

Appalling behavior

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The president's conduct as revealed in Kenneth Starr's report to Congress is appalling and indefensible. He has been self-indulgent and careless of the truth and of other people's lives. He has betrayed the trust of his family and supporters for the sake of furtive sexual gratification with a naïve intern, and he has lied about it to his family, the special prosecutor, his colleagues and the nation. He sought out "casual" sex and discovered, as people generally do, that it's a dangerous illusion.

But the probe of politicians' sexual lives is appalling in its own way, and the scope of Starr's investigation is difficult to defend. The distinction between public and private life may be blurry at times and is never absolute, but some distinction of this sort must be preserved. Otherwise, politics becomes impossible.

Politics is the collective pursuit of the common good, and it is always carried out by flawed human beings. Only when personal failings threaten the common good or the integrity of the political process should those flaws themselves become the subject of political attention. Politics is not the arena in which to address a legislator's marital problems or a president's emotional adolescence. Politics is about addressing issues of the common life that can be solved by public deliberation. For that reason, it is wise to exempt politicians' private lives from the publicity of the public sphere.

Eventually the nation must pause to consider: Are we any better off knowing about Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky? If we grant that Ken Starr was only doing his job, we still must ask: Was that job really a service to the nation? Has the special prosecutor brought to our attention violations of the law that demand the attention of Congress and the nation in order to salvage the integrity of our government? The answer to such questions is likely to be no.

When the current furor has died down, the law governing special prosecutors should be revised and the scope of that office restricted to specific allegations about violations of criminal law or the constitutional order.

The point is not that people should be blasé about politicians' sexual misconduct, or that Americans should learn to emulate the French, who only shrug when the president's mistress joins his family at his funeral. We are right to recognize that sexual conduct, because it involves a central aspect of being human, shapes and reflects human character in decisive ways. Nevertheless, sexual lives are not the stuff of politics, and mixing the two does not bolster marriage nor does it enhance the conduct of politics.