

True compassion

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

It is hard not to conclude, given his recent stumbling about on the issue, that at some point prior to his 30th birthday Governor George W. Bush used cocaine. There is no evidence of this, and there are no charges, only vague rumors which the governor has said he will not address. Will Bush succeed in halting media and political speculation on the topic? If you think so, then you have been asleep during Bill Clinton's presidency.

Is this any way to run a democracy? Well, actually, in this case, it is. It is appropriate and, indeed, essential that the media examine the past conduct of public officials and candidates for office when that conduct has a direct connection to public duties. The Justice Department had a legitimate reason to investigate possible criminal behavior by Bill and Hillary Clinton related to the Whitewater real estate project. As it turned out, special prosecutor Kenneth Starr concluded that none of the Whitewater allegations could stick—a conclusion he quietly reported to the Congress during his far more sexy pursuit of the Monica Lewinsky story. Whitewater qualified; Monica did not.

Sexual conduct between consenting adults that has no bearing on public duties is not the business of either the media or the public. But the use of cocaine by a public official at any point in his or her life is a legitimate public concern. By refusing to discuss whether he used drugs prior to the age of 30, Bush has left himself open to the charge that he is dissembling. And consider the fact that, if Governor Bush is one of the many Americans who once used hard drugs, then he is a governor and a possible future president who managed to escape punishment for a felony.

In recent years, as legislators have tried to outdo one another in being "tough on crime," they have passed harsh drug laws that offer no room for the rehabilitation of first-time, nonviolent drug users. Federal judges are given little leeway in sentencing. Federal guidelines require that anyone caught with more than five grams of crack cocaine must serve five years in prison. Sixty percent of federal prisoners are serving time for violating drug laws.

Most of the 70 million Americans who have tried illegal drugs have escaped incarceration, and some of the lucky ones, like Republican New Mexico Governor Gary E. Johnson, have even made it into public life. When Johnson, 46, entered politics after a career as a business executive, he revealed to voters that he had used hard drugs earlier in his life. That revelation did not stop the citizens of New Mexico from electing Johnson governor in 1994 and reelecting him in 1999.

As a result of his own experience, Johnson has become a strong advocate of reforming drug laws. The governor knows that young offenders who serve mandatory prison terms are deprived of education and the opportunity to build family and community ties. Rehabilitation, not punishment, as Governor Johnson has demonstrated, is not only a more compassionate response but a more effective one.

Governor Bush insists that since a 1985 talk with Billy Graham he has repudiated his sinful past. But in his redeemed state, Bush is unduly harsh on those who continue to sin. As governor, reports *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, Bush signed "a punitive law" that allowed judges "to put people convicted of possessing less than one gram of cocaine in jail." Very much in the mode of Prince Hal, who became Henry V when he succeeded his father as king of England, Governor Bush appears eager to demonstrate his piety by displaying no compassion for fellow sinners.

In Shakespeare's rendering of Henry V's move from wild youth to national leader, the king repudiates not only his previous conduct but also those who sinned with him, most notably Sir John Falstaff, whom he dismisses with the cruel rejection: "I do not know you, old man." Not even Falstaff's plaintive cry of earlier comradeship, "but we heard the chimes at midnight," can shake Henry's determination to show no mercy to fellow sinners. Where Bush differs from Henry V, however, is the fact that all of England knew the details of young Hal's early carousing.

Either Bush used hard drugs in his early years or he didn't. If he did, then it's essential that, like Governor Anderson, he make his confession and give thanks that he was one of the lucky ones. The American public will be far more forgiving of a confession of past mistakes than it will be of a continued evasiveness.

Hannah Arendt once wrote about the practice of lying by government officials: "Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye

to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared."

Governor Bush need only look at previous campaigns to realize that, if he doesn't tell the full story, it's very likely someone claiming to be a former supplier of drugs or a fellow user of drugs will sell his story to the tabloid press and confess to "my decade of drugs with George W."

Whatever his past dealings with drugs, Bush should listen to conservative columnist Arianna Huffington, who has called on him "to prove his compassionate conservatism" by leading the fight against this nation's punitive and destructive drug laws. That would show presidential leadership. Dissembling on the subject is merely politics as usual.