

The French code of silence

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As Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former managing director of the International Monetary Fund, [tries to find](#) a nicer place to stay than Riker's Island, the French media are busy unraveling the shock bite that came with an accusation of illegal imprisonment and attempted rape of a hotel maid.

It is the alleged violence of the incident that has shaken the French. But it has also led some French journalists to question what they admit was a protection of this government leader's extramarital affairs. "We journalists haven't done our job properly," [says](#) Pierre Haski, a political commentator and co-founder of [Rue89](#). "We felt that we were superior to the Americans and the British by upholding the principle of protecting private life . . . we need to define our role in a more aggressive way--and say that not everything private is private."

In the U.S., the media is hardly shy about sharing the adventures and misadventures of its governmental leaders. While the sexual habits of John F. Kennedy were covered up for him by his retinue of loyal staffers and adoring reporters, it seems that every leader and potential leader since then is scrutinized for any misstep, especially a sexual one.

Meanwhile, American journalists trip over each other in an effort to be first to report a transgression, and they challenge boundaries of privacy in order to add a government leader to our hall of infamy: John Edwards, Mark Sanford, etc., etc. (excluding Arnold the marriage terminator, who [managed to evade journalists!](#)).

If the French are questioning Strauss-Kahn's fitness to govern, perhaps they will further cement what Chantal Delsol says in the May 14 issue of *Le*

Figaro: the majority of the French do not subscribe to the cultural myth that Americans have attributed to them--the belief that one's personal life can be kept separate from one's public life. Most believe the opposite: private behavior directly affects one's behavior in the public domain.

If the French media decided to lift its code of silence and report on leaders' private lives--including incidents of promiscuity--would France discover or shape better leaders?

And on the other side of the Atlantic...does the U.S. have leaders of higher moral fiber because we watch them so closely and report on them so boldly? Or are we, with or without the camera on zoom, likely to continue to elect leaders who disappoint in private as well as in public life?