

Character and the Presidency

During the time of the Monica Lewinsky/President Clinton scandal the relative importance of character in a president was debated. President Clinton's supporters tended to argue that the job performance of the president mattered greatly and his character not so much. Of course, his opponents maintained that a president should have exceptional character and that his performance was secondary. Having "character" means that a person lives by norms generally accepted by society, that he or she is honest, possesses a moral code, behaves in a way that is lawful, and has integrity, that is, an alignment between a set of convictions and a manner of life.

In President Clinton's case, sexual contact with an intern was behavior for which most people would be fired if not prosecuted. That simple fact seemed to get lost in the political tug of war that was waged at the time. A lot was overlooked that should not have been. Many people felt that, well, maybe his actions were embarrassing but, hey, he balanced the budget!

Considering all the presidents in the last hundred years, President Clinton is not an outlier. A quick listing of presidents will make the point:

- Warren G. Harding: the reputation of his somewhat successful presidency was tarnished after his death by the revelation of several extramarital affairs, not to mention the Teapot Dome scandal for which his Secretary of the Interior went to prison for accepting bribes in exchange for oil leases.
- Franklin Roosevelt: revered by many for leading the country out of the Depression and through the Second World War. However, he kept a mistress for years. Also, his refusal to allow 900 Jewish refugees from landing in the United States, and his interning Japanese Americans speak to his character.
- Harry S. Truman: Leaving aside the moral questions surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Truman's character suffered only minor criticisms over his poker-playing, bourbon drinking, and hot temper. Several people in his administration were involved in scandals but they did not touch Truman.
- Dwight Eisenhower: it is rumored that Eisenhower had an extramarital affair with his aide.
- John Kennedy: His extramarital affairs are not just rumored, they are documented.
- Lyndon Johnson: had many extramarital affairs and kept an active interest in his businesses that were supposed to be in a blind trust while he was president.
- Richard Nixon: his paranoia led him to have people break into the offices of his political opponents and then lied about it.

Who knows what we don't know? For most of American history, character flaws and moral failings of presidents were kept hidden, even by the press. Given the ubiquitous and omniscient digital eye of the present day, most public figures lives are open books. For the most part that is a good thing, but it also paints more detailed portraits of our presidents and presidential candidates, portraits that are not always flattering.

Which brings me to the two leading presidential candidates in this election year, President Biden and former President Trump. Both of these men have serious character issues. Both are known

liars. Not the kind of twisting of the truth that is often accepted as political talk, the spin, the exaggerations, the one-sided accounts of events, etc. No, they have straight out lied repeatedly over the years. Trump has a long history of cheating workers and contractors out of money he owed them. Biden has allowed his name to be used in influence peddling by his family. Trump has said crude, insulting, and degrading things about war heroes, handicapped people, and women who have accused him of improprieties. Biden has betrayed basic moral tenets of the faith he purports to hold. You the reader can add to this list as you want.

Do their character failings matter? Shockingly, their supporters do not think so. I would disagree. Character matters. First let me say that even someone with poor character can accomplish good as president. We have seen it. But for an administration that consistently chooses the wisest and best courses of action promoting the common good over a long period of time, a president must have good character. The virtuous person does virtuous things. A person who has spent the time and effort in his or her life to choose the good will have developed habits of thought and attitude that support decisions that are considered, prudent, and in the best interests of the country he or she serves.

It is especially important in 2024 that we have a president of good character because as the leader of the country he or she will set the boundaries of what is acceptable. If a president ridicules certain populations, then it becomes acceptable for others to do that. If a president ignores the rule of law, then it becomes acceptable for others to do that. If a president shapes reality to his or her own liking, then others are free to create their own self-serving truths.

The fact is that there is no shared ethical vision in the United States, no cohesive understanding of what is good and exemplary. It is more important than ever that our political leader also serve as a moral leader. My hope is that people demand this of those who would be president.