What did you call me?

by James M. Wall in the March 22, 2000 issue

John McCain was the most innovative and exciting campaigner of the presidential primary season. His positive treatment from the media led one of his aides to observe that the media had been his political base. But now McCain is out of the presidential race, in part because, as Phyllis Schlafly of the conservative Eagle Forum said, “People don’t want to elect an angry candidate.”

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd was even more specific: McCain “called Big Tobacco ‘jerks.’” He ranted that the people running Bob Jones University were “idiots.” He blasted the televangelists of the right as “evil,” and even dubbed his own party establishment the “Death Star.” He mocked his colleagues in Congress by christening Washington the “city of Satan.” Dowd reached back to the Spanish Inquisition to argue that McCain “wasn’t running a campaign so much as an auto-da-fé, with himself as the martyr in the flames.”

From a political stance more akin to Schlafly’s than to Dowd’s, columnist George Will observed that by the end McCain’s campaign had become “a protracted snarl. Time and television had done their work, and the nation had seen him steadily and seen him whole, and had seen an angry man.” Will said that “the nation has elected only one president defined by his anger. But Andrew Jackson, he of towering rages and durable grudges, would not wear well in a wired age, when television forces Americans to live in intimacy with presidents.”

Television has turned presidential elections into character studies. Political issues are less significant because candidates rarely venture far from the political middle, where most voters prefer them to remain. There are, of course, some activists and some passionate believers who continue to make their voices heard, but they serve more of a prophetic than a pragmatic political purpose.

What matters to the larger population is character—not just moral or ethical behavior, but also a proper demeanor, the kind we expect from anyone we invite into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. McCain’s loss can be attributed to many things, including early money and the Republican establishment’s decision to anoint George

W. Bush, but McCain's anger played a huge role in stopping his momentum after his surprise victory in the Michigan primary. Though McCain praised the convictions of conservative religious believers, that was not enough political cover for his attacks on Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, which reflected negatively on his character.

James Carville, President Clinton's favorite attack dog, recently described his reasons for remaining loyal to Clinton during the bleakest days of the Lewinsky scandal. In *Stickin'*: *The Case for Loyalty*, Carville says things about Jerry Falwell that are too gross for these pages, but among the less gross passages is this observation: "I don't want Jerry Falwell to get sick or something. I just want him to shut up. (Well, maybe I wouldn't be too upset if he stubs his toe.) He is one of the world's really bad people."

McCain might have fared better in the character race had he had a Carville to attack Falwell and Robertson. But McCain had no surrogate with Carville's access to media, and as a candidate whose character was being judged, he made a serious mistake when he used the word *evil* to describe the two religious leaders. Evil is a term better reserved for serial killers and child molesters, or, as in the case of Ronald Reagan's talk about the Soviet Union, an ideological enemy.

How does this reaction to McCain compare to the public's response to the Clinton administration when issues of personal conduct and moral character were in constant public debate? The major irony of the Lewinsky scandal is that in trying to oust Clinton from office, political and religious conservatives were ultimately the ones seen as violating a core set of convictions on how we want to get along with one another.

The public agreed that Clinton's personal behavior had been both immoral and stupid, but as the campaign to oust him moved from the office of the special prosecutor to the impeachment trial, the unfairness of the legal and political actions against Clinton became apparent. Once this happened, the sad Lewinsky story took a turn: it ended not with the victory for moral virtue that both mainstream media and the Religious Right had predicted, but as a triumph for fairness in both our civil life and our civil discourse.

What is apparent in the Clinton ordeal and in McCain's defeat is that for all our weaknesses as a society, we operate with a set of core convictions, among which is the belief that there are boundaries of civility and fair play within which we want to live. These convictions are not as highly virtuous as religious leaders might prefer

them to be, but at least they are the convictions of a people who believe that if we are to live together as a community, we must remember what our parents taught us: The schoolyard is a crowded place where it is not a good idea to call anyone a nasty name.