

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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A MAN FOR THE TIMES

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The political question I am asked most often these days is why, given that Americans have historically placed honesty and integrity high on the list of personal characteristics they most value, so many voters today seem not to care at all about what the mainstream media has come to describe delicately as the "Clinton character issue."

This is, of course, more than just an academic question, since GOP hopes of recapturing the White House rest in very large part on the prospects that at least some of these people will change their minds about whether "character" matters, as they become better informed, via campaign advertising, about allegations concerning Bill's alleged ethical and moral shortcomings.

In recent months, I have attempted to address this issue in several ways, none of which, I must admit, have been very satisfying. For starters, I have toyed with the idea that the apparent, growing public indifference to moral and ethical transgressions by their politicians is nothing more than a reflection of a decline in the morals and ethics of the population itself.

But in the final analysis, I don't really believe this theory holds water. If it did, it would stand to reason that people who openly declare that they are uninterested in such issues would be less moral and ethical than those individuals who say they find such arguments compelling. Yet I have found no real evidence that this is necessarily the case.

I have also played with the idea that widespread public indifference to the so-called "character" issue may have something to do with the fact that the mainstream media has not kept the public very well informed about evidence indicating that not only Bill, but Mrs. Clinton as well, may not have always conducted themselves according to the highest standards.

There is, I think, some truth to this theory. But I don't think it is a complete explanation. After all, there have been enough stories in the mainstream media over the past three years to make most people very much aware that the issue exists, and anyone who is truly concerned about such issues could certainly have found out more.

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So this week I thought I would posit another explanation. Unfortunately for the GOP, this one leads to the conclusion that Whitewater and related "character" issues will never be of more than limited interest to a large number of voters.

I continue to think, as I have said in several recent articles, that the character issue will by November pull some voters into the Republican camp who are not there today. But if my new theory is correct, this number may not be as large as I had thought, which means that Republicans will either have to find a proverbial "smoking gun," which forces Bill Clinton to step down, or find other issues on which to pin their hopes. My new theory is as follows.

Slowly but surely during the past 60 years, the United States has become the most powerful economic and military force that the world has ever seen. When World War II broke out in Europe in the mid-1930s, America was extremely weak, both economically and militarily. During the next six decades, while confronting and defeating two enormously powerful enemies, its economy and its military might grew dramatically. Today, it enjoys a situation that few nations in the entire history of the world have experienced; that of having no foreign enemy that poses a serious threat to its continued existence and prosperity.

During this same period, the United States developed an immense federal wealth redistribution network that is today almost beyond the comprehension of the average citizen. By some estimates, some 60% of Americans now receive some form of direct payment from the federal government in any given year. And this doesn't count the huge number of people who have jobs because the federal government purchases the goods and services they produce (e.g., defense workers), directly subsidizes the cost of the goods and services they offer so others can afford to buy them (e.g., farmers), or subsidizes the purchase by consumers of the goods and services they produce (e.g., teachers, academics, and medical care providers).

In fact, I believe it is no exaggeration to say that the general well-being and prosperity of most citizens is today at least as dependent on the federal government as it is on individual effort. Indeed, I think it is increasingly apparent that the principal activity of the federal government today is the sorting out and ensuring, like some sort of modern-day Solomon, of the "rights" and "entitlements" of each and every citizen, according to an extraordinarily complicated set of standards that are constantly shifting based on the political power of each supplicant group.

This combination of the emergence of superpower status and the development of the welfare state has, I believe, profoundly changed the public's attitude toward and expectations of the federal government. This in turn has profoundly changed the criteria that most voters use for choosing a president.

Before the establishment of the nanny state, and before the United States became an unassailable military power, most Americans looked to the federal government to fulfill its basic constitutional mandate, i.e., to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, and provide for the nation's defense.

Under these conditions, most voters thought it was imperative that the president be a man of very high personal character and courage. Only an honest individual could ensure justice. How could a crook do so? Only a person of excellent character could ensure domestic tranquility, since

someone who regularly violated society's norms was, by definition, disruptive of the social order. Only an individual with demonstrated courage could be put in charge of the nation's defense. How could a coward assume such a role?

What liberals today describe as the "economic safety net" was provided in those days not by the federal government but first by the family, then by friends, and finally by the local community, via its charities and social organizations. The family was thus the root of civil society. Traditional virtues, especially courage and fidelity, were highly prized at all levels of society, because their existence was crucial to its functioning. It was thus unthinkable that ordinary people would vote for a president whom they knew lacked these qualities, since their existence in persons close to them was so important to their own prosperity and happiness.

As Alasdair MacIntyre points out in his marvelous book on moral philosophy entitled *After Virtue*, "To be courageous is to be someone on whom reliance can be placed. Hence, courage is an important ingredient in friendship. . . The other ingredient in friendship is fidelity. My friend's courage assures me of his power to aid me and my household; my friend's fidelity assures me of his will. My household's fidelity is the basic guarantee of its unity. So in women, who constitute the crucial relationships within the household, fidelity is the key virtue." Thus, there is, as MacIntyre points out, a strong relationship between courage, friendship, fidelity, and the household.

But, as they say, times have changed.

0 Today, the government has replaced the household and virtually all other of society's private institutions as the primary guarantor against hard times. As a result, it is absolutely crucial for most people that the person in the White House is on their side in the great redistribution battle.

The only fidelity they care about is fidelity to their "cause", or to their social, ethnic, or economic subgroup. The old joke about an honest politician's being one who when bought stays bought has taken on new meaning. In fact, it is much more important to most voters today that a politician will "stay bought" than that he can be bought. Indeed, a politician who cannot be bought is in today's society a threat to all parties.

In addition, due largely to greatly increased educational and job opportunities, an increasing number of women in today's society are much less vulnerable, both personally and financially, to a breakdown in their family unit than they were only a few decades ago. Thus, their concern that widely known infidelity in a president might diminish society's respect for this virtue is probably less pronounced today. It is worth noting that many males applaud this change, since it means that promiscuous behavior is more acceptable to society and it significantly eases society's expectations of them.

0 Today, the term justice has taken on a new meaning. For a majority of citizens, justice today means that his or her particular subset of society receives special treatment not only in the courts, but in the legislature, where the great wealth and power redistribution battle goes on incessantly. As a result, most voters today are less interested in a president who "ensures justice", in the traditional sense, than they are in finding one who will deliberately tilt in favor of their particular class or special interest. Nothing highlights this phenomenon more, I believe, than the derision

that Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas has suffered at the hands of many of the nation's African-American leaders, who complain that his legal decisions don't support the interests of "his people."

Another interesting insight into the state of "justice" in America today was provided recently by the amazement expressed in the media when a jury in Little Rock, Arkansas, rendered a guilty verdict against a bunch of crooks, something juries once did routinely.

0 Today, public concern about the nation's defense is limited. Therefore, it stands to reason that courage is not high on the list of characteristics most people demand in a president.

0 Today, domestic tranquility is, for the most part, a chimerical concept. One man's tranquility is another man's oppression. U.S. society at the close of the twentieth century has fewer and fewer widely accepted social norms the violation of which is generally believed to cause harm. The tenet described by MacIntyre as "emotivism" has replaced the belief that such terms as "right" and "wrong" have absolute meaning. Emotivism, according to MacIntyre, "is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* [emphasis in original] expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character." Thus, a president's personal actions, no matter how egregious by the standards of several decades ago, pose little or no threat to domestic tranquility by today's definition, and are thus of little interest to voters.

The bottom line on all of this is that Bill Clinton is correct politically when he emphasizes to voters what they will personally "get" from his presidency. And Bob Dole's effort to turn "character" into a campaign issue will be only marginally useful, if at all.

Many people with whom I have spoken about this brave new world express the view that it is temporary, that there is a counterrevolution ongoing in the land that will reinstate traditional virtues to their former high pedestal. If this proves to be so, it would be a wonderful thing. But I am somewhat pessimistic.

Nietzsche, in his own way one of the most conservative of philosophers, knew that contrary to the tortured protests of the likes of Hume and Kant and Kierkegaard, when God is dead, morality and ethics soon follow. He put it this way in *Twilight of the Idols*, one of his lesser known works, in a passage which begins "Whispered to Conservatives:"

What was not known formerly, what is known, or might be known today: a reversion, a return in any sense or degree is simply not possible . . . Today there are still parties whose dream it is that all things might walk backwards like crabs. But no one is free to be a crab. Nothing avails: one *must* go forward-step by step further into decadence (that is my definition of modern "progress"). One can *check* this development and thus dam up degeneration, gather it and make it more vehement and *sudden*: one can do no more [emphasis in the original].

We'll see.

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