

legitimacy of both: the importance of markets in allocating resources efficiently and the importance of regulation in expressing the ideals we stand for as a national community.

There is one factor, however, which we should take into account in weighing the pursuit of efficiency and wealth against the protection of environmental and cultural values and amenities. Surplus, not scarcity, is and is likely to remain the scourge of agriculture. Biotechnology, for example, promises greatly to expand our capacity to produce agricultural commodities at low cost. We may look upon environmental protection, then, not only as a "merit" or as an ethical good, but also as an economically justified policy, even when it preserves "useless" species and other resources we may never need to use or consume.

The reason is this: Governmental protection may constrain or limit production, for example, by preventing farmers from depleting aquifers, injuring wildlife, eroding soil, and the like. Environmental protection,

then, may offer a politically palatable way to take resources out of production and thus to limit otherwise runaway surpluses. Thus environmental protection, for this as well as other reasons, seems consistent with an efficient and sustainable agricultural economy. In that sense, our concern as citizens with environmental protection need not compete with but may serve our interest as consumers in inexpensive and plentiful crops.

—Mark Sagoff

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Sex, Character, Politics, and the Press

When, after secretly staking out his townhouse for a weekend, the *Miami Herald* revealed that Gary Hart had spent at least much of that time with a young woman, many ordinary people found themselves facing a difficult question.

Who's sleazier—Hart or the *Herald*?

After weeks of further revelations, ruminations, and reflections, some of us have reached a conclusion. The press deserves the prize.

The question is harder than this glib answer suggests. Indeed, the events of the last few weeks demonstrate what a tangle of difficult issues is raised when public figures cavort and journalists report. Is a candidate's sexual behavior relevant to his fitness for the presidency? How does sexual conduct compare with other so-called character issues? Is the issue one of morality or judgment? Does the distinction matter? Even if sex is relevant, does it follow that, as far as press coverage is concerned, all's fair? What role should the press play in deciding what subjects are appropriate for coverage?

Let's begin with what seems to be the pivotal question: is sexual behavior relevant to a person's fitness for political leadership? The question is pivotal because vindication of the press in the Hart incident requires the assumption that sex is relevant.

Surely how we conduct ourselves sexually reveals something about our moral standing as human

beings—about our character. People who use other people sexually, who lead on potential sexual partners, or who deceive those with whom they purport to have an exclusive relationship are morally blameworthy. (We don't know, of course, whether Gary Hart is guilty of any of these things.) Just how harshly we judge such offenses depends on a variety of additional factors: what precautions the person takes against hurting people, how he responds when he does, how continuous the sexual failings are with the rest of his behavior.

This last question is especially important. Sexual behavior is often discontinuous with the rest of personality; sexually, people often behave "out of character." That is because of the special status of sex, the unique place it occupies in our society and our psyches. Our sexual self is powerful, often shadowy and hidden—even from ourselves. Undoubtedly this is partly a social fact about how we as a society treat sexual matters and partly an inescapable psychic truth about human beings. In any case, we cannot draw easy conclusions about character, much less leadership ability, from sexual behavior alone. People who are otherwise above suspicion can behave in strange and not altogether admirable ways sexually.

It is difficult to think of other aspects of personal conduct comparable to sex in this way. Examples presented in recent public opinion polls ("Which would you find

more disturbing in a candidate: adultery or . . . ?") are heavy use of alcohol or drugs and cheating on one's income tax, behavior that may at first sight seem to be in the same boat with sex. Although not obviously political, they tell us something about a person's character. Yet the first indicates something about a person's general reliability and competence; the second tells us about his sense of civic obligation. (The public wisely deemed both more important than adultery.) Both are clearly relevant to a person's fitness to lead in a way sexual conduct is not.

For purposes of judging the qualities of leadership, the only aspect of private behavior that seems com-

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parable to sexual habits is everyday sensitivity and decency: a set of traits we typically invoke when we call or refuse to call someone a "nice guy." There can be no question that whether a person generally treats others around him with respect and compassion reveals something important about his character. Just as clearly, alas, these traits bear little on a person's leadership qualities. It's one of life's poetic injustices that although nice guys don't always finish last, those who finish first, and should, aren't always nice guys. And this suggests perhaps the strongest evidence for the gap between sexual conduct and the virtues of leadership—call it the argument from history. Let us theorize and moralize till we turn blue, it is an undeniable fact that a catalogue of the world's most important and capable leaders—throughout history as well as in America's recent past—would include a startling proportion of adulterers and philanderers, from virtually all the English prime ministers to FDR, the Kennedys and Martin Luther King. What else can we conclude from a hard-headed look at history but that, despite our best hopes and most noble ideals, a statesman might not be someone you would want for your friend?

This discrepancy points to the confusion lurking in all the Hart-inspired talk about character. There's character and character. Our ideal of a good person involves one set of traits, our expectations of a good leader or a good president involve a quite different set. Being a nice guy, sexually or otherwise, is far down on the list and may sometimes even get in the way of other traits we value much more in the political realm.

So sexual behavior is not, I conclude, relevant to one's fitness for political office. Part of me is sad to have to conclude this, for it would be nice if all the virtues went

together, if those with sufficient drive and fortitude and whatever else it takes to lead millions were also always good mommies or daddies and faithful spouses. But it just ain't so.

Some of Hart's critics and the press's defenders will agree. At this point the terms of the debate shift: it's not Hart's morals that are in question, we are told, but his judgment. Certainly his taunt to journalists to follow him was not smart. But beyond that? If it wasn't the dalliances themselves that disqualified him, it was instead, these critics say, his lack of discretion and his failure to see that "womanizing" had become an issue in his campaign requiring careful attention to appearances.

But there is something deeply wrong with this argument. At least one president, we hear, had his many women in the White House. Was that discreet? Discreet enough, apparently, because in those days reporters did not mention such things even when they knew them; it was not considered appropriate or relevant. But now, it will be said, it is thought appropriate or relevant, and Hart knew this. The standards of discretion and thus of judgment have changed.

But although this answer has some plausibility, it assigns ultimate responsibility in the wrong place. If Hart's judgment is poor, that is because the press has introduced a change in the rules; if sexual behavior and leadership ability have no connection, it has changed them for the worse. Perhaps not seeing that the rules have changed is poor judgment. But what sort of judgment is at issue here? Is it the intelligence and discernment necessary for negotiating with the Soviets or forging trade policy with Japan? Or is it merely image management—the ability to manipulate the press by acceding to its own manipulations? We ought to know better, after the last six years, than to set much store by that.

What can journalists say in defense of the new rules? One argument is that the public wants to know about the private lives of candidates and that journalists are

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just carrying out the public's will. But there is no evidence that people are more interested in these matters than they ever were. And even if they were, that does not amount to a license to snoop. What the public would like to know and what it has a right to know are two different things.

The more common defense of the press is slightly different: not that the public necessarily wants to know this or that but that the job of reporters is, simply, to

publish the news and leave it up to the public to decide what is important and relevant. People may not have a right to know what goes on in the politician's bedroom, it may be said, but they have a right to vote on the basis of any damn thing they please.

So they do—legally, at least. No one can jail you for voting on the basis of shoe size. Morally, however, things are otherwise. We have a duty to do our best to purge our decisions of obvious irrationalities and irrelevancies. And—more to the present point—that goes for journalists too. Since the press cannot cover everything, it must choose, select, decide, edit, omit, emphasize. Every single day journalists are confronted with the question "What is important?"; every single day they must take responsibility for the answers they give. The idea that "the news" is something out there waiting to be appropriated like apples on the supermarket shelf is blind to the crucial processes of decision and selection that are behind the morning paper and the nightly newscast. And it is blind to the inescapable fact that the relationship between the public's opinions, demands, and expectations of politicians and what the press covers is not a one-way street. It is not so much that the press covers the private lives of politicians because that is now an "issue" as that the press has *made* it an issue by covering it.

After the spectacle at which reporters asked Gary Hart whether he had ever committed adultery, Craig

Whitney, Washington bureau chief of the *New York Times*, defended the press by asserting that "There's no question that should be regarded as out of bounds. Let's ask about it, whatever it is, and then determine whether it's news." How naive can you get? Which of the following answers to the question "Have you ever committed adultery?" would the press *not* consider news: (a) Yes; (b) No; (c) It's none of your business? In such matters, you don't "determine whether it's news" after you get the answer; you determine that it will be news *in the very act of asking the question*. That fact has as much to do with people's natural curiosity and the love of gossip as with anything. But to acknowledge this does not let the press off the hook.

It is the failure by the press to admit its own crucial and determinative role in the political process that is revealed as the gravest lapse in the Hart incident. Whether one thinks the lapse is one of "ethics" or "judgment" depends on whether one thinks that journalists understand their power but refuse, for their own reasons, to acknowledge it, or that they are simply ignorant of the nature of their business. Either way, the lapse is inexcusable.

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from James Thurber's *Thurber & Company*
New York: Harper & Row.



"You wait here and I'll bring the etchings down."