

on which we need pay taxes only to God; and our private behavior—insofar as it involves ourselves alone—is seldom our neighbor's business. Family members or trusted friends who may shatter that privacy and prattle publicly about our personal thoughts and behavior forfeit our confidence.

In God's sight, lustful imagination or contemplation of crime justifies His moral condemnation. But statute law deals not with inner but with outward behavior. When crimes are alleged against state and society, public discussion of a person's conduct and premeditation may be not only proper and important but imperative.

But even here there are limits. Unfortunately, reporters and biographers often peer through every available peephole of one's life, expecting, even hoping, sooner or later to find adultery, homosexuality, drugs, criminal contacts, alcoholism, spousal abuse, or some other vice. The press subtly prejudices public figures by anticipated guilt. Sad to say, an author's voyeuristic imagination can add sales potential to biography; if such narrative is posthumous the subject is beyond his or her day in court. Can such cowardly character-assessment justify itself as serving an ethical purpose?

### Morals of the Media

That investigative reporters, media anchormen, and biographers seem exempt themselves from the scrutiny they impose on others is remarkable. Should public trust require that before assignment to a permanent post media personnel be subjected to public grilling and review of their private lives? Do anchormen reveal their after-hours indulgences? If not, why should the public servant be inordinately scrutinized? One answer is that we expect officeholders to be role models because they serve their country and represent constituencies. But cannot an anchorman in quite different ways honor or dishonor the public trust? Are not all of us morally responsible whoever and whatever we are? Should we expect more of a presidential candidate or of a televangelist than of an investigative reporter?

Once a society exempts certain classes from universally shared moral imperatives it is in trouble. To expose anyone's immorality is hardly a titillating pastime to be undertaken with glee. But for the grace of God all of us have the same potentiality for ethical compromise.

To destroy confidence in a public figure may indeed at times be legitimate and necessary. Not to do so may undermine confidence in the very democratic processes that the Free World treasures. But there is a proviso: the prosecutor dare not arrogate to himself or herself the prerogatives also of judge and jury. Such arrogance also undermines respect for those same democratic processes. The press has not yet, happily, displaced Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court. It will best serve the legality and morality of its profession and of the nation if its personnel manifest the same integrity that a just society expects, and rightly expects, from all of us.

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### RUSSELL KIRK

Private probity and public virtue.

Must people in public office be always exemplary in their private lives?

From Alexander Hamilton's affair with a woman client to the amours of Gary Hart, the American democracy frequently has rejected public men when it is said of them that they have promiscuous appetites or who have in some other fashion offended against what Marxists delight to call "bourgeois morality." The conspicuous rectitude of George Washington or John Adams remains the standard of political conduct for most Americans.

America's liberal intellectuals, on the other hand—Robert Maynard Hutchins, for one—often have asserted that competent performance of public responsibilities is everything, and that private vices or virtues are no proper concern for the electorate or the molders of public opinion. In Lear's phrase, "Let copulation thrive"—King Lear that is, not Norman Lear—as long as the public interest be not adversely affected.

### Public Good, Private Turpitude

Plato raised such questions of rectitude in the public man some 2,400 years ago. These issues grow serious again in our closing years of the 20th century, so like Plato's age in its incertitudes about moral standards. Can public good consist with private turpitude?

Take adultery—a term Gary Hart preferred not to define. A good many eminent statesmen, in many countries, have fallen into that slough. Even John Morley, the Victorian prime minister and sober man of letters, kept in his house for years a woman who was not his wife, whom he had rescued from a brutal husband.

We lack space here to touch upon the amatory exploits of British World War I Prime Minister David Lloyd George, President John F. Kennedy, and other possessors of power in a democracy. Does a politician's adulterous habit impede him in his public duties?

The answer to that question depends upon circumstances. A statesman's infatuation with the female agent of a foreign power may have consequences very grave indeed.

Or, as T. S. Eliot once remarked in a letter to me, the secret homosexual appetites of senior officials in the British intelligence services—two such had fled to the USSR for fear of arrest as Soviet agents not long before he wrote—scarcely are matters of indifference to the realm. Eliot added that a teacher teaches as much by what he is as by what he says. And that principle may apply to people in high authority.

### President Galahad

So I think that the American public does well to take some account of a public man's private character and habits. Yet the public would be foolish to expect every influential politician to live as a Galahad or a Parsifal, without stain or reproach. Chiefs of state and leaders of the crowd have to be men of the world.

President Richard Nixon remarked to me once that he did not think the people wished him to become a preacher of sermons, an issuer of moral rescripts. "I can speak to some effect on drug abuse," he added—but he took it,



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

**Alexander Hamilton: Press should be free but not wanton.**

rightly, that a president's duties are not those of *pontifex maximus*. Later, when the Watergate tapes were examined, certain hardened newspaper men affected shock at some rough phrases employed by Nixon and his kitchen cabinet.

The press, somewhat sanctimoniously, expected the public to wax indignant.

But why so? Abraham Lincoln had told off-color stories in the White House. Let us not pretend, ladies and gentlemen of the press, that the sort of men who seek great political power are notable for their chastity of thought and expression. Let us be grateful, rather, when such a rare politician appears among us.

Although it is unreasonable for the public to expect perfection of soul in every candidate for office, still Americans' frequent disapproval of politicians' private peccadilloes is founded upon something sounder than mere prissiness. It is not silly to ask one's self whether a public man, false to his wife, might not play fast and loose with his party and the public interest on convenient occasion. Nor is it absurd to suggest that servitude to what once was called "unnatural vice" might subject a public man to corrupting political pressures.

I offer an illustration of this principle. Some years ago, the character and fitness committee of the Michigan Bar Association was examining a candidate for admission to the bar. It was found that he had once been convicted of rape. The following dialogue occurred:

Examiner: "Why did you rape her?"

Candidate: "The opportunity presented itself, and I took it."

At the very least, it may be legitimately suspected of such an applicant that he might do with a client's money, on opportunity, the sort of thing he had done to the woman.

And so it is with a politician: The public entertains the legitimate presumption that the illicit lust for women's bodies might be paralleled in a public man's soul by an

illicit lust for acquiring possessions, what we call cupidity, and by an illicit lust for power, what St. Augustine and Thomas Hobbes called the *libido dominandi*—the lust for power, the appetite for absolute dominion. The public does well to try to safeguard itself against the conjunction of corruption in these three allied forms.

Then why think the American public pharisaical in making amatory decency a condition for election to high office?

If a candidate were notorious for having committed, as a private act, fraud or armed violence, would anybody hold that such private vice is irrelevant to candidacy for a higher public trust? What a person is accustomed to practice in private, he is all too liable to apply to his conduct in public concerns.

### A Tyrant's Lust

Public wrath at erotic misconduct by men in power is now new phenomenon. A principal reason for the old Greeks' hatred of tyranny was the tyrant's power to gratify his lust upon the bodies of his subjects. What undid King John and compelled him to sign the Magna Carta was his relish for the wives of his vassals.

And in the present circumstances of society, it is not unhealthy for the electorate to take a hostile view of adultery in high places. The family, which Cicero called the foundation of all other social institutions, notoriously is in a decaying state. If those in high political authority do not stand as tolerable examples of familial loyalty, who will?

Practical politicians, like single men in barracks, don't turn into plaster saints. But to argue that private character bears no relationship to fitness for the exercise of political trust and power—why, many centuries of human experience in community refute that liberal notion.

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### ERNEST W. LEFEVER

"If men were angels," said James Madison, "no government would be necessary." And, we might add, politics would be less complex and more boring. Eighty years ago John Dewey said, "While saints engage in introspection, burly sinners run the world."

Neither Madison nor Dewey was counseling despair. They were merely underscoring the plain truth—all men are sinners and government is not run by angels or saints.

This should come as no surprise to anyone observing the current presidential campaign or, for that matter, to anyone who looks honestly in a mirror. We are all sinners? So what?

The voter should distinguish between those vices and imperfections that bear directly on the behavior of one who holds (or aspires to) high office from those that do not. To speak of vices, we must also speak of virtue. High in the list of virtues essential to statesmanship are wisdom, prudence, integrity, courage, and a commitment to a free and just society. We associate Winston Churchill with these attributes, but even he was not without flaws.

Among the serious character flaws—if a pattern persists—that should disqualify a candidate for president or a