

PL3-"WHAT WE REALLY CAN'T FORGIVE CLINTON FOR: HE GOT CAUGHT", SALON, 9-4-98

THE CLOCK IS TICKING ON HOW LONG WE CAN HANDLE THE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE BETWEEN HIS BEHAVIOR AND OUR GRANDIOSE EXPECTATIONS OF THE PRESIDENCY

If President Clinton ends up having to resign -- which is what I expect - it will not be because he is an immoral or evil person, but because the American public is still not prepared, psychologically, to accept that our president is a mere mortal.

One probable, and ironic, legacy of Clinton will be that future presidents will be granted more latitude in personal sexual behavior, just as politicians can today get divorced or admit having smoked marijuana. This development will be welcome -- it's long past time for us to cease projecting our subconscious needs for a larger-than-life leader onto the fallible human beings our democratic process propels into the office of president. But for the moment, the cognitive dissonance between our little-discussed expectations of the presidency and Clinton's behavior may well lead to an Al Gore presidency within the next year. If so, the proximate cause will be Democratic leaders asking the president to step down in the face of larger-than-expected congressional losses and/or a weakening economy. But the real causes will go far deeper.

Did you ever have a nightmare where you were humiliated before everyone you knew, a nightmare in which everyone was either disgusted by or laughing at you? And do you remember how horrible you felt when you awakened? Now imagine poor Bill Clinton. He is in the middle of a living nightmare of humiliation beyond anything most of us can imagine. He is embarrassed not just before his family, friends, co-workers and everyone he knows, but the entire world -- and the entire world for all time to come, to boot. And, unlike the rest of us, he can't wake up. He will inhabit this nightmare all the rest of his days.

"Poor Bill Clinton." It is this dimension of Monicagate that is unique in the history of the presidency. We have had scoundrels, rogues, liars

and people who committed great violence in the job before. But never have we had so hapless a president. "The Emperor With No Clothes" was supposed to be a fairy tale, not the literal description of a president whose private parts have actually become a subject of public discussion.

From this perspective, Clinton's mistake is not that he had sex in the Oval Office or lied. It is something far more serious: He got caught. Presidents can be forgiven anything so long as they seem powerful enough to protect us. But a president who is so weak or foolish as to get caught is something that our psyches are just not prepared for.

It is amazing how little public discussion there has been about the role the presidency plays in our psyches and lives, which is the real issue underlying the Clinton scandal. It is true, as many have suggested, that CEOs, college professors and military officers could lose their jobs for denying and then having to admit having adulterous sex with someone young enough to be their child. But for no one other than a president could this become a national obsession, dominate the media for months on end and threaten to paralyze both the executive and legislative branches of government.

Let us begin with the basics: A president is different from every other American, all 250 million of them. This has partly to do with power: The president is the only person we entrust with the authority to use nuclear weapons. That is, we voluntarily grant the president, and only the president, the right to kill us and all life on earth.

N E X T+P A G E+| The psychic power of the presidency

But it has even more to do with our psyches. One has only to remember the magical feelings of awe we experienced as children when first learning of "The President" to begin to understand it. A president occupies a special place in our psychic geographies, in our subconscious -- a place so powerful that it moves grown adults to pay \$100,000 to sleep in the Lincoln bedroom, spend fortunes for a former president's humidor or golf club or devote their entire adult lives to running for the presidency.

We can speculate as to why. After surveying the anthropological literature, Ernest Becker suggests in "Escape From Evil" that the origin of hierarchy is people's desire for security in this life and immortality in the next. The first leaders -- and their successors for many thousands of years thereafter -- combined both secular and spiritual roles. People surrendered part of their power to them in return for the promise of life after death.

Whatever one thinks of Becker's thesis, the feelings it points to are undeniable. Somewhere, somehow, we tend to experience an undefinable but real frisson of transcendence in the presence of the president. Movie stars gush. Businessmen babble. Politicians patter. Cabinet secretaries and aides flatter. Citizens genuflect. Temperatures rise. Faces flush. Our conscious minds know that he or she is a fallible human being. Our subconscious minds react very differently, as we project inner and often unrecognized needs onto the mere mortal who occupies the office.

This creates a dilemma for the person who actually happens to be president. How can he or she govern and still remain human? In an interview recently rebroadcast by "60 Minutes," Richard Nixon discussed the traditional view: The president should behave properly in public but doesn't have to in private. Publicly, he should maintain the dignity of the office. Privately, Nixon suggested, "He should be able to let his hair down," e.g., by using foul language.

This view has been tenable, whatever problems it caused, throughout most of the history of the republic. As has been noted ad nauseam, the media and public kept the president's life private, up to and including JFK. But it began to change with LBJ, when large numbers of young people realized -- sooner or later -- that blind belief in the president could be fatal. And, of course, it was Nixon himself who forever changed how the media would cover the presidency.

The hold the presidency exerts on our psyches is so powerful that even the often scabrous media coverage of Jimmy Carter, Ronald

Reagan, George Bush and the pre-Monica Clinton only made relatively small inroads in the presidential mystique.

But Monicagate is something different. It seems clear that the presidency will never again be the same.

The national psyche could absorb the "evil president" archetype during Watergate -- we revolted against King George after all, and at least Nixon projected power. But it's not clear it can handle the "hapless president" with his pants around his ankles. Monicagate, which concerns where we live, touches our subconscious at a far deeper level than Watergate -- which was about where they live. As important as wiretapping or burglary are, they do not compare in our psychologies with issues like family, relationships, honesty, risk, trustworthiness and sex.

When the single most powerful person in the world lies about, is caught at and then admits adulterous, foolish, reckless, tawdry, furtive, illicit, gamy, guilty sex in the Oval Office with a woman barely old enough to work there, it may not be an impeachable offense. But it messes with people's psyches in ways that Woodward and Bernstein could never have imagined. The issue isn't Monica's age, it's the president's. We may be able to love that adolescent uncle who never grew up. But few of us feel protected by a president who behaves like him.

From this perspective, the president's high job ratings and people's anger at the media may be a national cry for help. Many can't psychically manage the knowledge that the man upon whom we depend for security, a man who can literally blow us all up, can't even control his own inappropriate sexual urges.

When people give the president high job-approval ratings, it is a conscious and rational wish that he go about the nation's business. But when his personal approval rating also shows signs of dropping precipitously, it indicates that our national subconscious is stirring. As details of presidential sexual indiscretions continue to dribble out, it is likely that public denial of their psychic implications will -- like Sen.

Dianne Feinstein's trust -- be shattered. If so, Clinton's days in office are most definitely numbered.

Perhaps this clash between our conscious and subconscious also helps explain the surprising anger one hears from people in the street, close friends, relatives, at the investigation, the almost plaintive plea that it just "go away." It may be that many people want it over because confronting Clinton's behavior is so unsettling to the space the presidency occupies in our psychic geographies.

Given the way our system works, however, Humpty-Dumpty cannot be put back together again. There is no way that the presidential mystique can be reconciled with Clinton's behavior, no way that its psychic impact can just be stuffed back into our subconscious. Therefore, Clinton will likely have to resign. But even if he does not leave office before his term is up, it is likely that people will forever lower their psychic expectations of the president as a result of this scandal.

On the whole, this is healthy. If we could ensure that only philosopher-kings with the morals of Gandhi, the decency of Mother Teresa and the sagacity of Socrates would occupy the Oval Office, there might be a case for arguing that the presidential mystique should be maintained. But given the fact that our political system almost ensures that the presidency will be occupied by ambitious, narcissistic strivers who make a career of avoiding risky moral stands on issues, it is far healthier to lower our expectations of who the president is and what he or she represents.

We got rid of King George for a reason. In the end, demythologizing the presidency will lead to a healthier democracy, as we stop looking to leaders to provide what we need to find in ourselves.

History may be kinder to the Clinton presidency than his contemporaries have been. He may well be remembered as the first postmodern president, the man who taught the American people as none before him that even presidents are mere mortals, and in so doing took the cause of democracy and republicanism to a new level.

Foolish, yes. But also fundamentally human, something we may miss among the grim choices to come.

But such speculation is for the future. For the moment, the basic question is whether Clinton's failure to meet subconscious expectations about the presidency will lead to his resignation. The jury on that question -- like the grand jury and the House Impeachment Committee -- is still out. But the clock is ticking.

SALON | Sept. 4, 1998

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