosevelt wrote. “I do not for one moment admit that political morality is different from private morality, that a promise made on the stump differs from a promise made in private life.” Other leading figures, though less explicitly, harbored similar views. An abstemious personal disposition and a moralistic public policy operated symbiotically for Woodrow Wilson. Calvin Coolidge, a “Puritan in Babylon,” crafted a reputation for rectitude that contrasted favorably with Harding’s imprudence. In 1928, Republican operatives—while floating rumors that Al Smith had been seen drunk in public—painted presidential aspirant Herbert Hoover as a man of “honesty” and “integrity” who would “protect your home.” Franklin Roosevelt’s fatherly image worked in similar fashion. 24

Respectable sexual character lingered as a talisman in the public language of


American cultural politics. Why else did the 1920 Republican National Committee offer to dispatch Carrie Phillips, one of Harding’s paramours, to Europe with twenty thousand dollars in hush money? Why else did Franklin Roosevelt, an “amiable tyrant” who ordered “the boldest of [reporters] to go stand in the corner if they asked questions he didn’t like,” seek and extract assurances that certain sensitive, personal subjects would remain inviolable? To carry the point into the Cold War period, the recurring importance of personal virtue explains the logic directing the machinations of J. Edgar Hoover, who counted blackmail among his cache of weapons against rival politicians and nonconformists such as Martin Luther King Jr. Upon what foundation did this leverage rest, if not the expectation of sexual virtue? A charming personality might help persuade audiences, but respectability underwrote the legitimacy of the glad-handing politician and the dissenter alike.25

Does a genuine respect for the idea of privacy explain the return of reticence about sexual transgressions? To be sure, numerous Gilded Age reformers endeavored to modulate the invasive ringing of the press, and while a few malcontents argued that “a citizen of the United States cannot repel newspaper slander in a more effectual way than by inflicting corporal punishment on the slanderer,” other, more sophisticated writers appealed to the notion of privacy for intellectual purchase on opposition to public gossiping. Prominent figures such as E. L. Godkin, Henry Adams, and Charles Eliot Norton, among others, sought protection from the boorish stares of the “ignorant and barbaric multitudes,” as Norton once termed his fellow citizens. Imbued with equal measures of self-satisfaction and contempt for popular politics, these reformers contended that disclosing the moral transgressions of public figures only polluted political life and conflated “all distinctions between wholesome, necessary intelligence and that which corrupts and contaminates.” Reading scandal in newspapers therefore constituted a “bad habit”—perhaps even a “mild form of mania which needs regulation and control as much as other petty vices of human nature.” This agitation against the “anarchy of journalism” became increasingly influential. Privacy as a concept in civil law, whose violation was a tort, finally began to earn a durable group of adherents in the late 1890s, when a widely read paper by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, “The Right to Privacy,” brought the matter of unwanted newspaper publicity to the attention of the perturbed classes.26


Swiftly, however, legal privacy proved unwieldy and virtually unenforceable. In the meantime, libel law—still under the aegis of the states—remained contradictory and confusing until 1964, when it was nationalized. Libel, no doubt, exerted a great influence in many individual situations. But as a guide to shifts in print culture it returns few reliable clues. In 1941 Curtis D. MacDougall, a lecturer in journalism at Northwestern University, stated that “almost no lawyers specialize in libel law, few editors and publishers are clear regarding it, individuals who actually have been libeled do not understand their rights and state laws are not uniform but inconsistent, vague, and confusing.” Even among the national press corps the effectiveness of libel law proved uncertain. The most daring and the most sued of all Washington-based political reporters this century, Drew Pearson, lost only one libel case in his long career and professed, with good cause, never to fear the courtroom. Neither libel statutes nor the inchoate privacy tort would have generated a nationwide trend toward reticence. In any case, reports about certain personal activities of national politicians actually intensified after the 1890s. Auguring the intense coverage of the Kennedy family, stories recounting the adventures of Theodore Roosevelt and his energetic children appeared often in the popular press. When Alice Roosevelt, the president’s eldest daughter, married Congressman Nicholas Longworth in 1906, details of the ceremony decorated newspapers and periodicals across the nation. Everywhere “dogged by reporters,” Alice Roosevelt noticed “inquisitive crowds following when I went shopping; to some extent the sort of thing a royalty or a movie star endures, or enjoys.” “But I suppose we were fair game for the press of the day,” she wrote in her memoir, Crowded Hours. Roosevelt brooked unrelenting newspaper coverage with equanimity. Others found the nakedness of political life more disconcerting. Woodrow Wilson’s second wife, Edith, once confessed that “the terrible thought of publicity” almost persuaded her to reject the president’s marriage proposal.

Why, then, did indiscretions about sex retreat from popular view? One important explanation centers on the metamorphosis of American journalism. Under steady attack from antiparty elites and from Progressive Era reformers, the distinctive style of nineteenth-century public life began to deteriorate after the 1880s. Partisanship would remain an important feature of electioneering in the new era, but the fresh notion of “independence” began to discredit unwavering party loyalties, as proponents of a more
intellectualized, "educative" brand of politics undermined political customs centered on ritual and resplendent display. In seeking to elaborate a more rational foundation for political life, the reformers launched a broad-based assault on popular politics that left the parties weakened and unsure. Democrats and Republicans retained their grip on the electoral process, but the myriad social and political functions of party machinery fell to "specialists" and "experts." As part of this broad disaggregation, reporters and editors broke free from their partisan moorings, established journalism as an autonomous profession, and thereby ended the party monopolies on political information. 29

Now the most self-conscious and influential purveyors of knowledge about politics, "objective" journalists hastened to elevate their vocation into a profession. "How far can we go in turning newspaper enterprise from a haphazard trade into a disciplined profession?" wondered Walter Lippmann in 1920. "Quite far, I imagine, for it is altogether unthinkable that a society like ours should remain forever dependent upon untrained accidental witnesses." 30 Reticence about the immoralities of political figures first acquired concerted support in the professionalization of journalism. Ethical codes of conduct constituted "the heart of the whole matter," according to Joseph Pulitzer. In 1910, Kansas editors—the first to articulate ethical maxims—insisted that "however prominent the principals, offenses against private morality should never receive first page position, and their details should be eliminated as much as possible." The Brooklyn Daily Eagle instructed that, when writing obituaries, one should "not emphasize unfortunate incidents in the lives of well reputed persons," while in Oregon another group maintained that "the reputations of men and women are sacred in nature, and not to be torn down lightly." The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) crafted the most influential set of ethical guidelines. In 1923 the newly formed group called for "fair play." As formulated by the ASNE, "fair play" meant that "a newspaper should not publish unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without opportunity given to the accused to be heard." Furthermore, "a newspaper should not invade private rights or feelings without sure warrant of public right as distinguished from public curiosity." Similar versions of fair play appeared in nearly every guide to professional newspaper practice in the 1910s and 1920s. 31


Sentiment for such codes had been building for decades. But why did prescriptions of fair play achieve such a broad accord in this period? Essentially, insulation for “well reputed persons” emerged as a reflection of professional journalism’s renunciation of popular politics. Beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century, and especially after the bewildering vagaries of public opinion during World War I, a consensus of democratic “realism” coalesced among social scientists, philosophers, businessmen, and reform-minded intellectuals. The complexities of industrial society, insisted realists, had thrown into sharp relief the inherently limited nature of political knowledge. Whereas the United States had modeled its democratic institutions on small communities, in the larger communities of the modern industrial world a “twilight zone” — as Lippmann wrote in his 1925 book, The Phantom Public — obscured differences between fact and propaganda, rendering “public opinion” irrational and, without proper regulation, misguided. Hence the need for “experts” to gather, interpret, and disseminate political information.32

Led by Lippmann’s influential writings, leaders in journalism hewed closely to the realist position, often distinguishing between “giving the public what it wants” and “giving the public what it should have.” Critics such as the writer John Macy regarded newspaper readers as lethargic, pliable dullards overprone to credulity. “The Reader, the Public is mute, if not inglorious,” sneered Macy’s entry in Civilization in the United States, “and accepts uncritically what the daily press provides.” Gerald Johnson, a well-known editorial writer for the Baltimore Sun, insisted that “the American reader of newspapers, that is, almost everybody, is a duffer, so far as the newspaper is concerned, uncritical, docile, and only meekly incredulous.” Others, sharing Macy and Johnson’s ungenerous judgments, also warned of the dangers of public opinion. In his textbook on editorial writing, M. Lyle Spencer, president of the University of Washington, advised that “a writer must always take the hostility of the mob public into consideration. Its wrath is intense and destructive. Like fire, it knows no limits or reason. One who has been burned by it once, never forgets. In a period of intense excitement or great upheaval an editorial running counter to its emotions may mean destruction.” Washington Gladden’s 1915 essay—published in the collection The Coming Newspaper—asked journalists to “avoid exaggeration” and “to cultivate moderate and rational modes of expression.” For, when provoked, public opinion becomes hostage to “emotional mutations in which it ceases to be opinion and becomes mere sentiment, unorganized, highly volatile and inflammable, keeping no steady course but, like the wind, blowing where it listeth, possessing tremendous force, but having no assignable direction.” “It is pretty clear,” fretted Gladden, a widely esteemed

32 Walter Lippmann, The Phantom Public (New York, 1925), 110. Realist critics questioned “the belief in the capacity of all men for rational political action and the belief in the practicality and desirability of maximizing the participation of all citizens in public life.” They argued for a “government for the people by enlightened and responsible elites.” Robert B. Westbrooks, John Dewey and American Democracy (Ithaca, 1991), 281–82. For more on the “powerful and deadly critique of the democratic ideal” in these years, see Edward A. Purcell Jr., The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value (Lexington, Ky., 1973), esp. 95–113.
Congregationalist clergyman, “that the crowd self is getting to be a portentous figure in our democratic civilization.”

As democratic realists, editors and reporters assigned themselves the “very great obligation” of managing the opinions of voters. “No people have ever progressed morally who did not have conceptions of right impressed upon them by moral leadership,” wrote Casper Yost, editor of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* and first president of the ASNE, in a remark typical of his formative generation of professional journalists. To the question of whether “giving the public what it wants” remained a defensible standard for editors, every respondent at a 1914 symposium answered in the negative. “The editor,” admonished the clergyman and religious journalist Lyman Abbott, “is, or ought to be, a public teacher.” Another conferee struck an even more telling analogy, comparing newspaper readers to children whose puerile tastes required stern discipline by figures of authority: “It is simply up to the newspaper man to sort out that demand very carefully and make up his mind what particular feature of the demand he is going to supply.” “To protect the people from themselves, to point out their errors, and urge rectification, is the true mission of journalism,” maintained George Harvey, editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, at Yale University in 1908. “The master journalist must have the stability of purpose and coolness of judgment”; his “aim must be to uplift humanity, not to profit by its degradation.” Surveying recent developments in the field, Harvey seemed pleased. “The journalist has become the accepted and most potent guide of the masses,” he remarked. “Great strides have been made in American journalism. The asperities of to-day seem innocuous when compared with those of the good old times . . . when [John] Jay was anathematized as a scoundrel and [Thomas] Jefferson as an atheist and a satyr.”

In this respect, the uneasy side of the character question faded from public view as part of a general ideology of insulation. The writings of Walter Lippmann, Lyman Abbott, Gerald Johnson, George Harvey, Washington Gladden, and Casper Yost suggest, at best, unapologetic paternalism. At worst, their arguments for a new, more circumspect journalism reveal them as possessors of what the historian Christopher Lasch once termed “the manipulative mind.” In either case, these men plainly viewed themselves as custodians of the unmanered masses, moral and political cynosures authorized to guide a wayward political culture. Once, evangelicals and republicans appealed to the populace to discipline and monitor the morality of political elites. Now, political elites were charged with the discipline of the populace. Notice how Washington Gladden mixes the old evangelical concern for morality and self-control with newer anxieties about the “mob mind.” “One of the great duties of all public teachers and leaders is to discourage all those crazes and fads and rages in which people exchange reason for passion, and judgment for imitation,” he

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34 Casper S. Yost, *The Principles of Journalism* (New York, 1924), 154, 110; “Symposium: Giving the Public What It Wants,” in *Coming Newspaper*, ed. Thorpe, 223, 238; George Harvey, *Journalism, Politics, and the University* (n.p., 1908), 2, 1, 8. This pamphlet contains the Bromley lectures delivered at Yale University in March 1908.
wrote in *The Coming Newspaper*. "Whatever tends to develop the mob mind tends to make government by public opinion impossible. Whatever tends to keep people reasonable, and thoughtful, and self-controlled, and fair-minded is cultivating in the public mind those qualities and habits on which we must rely." Reticence emerged as part of a broad operation to protect the workings of government from the sort of "irrational" scrutiny that characterized the popular politics of the nineteenth century.35

If reticence originated as part of an ideology of insulation, and, correspondingly, of a concentration of power among early-twentieth-century elites whose authority rested substantially upon their ability to monopolize political knowledge, it proved an ideal especially serviceable for journalism. For the promise of reticence permitted elite reporters to get closer to the instruments of government power. After all, correspondents who endorsed "fair play" demonstrated a willingness to keep secrets from their readers. For reporters such as Mark Sullivan, who recalled that during the latter half of his career "practically all my associations, both personal and those that went

with my work, were with public men,” earning the confidence of sources meant protecting their unscrupulousness from popular inspection. Prominent nineteenth-century newsmen, of course, also traveled in the cool shadows of big political men. But associations such as the National Press Club—established in 1908 frankly to promote “friendly intercourse” between reporters and the “Great Names” of American politics—naturalized quid pro quo arrangements. A Washington Post reporter remembered, happily, that “the people who made the news came more and more as time passed to the clubhouse and talked more freely than they would anywhere else.” Behind the facade of objective professionalism, new journalistic organizations institutionalized ties to politicians and in consequence legitimated them. Another way of putting this is to say that when citizens picked up a nineteenth-century newspaper, they knew what they were getting, whereas in the twentieth century the ideal of objectivity masked a rampant solicitude that admitted few effective countervailing responses.36

By the New Deal years, this sort of “cozy relationship between reporters and officials” extended to the press conference, according to James Reston, who never quite reconciled himself to the “bantering atmosphere of these clubby gatherings.” Others seemed to entertain few qualms. A number of important White House correspondents in the Cold War period not only disavowed popular politics in favor of the professional ideology of democratic realism but also relieved their social anxieties in the process. Thus the legendary journalist Merriman Smith, noting that President Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to flatter the White House press corps with extra attention, could state without a trace of embarrassment that “reporters were justified when they deplored his lack of after-hours or social contact with them.” (Jack Kennedy evidently made things right for Smith. “I felt Kennedy understood me,” recounted his memoirs.) Kennedy’s charm turned newsmen such as Arthur Krock, Hugh Sidey, and Benjamin Bradlee from putatively objective newsmen into half-confessed sycophants. They were more likely to swim naked with the president in the White House pool—as Sidey did in his capacity as Washington correspondent for Time magazine—than to analyze Kennedy’s behavior and its implications for American political culture.37

The nineteenth-century reporter Ben: Perley Poore and his colleagues on “newspaper row” never divulged everything they knew about the workings of government. Nor did efforts to discredit officials by circulating gossip always meet unqualified approbation in the age of popular politics. In 1850 Jane Grey Swisshelm marked the beginning of her tenure as a Washington correspondent by printing allegations that Daniel Webster had sired two illegitimate mulatto children. “Webster was supposed to be a moral as well as an intellectual giant,” yet “his life was full of rotteness,” she later explained. Nevertheless, Horace Greeley, her

boss, swiftly fired her for her temerity. Swisshelm had no regrets, for her story was “copied and copied” and Webster’s reputation suffered in consequence. “Even Mr. Greeley continued to be my friend,” and I wrote for the Tribune often after that time.” Swisshelm and like-minded contemporaries could justify such actions by invoking the popular sentiment that animated democratic republicanism or evangelical Protestantism. Twentieth-century correspondents, by contrast, endorsed a more deliberate, clinical form of democratic politics and, so appealed to a different set of imperatives. As professionals infatuated with the notions of rationality, objectivity, and expertise, they identified with men in power and found themselves in need of the cooperation of their subjects—who increasingly set the terms of the arrangement.

Insulation augmented the authority of journalists as experts by conferring upon exposure an even more sensational cast. Popular books by reporters such as Clinton Wallace Gilbert, Drew Pearson, Robert Allen, Jack Lait, and Lee Mortimer vowed to deliver rumors stolen from behind the facades of officialdom. Reviewers praised Gilbert’s The Mirrors of Washington (1921) for its “amusingly impertinent” evaluation of personal foibles. The book, snickered the New York Times, “contains indiscretions delicious enough to satisfy the most exacting.” Reviews of Washington Merry-Go-Round (1931), coauthored by Pearson and Allen, similarly assured that “every gossipy or cynical soul will find its detail and its insouciant irreverence vastly amusing and entertaining.” Yet, neither Gilbert nor Pearson and Allen betrayed confidences by disclosing unsavory rumors about sexual immorality, though the latter exoriated the “smug sycophancy and the disgusting timidity of the majority of the correspondents and especially of the ‘trained seal’ group.” In Washington Confidential (1951), reporters Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer testified to their willingness to announce sexual legerdemain among national politicians. “That’s why we were born—to tell you what you couldn’t find out without us—Confidential!” As promised, the pair proved more indiscreet than either Gilbert or the team of Pearson and Allen. They printed the names and addresses of Washington prostitutes, for instance, and such lines as: “A man of almost Cabinet rank in the Defense Department is also a pervert, with bivalent tendencies, a two-way performer.” Nevertheless, their blunt discussion of transgressions by public officials eschewed full disclosure. “We will not divulge names, or tell how they cover up. Your imagination will picture how easy it is in a town where so many are seeking favors, to get a stooge to come along as the cutie’s alleged ‘date,’ while the principal apparently came along only for the ride.” Bearing seductive titles and employing clever marketing strategies—Gilbert and Pearson and Allen initially published their books anonymously—these works traded on the venerated idiom of exposure while manifesting an emerging class of Washington insiders privy to the hidden exertions of politicians. In time, the sort of measured gossip they peddled became institutionalized. Clinton Gilbert wrote a column for Collier’s titled “The Man at the Keyhole.” Merriman Smith’s twice-weekly “Backstairs at the White House” ran in newspapers from the 1930s to the 1970s, while

38 Jane Grey Swisshelm, Half a Century (Chicago, 1880), 131–35.

Candidates and voters agreed that personal virtue remained important for asserting political authority in the twentieth century, then, but a professionalized journalism hostile to the perceived excesses of popular politics increasingly refused to divulge the embarrassing sexual practices of powerful officials. A by-product of journalism’s paternalistic mood, insulation also proved an expedient means by which reporters could establish themselves as experts in a segmented, hierarchical society. Newspapermen, in short, entered the thriving ranks of professional elites by subscribing to the prevailing tenet that political decision making required insulation from “mobbish” and “irrational” voters.

By itself, this explanation for the return of reticence proves vulnerable to at least two objections. First, unlike other areas of specialized inquiry, American journalism generally lacked formal internal disciplinary mechanisms. As a result, the field never became fully professionalized. What, then, explains the restraint displayed by tabloid newspapermen such as Walter Winchell and by somewhat marginalized figures such as Pearson, Gilbert, Lait, and Mortimer? These men did not always operate within the professional fold, and they sometimes had an uneasy relationship with the ethical codes of the ASNE. Consider in this respect Winchell’s reticence about the infidelities of New York City mayor Jimmy Walker, who pursued forbidden sexual pleasures throughout the 1920s, unafraid that a demand for accountability might lead to public opprobrium. Throughout his term, “the reporters tried to protect Jim from himself,” according to the newsman Gene Fowler. And indeed even Winchell—“the great revealer of other people’s secrets”—knew about and suppressed news of the mayor’s habits. Only after the beginning of the Seabury investigations, which revealed rampant corruption in his regime, did word of Walker’s mistress filter into the tabloids.\footnote{Gene Fowler, *Best James: The Life and Times of Jimmy Walker* (New York, 1949), 212; Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power, and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York, 1994), 95, 135–36. On journalism’s status as a profession, see Michael Schudson, “The Profession of Journalism in the United States,” in *The Professions in American History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch (Notre Dame, 1988), 145–61.}

A second, related objection to the focus on professional-class journalism concerns the motives of politicians themselves. What explains their reticence? Partisanship
What Happened to Sex Scandals?

lost some of its fury in the twentieth century, but it hardly died. Surely disclosures of candidates' adulteries could have reaped political gain. Yet in 1920 Democrats possessed information about Harding's assignations with women not his wife and did not make use of it. Republicans, in turn, possessed legal papers in 1960 concerning an illegitimate child allegedly fathered by Kennedy but refused to divulge the matter in public. Whatever their disagreements, leaders in the major parties entered the century determined to temper open discussions about sexual indiscretion and related topics. In 1880, the House of Representatives adopted Rule XIV, which instructed a floor speaker to “confin[e] himself to the question under debate, avoiding personality.” Two decades later, California legislators sought similar ends through more nefarious means. They passed a sweeping, short-lived statute that made illegal the publication of “any caricature of any person residing in this state, which caricature will in any manner reflect upon the honor, integrity, manhood, virtue, reputation, or business or political motives of the person so caricatured, or which tends to expose the individual so caricatured to public hatred, ridicule, or contempt.” Other state assemblies—including New York’s in 1897, Indiana’s in 1913, and Alabama’s in 1915—attempted similar proscriptions of nineteenth-century methods of politicking. A Pennsylvania initiative, undertaken in 1903, lambasted “evil gossip” and “groundless rumors” and finally outlawed any newspaper story “affecting the character, reputation or business of citizens.”

Hence the transformation of American journalism constitutes a compelling but an incomplete accounting for the return of reticence. Sentiment for eliminating unsavory sexual details from the topography of political culture ran quite deep in the eight decades that followed the Cleveland-Halpin contretemps. The final part of the explanation, accordingly, concerns a general phenomenon: the political psychology of national state building. During the tumultuous decades after the 1880s, the relatively weak, attenuated structures of nineteenth-century government power faced myriad threats: intensifying class divisions, reckless corporate power, menacing domestic radicals and international enemies, and an increasingly disorderly complex society. A broad group of reformers that included mugwumps, Progressives, and, later, New Dealers responded to these crises by building “an entirely new framework for governmental operations.” In place of the local controls and party "bossism" that characterized much of nineteenth-century government emerged an increasingly centralized administrative bureaucracy, comprising an expanded federal judiciary and enhanced regulatory mechanisms. A reconstructed state would confront the challenges of industrial capitalism by concentrating power in hierarchical offices staffed by managers, specialists, and other elites. This panoramic nationalization of governmental power—which also called forth a muscular chief

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executive—generated a “sense of the state” heretofore famously absent from American political life.42

In a democratic republic whose citizens still harbored suspicions of concentrated power, that sense of the state demanded cultural as well as legal justification. That is, transforming elitist ideas about power into legitimate authority meant that officials and quasi officials presented a new cultural frame through which Americans were encouraged to view the federal government, and reticence about reprehensible sexual matters contributed to that project by bestowing prestige upon powerful politicians. The concept of prestige, or “status,” occupies an enormously complicated position in the study of political stratification. To insist, for instance, that politicians circulated new status claims is not to say that those claims were always and everywhere honored. Nor does it imply that their status pretensions were necessarily proportionate to the actual structure of the national government. The burden of the argument here is simply to suggest why those with access to the means of mass communication abandoned one ritualized public gesture for another, more constricted one. And two important ideological functions of prestige help explain that change: the symbolic unification of a community and the protection of its chief status bearers against the sort of dissent that erodes the legitimacy of their claims. Both these functions became increasingly manifest after the 1880s and 1890s, a period when journalists, politicians, and others began to propagate what the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1956 termed “the new national prestige scheme.”43

The preservation of the moral integrity of twentieth-century political elites, one element in this scheme, aspired to unify the nation around the federal state. By adopting reticence, the guideposts of mass communications implied that between the polity and the state lay sacredness and mystification, a symbolic distance. To many, political authority now appeared not immediate and corporeal, but abstract and intangible, increasingly shrouded in the office of the presidency and other protected images that together functioned as a bulwark against dissent. This, at least, was the hope of Herbert Croly and other evangelists of “American national integrity.” Croly disliked “rowdy journalism” for its “abusive attacks” and looked forward to “a completer mutual confidence between a few exceptional leaders and the many plain people,” as he wrote in his influential treatise, The Promise of American Life. “We ought to know,” continued Croly, remarking on invective as a kind of public rhetoric, “that the prejudices and passions provoked by language of this kind violate the essential principle of both nationality and democracy.” As Croly readily confessed, his ideas about democratic procedures fitted well within the Hamiltonian tradition that nineteenth-century popular politics had swept aside. The essential criterion of his neo-Hamiltonianism? Consider the following assertion in The Promise of American Life: “Anything which undermines executive authority in this country

What Happened to Sex Scandals? 851

seriously threatens our national integrity and balance.” The 1903 Pennsylvania initiative against “evil gossip” even more clearly connected attacks on the personal morality of individual politicians with the legitimacy of governmental authority. “A whole generation of young men are being trained to a familiarity with crime and to disrespect for government,” complained the bill’s sponsor, who then articulated the sentiment that lay behind Croly’s remarks. “It is not the individual attacked who is alone concerned. The Commonwealth is interested that those who render her service should be treated with deference and respect, so that when they go forth in the performance of her functions those to whom they are sent may feel that they are vested with authority.”

Several decades later, reactions to the posthumous Harding revelations indicated the growing importance of reticence to national authority. In Philadelphia, for instance, a local attorney filed an injunction to halt stage productions of Samuel Hopkins Adams’s book Revolver, which portrayed several of Harding’s immoralities, on the sole ground that Adams “flaunts the Federal Government and ridicules high officials.” The theater owner chased the play out of the city, calling the production “essentially unpatriotic.” In similar fashion, Congressman John Tillman, in the midst of denouncing Nan Britton’s book on the floor of the House of Representatives, insisted that suppressing news of presidential adultery constituted “a matter of nation-wide interest and importance. It is a non-partisan question.” Richard Washburn Child, the diplomat, onetime editor of Collier’s, and former ambassador to Italy who collaborated with Benito Mussolini on the latter’s autobiography, proposed “Commandant no. 11: Thou shalt not whisper falsely against thy President.” Child maintained that “American citizenship owes it to [presidents and other statesman] to reject the word-of-mouth story and the whispered slander.” Explaining the reluctance of media figures to discuss any of Harding’s trespasses, another reviewer upheld the argument that “the majority feel . . . that it is not only beneath their dignity but a breach of their patriotic integrity to notice such terrible statements about a dead ex-President of the United States and other officials high in the honored (or dishonored?) places of government.” Appeals to the dignity, power, and honor of the national government and its chief representatives did not present themselves so easily in the nineteenth century.

Subsequent to the 1920s a series of crises—the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War—vastly strengthened those appeals. Thus C. Wright Mills witnessed a “penumbra of prestige” shadowing postwar American leaders, who successfully perpetuated and consolidated the “nationalization of status” undertaken by their forebears. In fact, by the time that Mills blasted the “power elite” and Kennedy readied himself to lead it, everyone who held a position in the national firmament—from tabloid journalists to major publishers to partisan officials themselves—had learned

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the transformation in the 1970s and 1980s—when journalism fragmented and American government suffered renewed challenges to its legitimacy—will meet a general consensus. I suppose, too, that dating the impeachment of Bill Clinton as the consummation of the decline of reticence will not cause many disagreements.

In my view, many of the public discussions surrounding exposure and impeachment were nearly as shabby as the infamous events themselves, and I do not wish to rehearse the objections registered on behalf of "privacy" and against mass prurience, "sexual totalitarianism," and the sundry evils of tabloid journalism. Rather, I wish to offer considerations drawn from the foregoing exploration, among them what must now appear an obvious point: American history discloses a long and frequently honorable tradition of assailing corrupt personal character in politicians. Today's liberal intellectuals, however, would have us believe otherwise: that inquiries into "private" peccadilloes of political elites demonstrate little except for adolescent sniffing around. The sources of their outrage with this subject are not hard to locate, since modern liberalism long ago repudiated both the civic virtue associated with democratic republicanism and the public moralism from which many permutations of evangelicalism proceed. With its commitment to the efficient circulation of material goods by centralized, administrative agencies, contemporary liberalism has little use for sex scandals, which are regarded as irrelevant distractions from "real issues," to say nothing of scandalous invasions of "privacy." Yet alternative political traditions—however residual and attenuated—still claim the loyalty of some citizens. To be sure, the base commercialism of the tabloid press routinely cheapens the core concern of these traditions—how to guarantee responsible governance—but they deserve respect nonetheless.

The recent anguish over privacy seems to me similarly one-sided. Much too frequently, advocates for the privacy of high officials begin and end their case simply by invoking the term. But politicians past and present regularly invite attention to favorable features of their ostensibly personal lives, wishing, like other celebrities, to have it both ways as they create, manipulate, and peddle their images in frenzied pursuit of the seats of power. Until the plenteous critics of media invasiveness seriously attend to that side of the problem, they risk fostering the impression that preserving artificial political authority, not privacy, actually motivates their grievances. In the meantime, an important distinction might prove worthwhile for serious debate about this vexed subject. Privacy is not the same as secrecy, and salutary efforts to achieve transparency in government should take care to respect the former while denouncing the latter. Keeping irresponsible power at bay requires sustained and intense scrutiny of officials and quasi officials, but failing to uphold their individual legal rights would rob such publicity of its moral force.

In my view, the most important criterion to consider is whether sex scandals inhibit or promote the free flow of political discussion. This article has observed dis-

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48 Political speech is only one of many arenas in which the public-private dichotomy is conceptually muddled. For a useful overview, see Jeff Weintraub, "The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction," in Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy, ed. Jeff Weintraub and Krisan Kumar (Chicago, 1997), 1–42.
turbing connections in this respect. For the same assumptions and developments that drove scandal from the optic of political culture after the 1890s—the decline of political parties and the rise of an ostensibly autonomous journalism, the advent of a version of democratic thought that prized political engineering over political participation, and the construction of nationalized state apparatus—also introduced a sense of enervation and dissipation into the twentieth-century polity. As the scope and reach of the federal government enlarged and lengthened, the number and nature of secrets reposed within it also grew, sexual transgressions among them. Organized, effective dissent declined correspondingly, and in many quarters a vague sense of phoniness frustrated would-be political actors. C. Wright Mills wrote in 1952:

> Increasingly we feel that there is something synthetic about our big men. Their style, and the conditions under which they became 'big,' opens them to the charge of the build-up and the front. One feels, even when it is not there, the slickness of the pre-fabricated. And, in fact, the advertising and public relations technique has been extended from the peddling of brand-name tooth paste and movie stars to the 'development' of national politicians. 49

Again, distinctions and cautions intercede: the limited franchise meant that nineteenth-century popular politics was not a substantive democracy; and the raucous public exchanges of that era did not always produce the deliberation or openness that a strong democracy demands and for which Mills and others longed. Too much salacious material, moreover, can blunt the very sensibilities and capacities required for a rewarding self-government in the first place. Still, contrasting these two long periods in American history ultimately warrants the conclusion that the liberty to gossip in public about the leaders of any society—however tawdry the gossip or however noble the leaders—implies a breadth of freedom of expression that we should not voluntarily constrict anytime soon. 50

49 C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics, and People*, ed. Horowitz, 336. One can find a version of Mills's remark in nearly every period of American history, but the point here is that the standard mechanisms of redress—genuinely alternative parties—diminished by the post–World War II era, as the extrapoliical ferment of the 1960s amply demonstrated.

50 This point is demonstrated in a brilliant exegesis by a political scientist, useful here as conceptual framework: James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).