**Political Scandal in Historical Perspective**

Today, there is a widespread sense among the American public that politics has grown more venomous in recent years and that no facet of a politician's private life is off-limits to public scrutiny. Public concern with "the politics of personal destruction" burst into the political spotlight during the 1980s after President Ronald Reagan nominated Robert Bork for the U.S. Supreme Court, and his opponents investigated the videotapes that the nominee had rented.

Thus it comes as a surprise to learn that in the rough-and-tumble world of early American politics, every subject was fair game, including the purported sex lives of politicians. During the presidential campaign of 1800, President John Adams was accused of sending a friend to Europe to procure mistresses. Adams responded by joking that if the reports were true, General Pickering had kept them for himself. Thomas Jefferson was subsequently accused of fathering numerous mulatto children by his slave Sally Hemings. In 1828, John Quincy Adams's opponents charged that that when the President had served as Minister to Russia, he had offered his children's nanny as a royal mistress. In that same election, President Adams' supporters accused Andrew Jackson of committing adultery because he married his wife while she was still legally married to her first husband (a story that was technically true, even though neither Jackson nor his wife Rachel knew that her first husband was still alive). Martin Van Buren's Vice President, Richard Johnson, was accused of keeping a black concubine.

Perhaps the most striking example of sexual scandal in early American politics involved Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. In 1792, a convicted swindler named James Reynolds accused Hamilton of giving him money from the U.S. Treasury to speculate with in the stock market. When three members of Congress quietly investigated the charges, Hamilton admitted giving money to Reynolds, but said the funds were his own, and that he paid them to cover up an adulterous affair with Reynolds's wife, Maria. The members of Congress concluded that Hamilton's misconduct was wholly a private matter and kept it secret.

In 1797, however, the accusations came to public light when a journalist named James Callender published a pamphlet accusing Hamilton of misusing Treasury funds and colluding with speculators. Hamilton responded by publishing letters documenting his "irregular and indelicate" affair with Maria Reynolds. "The charge against me is a connection with one James Reynolds for purposes of improper pecuniary speculation," Hamilton wrote. "My real crime is an amorous connection with his wife."

Deeply concerned that his reputation for public virtue not be tarnished, Hamilton was willing to publicly confess to sexual misconduct, even though his confession deeply hurt his wife. He never held public office again.

Callender seems to have gotten his information from John Beckley, a supporter of Thomas Jefferson. Beckley, the first clerk of the House of Representatives, had been dismissed from this position when the Federalists had won control of the House in 1796. Callender expected to be rewarded by the Jeffersonians after he was jailed under the Alien and Sedition Acts. When Jefferson was slow to release him from prison and failed to award Callender a position as a postmaster, Callender published the story, which seems to be confirmed by genetic testing, that Jefferson was the father of numerous children by a slave mistress.

Yet what is especially striking in retrospect is that the politics of sexual scandal repeatedly failed. No where is this more apparent than during the presidential campaign of 1884, when Democratic Presidential candidate Grover Cleveland was accused of fathering a child out of wedlock. In 1874, Maria C. Halpin, a 33-year-old widow, gave birth to a son whom she named Oscar Folsom Cleveland. She had kept company with several men, and although Cleveland was never sure that he was the child's father, he provided the woman with financial support. Later he had her committed to an insane asylum and the child to an orphanage.

During the 1884 campaign, Republicans, chanting the slogan "Ma, Ma, Where's My Pa," wore white ribbons and dedicated their campaign to "Home Protection." But the Democratic Cleveland won the race, as his supporters responded, "Gone to the White House, ha, ha, ha!"

In the twentieth century, in sharp contrast to the nineteenth, a conspiracy of silence generally protected the presidents' private lives from public scrutiny. Prior to his second marriage, Woodrow Wilson had a relationship with a woman named Mary Allen Hulbert. Franklin Roosevelt had an affair with Lucy Page Mercer, whom Eleanor Roosevelt had hired as her social secretary. Mercer was with President Roosevelt when he died in 1945 in Warm Springs, Georgia. During World War II, General Dwight Eisenhower had an extra-marital relationship with Kate Summersby, his personal secretary and military aide. After the war, the two never saw each other again. Beginning in the 1970s, over a decade after his assassination, reports linked John F. Kennedy with a Mafia moll, Judith Exner, and the actress Marilyn Monroe.

Between Woodrow Wilson and Bill Clinton, the one major exception to this rule was Warren Harding, yet even in this case, reports of presidential adultery followed his death. For fifteen years, Harding had an affair with Carrie Phillips, the wife of a close friend. After World War I broken out in Europe, she threatened to reveal their affair unless Harding voted against a U.S. declaration of war. After Harding received the Republican presidential nomination in 1920, the Republican National Committee sent her family on an all-expense paid trip to Japan and paid her $20,000 to keep quiet. Later, a woman named Nan Britten claimed that she had an illicit affair with Harding, including trysts in a White House cloak closet, and that the he had gotten her pregnant. Recent historical scholarship has cast doubt on aspects of this story.

American reactions to sexual scandals involving prominent politicians appear to be influenced by two traditions rooted in the country's colonial past, one stressing personal rectitude; the other emphasizing contrition, public confession, and forgiveness. A key issue raised during the controversy over President Bill Clinton's relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky is whether political leaders' public and private lives can be separated and whether their moral authority demands that they be held to higher standards than ordinary citizens.