

PL8-- "WHY THE PUBLIC NEEDS TO KNOW IF BUSH USED DRUGS: IT'S ABOUT CHARACTER, STUPID" , SALON, 8/31/99

August 31, 1999 | WASHINGTON -- James Carville has emerged as a kind of courtier not only to President Clinton, but to the institution of the presidency itself, with his recent Time magazine attack on the press for asking questions about George W. Bush's alleged cocaine use. His advice to Bush -- that he should ask reporters "What is there about no that you don't understand?" -- bespeaks a common attitude among courtiers and other sycophants to the powerful: that a leader's "private life" should remain private, that the press should collude in keeping it that way and that the only legitimate questions have to do with public policy.

Even more respected figures like presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin have begun saying that there is a need to restore the "dignity" of the presidency by reducing media intrusion into the president's private life.

This attitude is highly unfortunate, for it seeks to reverse President Clinton's most historic and lasting accomplishment: his demystification of the presidency. While inadvertent to be sure, Clinton has performed an invaluable public service in showing Americans that our president is a real person with weaknesses like anyone else. Confronted with the evidence, Americans decided that his weaknesses did not outweigh his strengths, and overwhelmingly opposed impeachment.

The president is different from all of our other politicians. He or she alone still carries a kind of mystique, as a carry-over from the days of monarchy and rulers holding both secular and sacred power. Americans defer to the president more than anyone else in our society.

Presidents, of course, have historically misused this deference. Clearly the president's traditional hold on the public psyche has done great harm -- from Vietnam to Watergate to Iran-Contra -- and has no place in a democracy. Given our innate tendency to project our desires for protection onto the president, the media and public should demand

more information, not less, from our presidential candidates in coming years.

The most important reason for reducing the "zone of privacy" around the president is simple: He or she is the only person to whom we give the unilateral power to blow up ourselves and everyone else on earth, and to send our young people into combat, and we ought to know as much as we can about the person to whom we entrust such formidable power.

In return for being granted the power to murder and maim at will, as well as the perks of lifelong wealth and fame, ordinary politicians running for president should expect to share everything about their personal lives that will enable us to judge their character. No one forces anyone to run for president. But if they wish to seek the power to destroy life on earth, they should have no secrets from the rest of us.

In the old days, this was impractical, for the public was even more hypocritical than leaders and the press. In a world -- the mid 1960s -- in which Nelson Rockefeller could be blackballed from the presidency for a divorce, even though adultery was rampant and divorces already skyrocketing, there was perhaps a case for allowing the president his secrets.

Today, however, the public is more sophisticated than the media and politicians combined. As Monicagate showed, they are capable of analyzing and weighing the importance of personal information far better than those conveying it to them.

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In a democracy, the public needs personal information to make democratic judgments. The reason is not the tortured connection often made between public policy and personal information: for example, that we need to know about Bush's cocaine use because he would be

the chief law enforcement officer, with responsibility for national drug laws and policies .

That's part of the picture, but more important is the insight such information gives us as to his or her character. As conservatives like to say, "character counts." And character is particularly important in today's media age, in which almost totally unknown politicians -- like Clinton, Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush -- rocket out of nowhere to become leading contenders for president.

Bush is an extreme example of this. His life was devoid of real accomplishment prior to his becoming Texas governor a mere five years ago. So his resume offers far less guidance to how he might behave in a future international crisis than information that helps us understand his character.

Imagine, for example, that the answer to whether Bush used cocaine is "yes." It's somehow been assumed that even if so, he only tried it once or twice. But what if that is not the case? What if he frequently used it during a given period of his life? What if he used other drugs, too? Would the answer not be relevant to his character, and who he is today?

What if he were addicted? Sold the drug? Developed health problems because of it? Who else knew about his cocaine use? How did he obtain the drug? Why did he start? Why did he stop?

Did he think about the potential harm it could do to his father's political career if he got caught? Why was he willing to risk his relationship with his father, which we know means a lot to him, and his father's political career? What does this reveal about his feelings toward his father and himself? Did he lie about his cocaine use to friends and family? If so, is lying to friends, family and associates a pattern?

Did he care that what he was doing was illegal? How does that reflect on his attitude toward law enforcement, then and now? And does it

matter to him that thousands of young people are currently in jail for doing what he did when he was "young and irresponsible?"

Such questions go to the heart of Bush's character. A key question, after all, is the extent to which Bush is reckless, or an addictive personality. Certainly his excessive drinking for decades suggests he might be both. If this behavior was accompanied by a period of reckless, health-endangering cocaine use as well, it would be all the more disturbing.

Of course even if his answers to these questions revealed a period of excessive and reckless cocaine use, it would not necessarily be a definitive reason to vote against him for president. But it would be a significant part of the mosaic. If stories indicating recklessness, addiction or emotional problems were to emerge in other areas, it would form a pattern that voters need to know about. Conversely, if a period of excessive cocaine use was followed by a sharp turnaround, it might suggest strong discipline and willpower, and give voters additional reasons to vote for him.

But whatever the case, one thing is clear: We learned from Monicagate that our presidents are human beings with human frailties that could have a significant impact on their terms in office. Had the nation known more about the president's compulsive womanizing before he was elected, for instance, we might have avoided the time and resource drain of impeachment entirely. Either he'd have lost the election, or, if he won, his enemies would have known not to try to bring him down with more evidence of his compulsion.

We need to demand more candor, not less, from the emotionally fragile men demanding power over our lives. They need not fear us. We will know how to assess this information far better than the James Carvilles and other gatekeepers who make a living helping them conceal who they really are.

A democracy can, and should, demand no less.