

ABSTRACT

Political Leadership and Morality: Shifting American Leadership Responses to Scandal

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Politicians have always walked on the shaky ground of public opinion, but now more than ever it seems their personal lives have come into play in the political arena. The American People are no longer satisfied with leaders who pose as good citizens in public but have deep secrets in private. Rather the dynamic has shifted, and it is clear that there is a distinct relationship between American Political Leadership and Morality. Interestingly, I have found that over time the definition and perception of this idea has shifted. Americans have always embraced leaders they believe to have good character, but in today's political climate this character is focused on complete honesty rather than moral integrity. The way in which political scandals are handled has shifted dramatically over the last half-century, and as a result the model for political leadership has changed. Richard Nixon began this trend by breaching America's trust and view of politicians and awakening a watchdog media. Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich continued by defiantly admitting to private infidelities, leading to the present. An American public willing to forgive Mark Sanford within 3 years of a sex scandal, and re-elect him to the United States Congress, with nothing more than an honest apology for his error.

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POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND MORALITY: SHIFTING AMERICAN
LEADERSHIP RESPONSES TO SCANDAL

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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May 2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iii
Dedication	iv
Chapter One: Introduction to Leadership in America	1
Chapter Two: Losing Trust: Nixon and American Leadership	5
Chapter Three: The Perception of Honesty: Clinton and Gingrich	14
Chapter Four: The Art of the Half-Hearted Apology: From Sanford to Spitzer	25
Chapter Five: The Relationship Between Political Leadership and American Morality	32
Bibliography	40

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author extends gratitude to all who assisted in the process of writing this thesis. Specifically, I would like to thank the members of my defense committee, Dr. Andrew Hogue, Dr. Pat Flavin and Ms. Julie King J.D., for providing their valuable time to read this work and provide insight. I would also like to thank Dr. David Bridge for providing guidance during the early stages of the process, and steering me towards my true interests.

A special sentiment of gratitude goes to Dr. Andrew Hogue. This project would not have been possible without his time, thought, guidance, and willingness to be flexible while helping to process different hypotheses and ideas.

Thanks to Allison Baker for her continued support and encouragement throughout the past year, along with Elliot Ehlen, John Cooney Jr., Tyler Cook, Brad Miles, Blaze Wrobleske, Austin Draughn, and Andrew Orr for the grace and friendship they've shown me during my time at Baylor University.

Finally, A heartfelt word of thanks goes to my parents Jon and Tara Allman, and their parents Joe and Thetta Allman, and T. Wayne and Helen Lanier. Each of whom provided me not only with unconditional love, but with examples of true leadership, moral virtue, and commitment to our country that ignited my passion for these issues from an early age.

In Memory of Dustin Chamberlain

May we love the Lord with all our hearts, and never give anything less than our best.

No Regrets.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to Leadership in America

Few concepts are as critical to the success of the American experiment as leadership. While politicians, journalists, and even rules of law come and go, leadership remains a constant. Americans, as such have always been fascinated by the power that they vest in their elected representatives. In fact the idea that leadership can be earned and maintained by a power vested in the people you are leading is one that is distinctly American. Upon the founding of our country, the sentiment that leadership was reserved to specific bloodlines was squashed, and has remained outside of the accepted view ever since. From the beginning America was a country that admitted leadership was earned, not simply awarded. In this way the ideals of the country are intricately linked with the idea. Thus Americans have a vested interest in the success of our leaders. Not only are leaders depended upon for the protection of our rights, but they are depended upon for the protection of our distinctly American notions and ideas. If American leadership fails, so too then does the American experiment fail.

It follows then that Americans have always carried an interest in leadership. Essentially we are connected to our leaders in ways that few societies before us have been. We see leaders as an extension of ourselves, rather than just figureheads. In leaders we see examples of what we strive for, and what we stand for. We see them as

proof of the American dream, and as providers of hope¹. This is never more evident than during a presidential campaign. Candidates vie for a connection with the American people, to be an example, and to instill hope. They attempt to earn both the respect and admiration of the voters, all while proving just how deserving they are of being the top leader in the country. The function of leaders in America is simply unparalleled in modern politics. The standard to which leaders must strive is nearly unrealistic. Not only are leaders held to high standards in their respective fields, they are held to high standards in their personal lives². Such is leadership, and these aspects have not changed much over time. Quite simply Americans have always expected their leaders to lead in every area³.

There is value in discussing the effect America's leaders have had on shifting perceptions of leadership. A few examples being John F. Kennedy's charisma, Richard Nixon's character, and even Bill Clinton's impeachment scandal. In speculation I see a strong correlation between the examples set by our leaders, and shifts in the requirements of political leadership, accompanying shifts in cultural norms. However I do not begin to theorize in which way the relationship is causal, rather that there simply is a relationship, a *Relationship Between American Political Leadership and Moral Culture*. What we can seek to determine though, is to what extent political leadership shifts in response to high-profile moral failures. By that I mean we can gauge the differences in

¹ Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush*, 2nd ed (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2004).

² James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 4th ed, Longman Classics in Political Science (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 484–492.

³ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 5–9.

the way politicians of different eras have handled certain situations, specifically those of a scandalous nature. In doing this I hope to show that there is a relationship between the ways politicians handle scandals, and their shifting understanding of perceived morality. As a specific examples, sex scandals have had an impact on our culture's changing moral views toward sexual activity⁴. I maintain that there is a relationship between the views of the country and the ability of politicians to bounce back from scandals. For example it seems as if it took significantly longer for Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton to be culturally accepted again than more recent objects of scandal like Mark Sanford and Elliot Spitzer. I will explore the idea that while we are a country that likes to conduct politics in moral terms we end up being forgiving, while attempting to verge the gap between the differing of experiences over time. Through careful reading and study I will attempt to determine to what extent political leadership shifts in response to high-profile moral failures.

I will focus specifically on three different eras in political leadership. First I will examine the precedent(or lack thereof) for political leadership set by the Nixon administration through their response to the Watergate Scandal. Next I will examine the effect that sexual affairs committed on the national stage by President Bill Clinton and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich had on the precedent for dealing with the public reaction to personal scandals. Finally I will explore sex scandals in the most recent decade, in order to examine the changes in the strategy of managing political scandals and a shift towards reactionary rather than initiatory public leadership in America.

⁴ Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 189–190.

While political scandal is no new phenomenon in America or the World, events of the recent past seem to exhibit a shift in the way leadership is defined by the American electorate. In the spring of 2013 something unthinkable happened. Barely 2 years removed from scandal, Mark Sanford had won a special election for his old Congressional seat in South Carolina. Not only had he won, but he had beaten a viable candidate, as a Republican in the South. The party more commonly associated with staunch socially conservative views than not, had just elected an adulterer, a mere two years after he disgraced the state's governorship. All this before he had so much as married his mistress. In New York another disgraced former Congressman too contemplated a comeback. Anthony Weiner was from the North, and was a socially liberal Democrat. While he may have committed acts that were more distasteful, the door was open to make it back into the game, and Anthony Weiner is not the type of person to miss an opportunity. Neither as it turned out was Eliot Spitzer, who himself made a comeback in the summer of 2013 after a scandal tinged governorship of his own. One by one it seemed disgraced politicians were attempting to re-enter public service. The question that remains though, is just how they got the idea in the first place that a comeback was possible.

CHAPTER TWO

Losing Trust: Nixon and American Leadership

The relationship between political leadership and moral obligation can be shaky and unclear. Mistrust of politicians, seemingly a timeless phenomenon, today seems ubiquitous. The relationship between trust and political leadership changes over time and therefore merits consideration.

Certainly, change has occurred in American politics over the last half-century with respect to this issue¹. There is a stark contrast between the outcry after Nixon's Watergate and that following Clinton's Whitewater. There is a stark difference between the reaction to sex scandals in the 1990s and those today. It seems that over time there has been a paradigm shift in what constitutes political leadership. No longer are politicians expected simply to be perceived as clean and blemish free, rather they have been exposed and are expected to behave honestly, rather than simply portray themselves as such². Americans have come to expect fallen leaders³. Just as the fall of mankind started with one key event in the garden of Eden, the fall of American political leadership started with one key event in The Oval Office: Watergate.

¹ Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 3-4.

² Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 485-492.

³ Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*, 189.

Americans have always looked for someone to believe in, evidenced by the hero status bestowed upon charismatic leaders. As a people Americans seem to enjoy attaching themselves to someone with good intentions and who does good things. Americans like to have hope; they enjoy charismatic leaders whom they can look up to, emulate and follow. This took on new form with the advent of television, when charismatic public figures such as John F. Kennedy enjoyed admiration and loyalty⁴. Like few before them JFK and the Kennedy family had become the prototype for American family. On the whole they were attractive, well spoken, intelligent, and full of potential. They were picture perfect and smart, and as such America fell in love with them⁵. Richard Millhouse Nixon lacked the Kennedy charisma, which was an unfortunate turn of fate when the two faced off for the presidency in 1960, the first national election in which television would be a major factor. Nixon, in fact, was abnormal for a politician to begin with. He wasn't particularly good with people, had an anger problem, a harsh stubbornness, and was incredibly introverted⁶⁷. Most importantly, unlike the Kennedy family, Nixon's deficiencies reached further than just moral quandaries, or lapses in judgment that were easily covered up, Nixon himself was a troubled and insecure man⁸. All of these factors contributed to Nixon's 1960 defeat at the hands of Kennedy. Eventually Nixon recovered, learned from his mistakes, and won election in 1968.

⁴ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 360.

⁵ Geoffrey Perret, *Jack: A Life like No Other* (New York: Random House, 2002).

⁶ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 99.

⁷ Perret, *Jack*, 269.

⁸ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 141–144.

Like Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson before him, Nixon was a president that exuded confidence. Yet his confidence was not the same as Kennedy's. While JFK had a genuine charisma, Richard Nixon had a manufactured swagger. Nixon at his best was a self-made political leader who had conquered the odds, but at his worst was an insecure, angry man seeking to reaffirm himself through power. He was a man who had molded himself into an image of what he thought success looked like. He portrayed a porcelain version of himself to the public, a version that was destined to break.

Kennedy ran his Presidential campaign of 1960 primarily on character; he touted his accomplishments and heroics during the war and presented himself as a trustworthy and morally upright candidate who cared about more than politics⁹. While Nixon certainly did not suggest his own character was not lacking, his image had been built on worrying about others¹⁰. He was known as a hero of the red-scare, one that cracked a big spying case while in the Congress by helping convict former Roosevelt aide Alger Hiss¹¹. In fact, the Congressional seat he occupied from 1947-1950 was won by accusing his incumbent opponent of being soft on communism and by attacking his record¹². The difference between Nixon and Kennedy was primarily that Nixon had scrapped his way

⁹ Perret, *Jack*, 258–270.

¹⁰ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 149–150.

¹¹ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 95–96.

to the top by being a shrewd politician, while Kennedy had run on his own charisma and idealism¹³.

This is important not because Presidential leadership is dependent on modeling oneself after a Kennedy or a Nixon, but rather because the differences between Kennedy and Nixon show exactly the kind of politician Nixon introduced to the American Public, one that really is significantly flawed. Before Watergate Americans expected politicians to be like Kennedy-- clean cut, seemingly moral, well-spoken, attractive, and charismatic¹⁴. Politicians were either expected to have each of these attributes, or at least to act in public as if they did. Nowhere is this example more relevant than in the famous televised debates between Kennedy and Nixon¹⁵. While the majority of radio listeners believed Nixon won, the majority of viewers believed the younger more charismatic Kennedy won handily. Americans wanted a hero to rally behind rather than an introverted political mind. Americans knew and believed what their leaders looked like regardless of experience or accolades, and Kennedy was more of one than Nixon¹⁶.

Nixon seemed like a man stuck in between two worlds; how he thought and felt, and how he thought he was supposed to act¹⁷. In fact it made sense for him to be split; he had essentially grown up the product of these worlds with a mother who was well

¹³ Barber, *The Presidential Character*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 70.

¹⁷ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 148.

regarded and a father who had a quick temper and little education ¹⁸. Nixon was not afforded the luxuries that many future politicians were in his day. While there are numerous examples of self-made politicians before Nixon, it's clear the majority of those elected, like Kennedy, had been put on a path to success. Nixon, on the other hand, was forced to turn down acceptance to Harvard in order to attend Whittier College, which was closer to home, so he could afford room and board. He then earned a scholarship to Duke Law School and worked odd jobs during his time there. Nixon was essentially the opposite of a silver spoon child. He had been given just enough to be successful, but getting there would require raw determination and effort. Like Kennedy, Nixon served in the Navy during World War II and afterwards returned to his home district and was pegged by the RNC to run for office ¹⁹. Nixon was on a fast political trajectory, rising within six years from a freshman Congressman to being selected by Eisenhower as a vice presidential running mate. Of course, eventually this trajectory slowed down a bit, and Nixon's boring incumbent position led to his losing 1960 campaign against Kennedy. It is widely believed that this loss deeply scarred Nixon and ultimately led to his intense paranoia and fear of losing a national election. Nixon ultimately ran again in 1968 and won election as President.

Nixon accomplished some important things as president. He became a surprisingly good ambassador, leading to his famous olive branch trip to China²⁰.

¹⁸ Ibid., 124–135.

¹⁹ Ibid., 137–140.

²⁰ “Richard M. Nixon | The White House,” accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/richardnixon/>.

Furthermore as President he ended the war in Vietnam, and helped to foster better relations with the Soviet Union. Nixon by most accounts was a fairly decent president in terms of policy knowledge, in fact in modern terms he would probably be described as a policy wonk as he seemed to prefer the academia of policy to the personal politics of policy making²¹. However for all of his merits as a smart man and a politician, Nixon had a fundamental leadership flaw. He lacked the ability to trust almost anyone for fear of losing his power and position²². In a political system that runs off of a power ultimately vested in the people, who vote on their leaders this type of distrust has large potential to change the outcome of an election. After all, if a leader cannot trust those around him, how can the people trust the leader? Ultimately this flaw would be Nixon's demise²³.

Sometime before his second term in office Nixon's trust issues led him to install a tape recording system in each of his private offices. The system essentially would serve two purposes: 1. Nixon would be able to better remember interactions he had and learn from them and 2. Nixon would have evidence of every interaction to rely on if needed²⁴. In fact, the taping system is the perfect symbol of each of Nixon's fundamental flaws. Nixon struggled with personal interactions and trust, each of which the system was meant to help mediate. Nixon's closest aides became so aware of his lack of social ability, and his awkwardness, that they had begun to script entire social interactions for him²⁵. The

²¹ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 99–100.

²² Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 155–157.

²³ *Ibid.*, 161–163.

²⁴ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 102–103.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

system would allow them to make changes and critique his work for the future²⁶. Ironically the quality that had prevented Nixon from defeating Kennedy in his first presidential race was also the quality that would lead to his resignation. More importantly though, the system was meant to give Nixon peace of mind in his interactions, as he knew that everything would be recorded in case he was double crossed in any way. When members of Nixon's inner circle were discovered to have involved with a break-in at the DNC headquarters leading up to the 1972 election, the tapes became the key to discovering how aware Nixon had been of the operation, and the actions he took upon its discovery²⁷. While leaders before him may have distrusted individuals, or worried about those around them, none had gone to the extent Nixon had in his paranoia. In a sheer bit of irony Nixon's flaws ultimately were passed on to the American public at large in their perception of his position. His influence as a leader, and his own devices had fundamentally shifted American political leadership²⁸.

The Nixon Difference is not so much about the fact that he committed an error, or that he was caught, as it is about how he handled it. Nixon did not have the luxury of a set standard to follow. Scandals involving the White House, or at the least the President himself at this level had not been a common occurrence in American history, or if they had they had not been made known to the public²⁹. Unfortunately for Nixon, television

²⁶ Ibid., 102–103.

²⁷ Ibid., 104.

²⁸ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 145.

²⁹ Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*, 3–4.

became a fixture in most households during the 1960s and he was not at luxury to remain even the least bit anonymous. What sealed his fate though, was how he reacted to the charges against him. Nixon was convinced that he had done nothing wrong, and famously offered his sentiment in a later interview with David Frost that he felt the President had very little rule of law governing him. The American people and their members of Congress did not seem quite as convinced at the time as impeachment seemed imminent. The fact that Nixon denied being in any way wrong seemed to rub those controlling his destiny the wrong way. As the first President to face a scandal of this magnitude and resign, the way Nixon handled Watergate was cast into the history books as an example of what not to do³⁰. This example shifted forever the way in which political leaders handle scandals in a few different ways. First, it is better to never get caught doing something unethical. Second, if you do get caught make up for your lack of discretion by providing full discretion, rather than sustaining you are blameless³¹. Third, never again trust the media to protect your interests.

It was clear after Nixon's famous interview with David Frost that the President no longer had the luxury of control over his interviews. While Nixon was 3 years removed from office, and was scandal ridden, the interviews still seemed to showcase a lack of reverence for the leader of the country. Frost attempted to lure information from the former president, and later was proclaimed as a master interviewer, providing incentive for future interviewers of Presidents to push the envelope in their content and

³⁰ Joseph C. Spear, *Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1984), 177–235.

³¹ Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*, 180–192.

questioning. The days of status quo political interviews effectively met their end with the Watergate scandal, with investigative journalism becoming the new standard.

CHAPTER THREE

The Perception of Honesty: Clinton and Gingrich

Former President Clinton answered his phone as it rang. President Obama had just won re-election and Clinton had a guess to who was calling. Sure enough, Barack Obama was at the end of the line, and had called former President Clinton in order to thank him for his work on the campaign. In fact as it turned out, Clinton was Obama's first call after being re-elected¹. In the political world, that's a pretty weighty statement of gratitude. In the summer of 1998 Clinton was on the verge of impeachment, the center of multiple scandals, with the tip of the iceberg being the Lewinsky affair. The American Public had grown weary of political games and it showed in what truly interested them about the scandal. Rather than be concerned about the President committing perjury, they seemed more concerned about his sex life.² While many rallied to support President Clinton, the state of American Government was the worst since the Nixon administration and the American people were taking notice³. For nearly a year the leader of the free world was under investigation, becoming the first sitting President to testify before grand jury investigating his conduct, and ultimately admitting to having an inappropriate relationship with a former White House intern. The admission sent shockwaves throughout the country, never before had a President publicly admitted to an

¹ David M. Jackson, "Bill Clinton Answers the Call at Work, in Campaign," *USA Today*, November 7, 2012, Online edition, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2012/11/07/bill-hillary-clinton-obama/1690515/>.

² Steven M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry That Defined a Generation* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 226–227.

³ *Ibid.*, 247.

inappropriate relationship with a woman other than his wife⁴. There was a new precedent for presidential leadership. No longer was the President immune to flaws of sexual morality. Thanks to Bill Clinton the presidency, and the norms of American Politics, would never be the same. Yet 14 years later he was, back in the middle of the fray helping to lead his party, and he wasn't the only one.

Newt Gingrich was arguably the most ornery, stubborn, and sharp Speaker of the House in recent memory. His battles with Bill Clinton make John Boehner look tame. The budget standoffs were legendary, the longest and most talked about in history. In fact, the government shutdown that sprung from one such standoff is credited by some as the breeding ground for the Lewinsky affair⁵⁶. Gingrich loved showmanship, revolutionizing the use of live television for personal gain when he was a young Congressman. When CSPAN first began around the clock coverage in the House Chamber, Gingrich would go onto the floor during prime-time (when everyone else had gone home) in his own sort of bully pulpit. He would speak about anything and everything within relevance, even asking the crowd for a response if they disagreed, realizing the cameras were not panning the rest of the chamber, which was empty⁷. Given his flair for the camera it only made sense that on election night of 2012 Gingrich was making the rounds as just another television talking head with Fox News. He appeared sporadically throughout the night to weigh in with his opinion and to react to

⁴ Ken Gormley, *The Death of American Virtue: Clinton vs. Starr*, 1st ed (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 545–549.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁶ Gillon, *The Pact*, 224.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

the results. It was evident that Gingrich had seen better days; the majority of his predictions were wrong. However, similarly to Clinton, Gingrich had once again become a golden boy for his party⁸. After years out of politics he had nearly pulled off a shocking upset in the Republican primary, reproving his merits as an accomplished debater and policy wonk. Now he was spinning for candidates, speaking at the Republican convention, publishing opinion pieces, and becoming the explainer in chief for the Republican platform. Of course, this is not where the similarities between Gingrich and Clinton end. In the simplest of explanations, Gingrich and Clinton were both each other's biggest enemy and biggest ally, and they shared one major weakness: a desire for the company of women who weren't their wives⁹. Gingrich too had an affair when at the peak of his power, with a young House staffer from Wisconsin. Yet in 2012 his sins had been forgotten as he paraded around the country with his 3rd wife, that same house staffer¹⁰.

Political strategy ruled the Lewinsky affair. There's really no other way to put it. When thinking of the Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton era, one is hard pressed to leave out Lewinsky. Yet, the general public may not completely understand just to what extent politics played out in the affair. You see, politics doesn't necessarily mean the two sides attacking each other (though that did happen). Rather, in this case self-interest meant two seasoned politicians fighting to save their own skin, and reputations¹¹. Both Newt

⁸ Matt Bai, "Newt. Again.," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2009.

⁹ Gillon, *The Pact*, 243–251.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 249–250.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 229–230.

Gingrich and Bill Clinton knew what the affair could mean for the future of their political careers, and each was determined to save his own skin¹². Though what they didn't realize is just how profound of an effect their political gamesmanship would have on the future of political leadership.

Not only would the glass ceiling of political morality come crashing down, but also the precedent for dealing with political scandals would shift in a major way.

Democrat and Republican. Smooth and brash. Attractive and not as much. To the casual observer, Clinton and Gingrich may have seemed like natural adversaries. Yet, in a sheer bit of irony, Gingrich and Clinton really weren't that different. Though the two were on the opposing sides of most debates, the two fundamentally understood each other¹³. As a matter of fact, before news of Clinton's affair broke, they were getting along pretty well behind the scenes¹⁴. After the 1996 election Gingrich and Clinton had spent a significant amount of time together attempting to make deals on numerous issues. Whether it be the budget, DOMA, or don't ask don't tell, the two had learned to talk things out. Unlike many politicians of today Clinton and Gingrich seemed to actually enjoy the process of negotiation¹⁵. Likely because of their backgrounds, they liked the gamesmanship that came with the give and take of legislation

¹² Ibid., 228.

¹³ Ibid., 213–214.

¹⁴ Ibid., 203.

¹⁵ Ibid., 215–218.

building¹⁶. As the most powerful men in their respective branch of government, the process of attempting to sway their equal in another branch was enjoyable and exciting. Reportedly the two became so close they even had a proposed compromise on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid completely worked out¹⁷. Yet, the majority of this plan never came to fruition as the moral escapades of the two derailed what momentum they had built by working together.

Gingrich was raised in a semi-broken home. His birth father and mother split before he was even born. Later his mother married Robert Gingrich, who adopted Newt, then a toddler. Newt grew up moving around with his Army officer adoptive father, and had his interest peaked in politics while living overseas. He attended Emory University and opted out of the Vietnam draft as a student, receiving a History degree in 1965. After graduating with a Ph.D. in European history from Tulane, Gingrich became a professor at West Georgia College. He taught there for 8 years before being elected to Congress. Gingrich in many ways, brought this professorial approach to Congress, as he explained things with a professorial flair¹⁸. Yet further than that, and going further back, it is clear that Gingrich has always yearned for the attention and affection that comes along with political success¹⁹. This is no new phenomenon, as politicians are famous for seeking affection, but Gingrich (with his adoptive father and 3 half-sisters) had reason to.

¹⁶ Ibid., 214.

¹⁷ Ibid., 217–221.

¹⁸ Ibid., 32–33.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3–7.

Clinton's father died just months before he was born. His mother left Bill with his grandparents until age 4 at which point she returned and married Roger Clinton. Bill adopted the surname Clinton at the age of 15. He lived a troubled childhood, in which his stepfather battled a range of addictions, and the rest of the family battled his stepfather²⁰. Clinton claims that he learned early on how to please people, and decided on a life of public service while still in high school. He graduated from Georgetown University, earned a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and then went on to law school at Yale. Following law school on a brief stint working on a campaign he took a job as a law professor at the University of Arkansas. Similarly to Newt Gingrich, it was clear that in this role Clinton developed a keen ability to teach and explain. A year later he ran for the U.S. House of Representatives and lost. Two years after that Clinton was elected Arkansas Attorney General. In 1978 Clinton won his first term as Governor.

Coming from similar backgrounds meant Clinton and Gingrich had common ground on which to work, but they also had a reason to protect their status. Each had lost their first Run at the U.S. House of Representatives in 1974. Now 20 years later it was understandable neither wanted to relinquish what they had rightfully earned. Political careers are about survival, and Gingrich and Clinton knew how to survive. What they didn't realize though, is that sometimes self-interest in survival could be a detriment to the country²¹. You see it was evident that each wanted to frame the Whitewater affair to suit their own personal agendas. Clinton knew that if the case

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

²¹ Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*, 190.

became about perjury, there was a higher chance he would be impeached than if the case were about his personal sex life²². Based on this assumption, Clinton tried to frame the issue around his remorse for the act itself, and his personal life²³²⁴. In the eyes of the American people the Whitewater case was long gone in a matter of days. Sex sells, and all Americans became concerned about was whether or not Clinton had an inappropriate relationship with an intern²⁵. In this way Clinton was able to shift the focus away from the fact that he had committed perjury. As if on cue, his opponents took the bait and made the fight a moral one²⁶. They argued that the leader of the nation couldn't be subject to the sort of moral ineptitude Clinton had displayed. They argued that this decision made it clear Clinton's decision making was questionable. They argued that the president should be not just the country's political leader, but also the moral leader (Watergate aftereffects)(cite). The issue on the minds of Americans became centered around Clinton's personal life, not the felony he had committed²⁷.

Gingrich knew he had to combat this for 2 reasons; 1. Gingrich was smart enough to know Republicans couldn't win with the moral argument and 2. Gingrich was afraid for his own political reputation²⁸. There had long been talk that Gingrich was not the

²² Gillon, *The Pact*, 243–249.

²³ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 247–250.

most faithful of husbands, and he had already been divorced once for this reason.

During the Lewinsky debacle, he was in the midst of an affair of his own. He too was seeing a younger staffer on the side. Gingrich knew that if Republican talking points became solely about the morality of Clinton's actions, his days would be numbered²⁹. As such he framed the argument around perjury (and still does to this day). It is completely possible that Gingrich had good intentions, and simply wished to see the president's impeachment focus around the real felony he committed, but with hindsight one can speculate that his intentions seem a bit murky.

In fact, Gingrich's affair might have had more influence on the actual act of governing than Clinton's. Apparently the affair was common knowledge in hill circles, and his mistress Callista Bisek spoke of it openly³⁰. In fact, Bisek's boss at the time, Wisconsin Rep. Steve Gunderson, seemed to benefit from the relationship³¹. Despite the fact that Gunderson and Gingrich sat on opposite sides of the Republican ideological spectrum, Gunderson served in important party positions under Gingrich's leadership. Furthermore, Gingrich campaigned heavily for Gunderson. If the matter needed be complicated further, Gingrich's affair ended up being 6 years long, while Clinton's just a few months. It's a small wonder that Gingrich did not push the perjury issue *even harder* to take the focus off of moral ineptitude.

²⁹ Ibid., 249–250.

³⁰ Tim Dickinson, "Newt and Callista's Affair 'Was Common Knowledge' on the Hill," *Rolling Stone Politics*, January 26, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/national-affairs/newt-and-callista-an-affair-to-remember-20120126>.

³¹ Ibid.

As American society has evolved, so has our perspective on sex, specifically with regard to those in the public sphere. We have moved from an era in which leaders must not be embarrassed, and the unspeakable is not spoken of, to a post-Nixon era in which leaders are expected to be open, honest, and moral³². The rhetoric of Jimmy Carter jump-started this idea, Reagan and George H.W. Bush continued the trend. In a mere 30 years the societal expectations of leaders had shifted dramatically³³. In a post-Nixon world Americans were less likely to put up with leaders who had secrets exposed. By the nineties though, something had begun to shift. There was a new generation, open to a wider variety of shortcomings than the last one³⁴. There was twenty-four hour news, which in order to fill the time and boost ratings began to cover personalities and personal lives of politicians, and personal lives all the more. No longer was the public sphere merely comprised of coordinated photo shoots, radio addresses, and scripted speeches. The personal had become public, and the people had begun to accept the idea that public figures were none too different than themselves³⁵. No longer were public figures put on a pedestal of perfection; in fact it is unlikely Presidents of the past could have survived in this new environment. One has to question if Kennedy would even have been an electable candidate had his private life been subject to twenty-four hour cable news. We'll never know how the public would have responded to the revelation that Wilson was incapable of continuing his official duties, or that FDR had polio. Yet, this new more public world is the one that the two most powerful men in 1990's America had to

³² Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*, 138–139.

³³ Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

deal with. The way Clinton and Gingrich handled the Lewinsky affair fundamentally changed the way our society views sex and politics.

“I did not have sex with that woman”. These may be the most memorable, and repeated words from a relatively peaceful decade of American politics leading up to 9-11. Clinton of course went on to argue that while he had engaged in sexual acts with Monica Lewinsky, such acts didn’t actually count as sex. In the decade following, that definition would stick, and the idea of oral sex became as mainstream as anything a President does. A sitting President had practically just endorsed to teenagers around the country that what he had done was completely permissible under our definition of sex. This moment of poor leadership seems to have been vastly understated. The American Public doesn’t necessarily notice that anything is different currently, but in 1998 a sitting President admitting to an extramarital affair *in the West Wing* was earth shattering news³⁶. Yet the President attempted to smooth it over as something that surely did not count as sex, and that was a personal issue for which he was sorry.

Similar admissions would have been positively unheard of from the Ford until the H.W. Bush administrations. Not only had President Clinton admitted he had committed a moral infidelity, he admitted it on video that was eventually viewed by nearly the entire country. Clinton had just set a new precedent for the way in which high profile scandals, and specifically sex scandals could be handled. This revelation affected the country in 2 fundamental ways; 1. The idea that a post-Watergate era had forced politicians to behave

³⁶ Gormley, *The Death of American Virtue*, 527–532.

better was significantly tainted and 2. Sex was now completely on the table for discussion in the political arena.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Art of the Half-Hearted Apology: From Sanford to Spitzer

Mark Sanford was a troubled man. Troubled, yet happy. As the 2012 election unfolded he was still outside of the limelight, but his past was foreboding. He thrived on the people, the reporters, and the satisfaction of politics¹. Mark Sanford is a man who likes to inform, and feels the need to be heard. Especially now, after years of increasing debt, and unbalanced budgets, opportunity was present. Sanford doesn't like unnecessary government spending². After all, the man had once famously brought live pigs onto the floor of the South Carolina Legislature in a demonstration against “unnecessary pork projects”. He had been a conservative member of Congress, and carried those credentials into his time as Governor. In fact during his time as South Carolina's highest official the Cato Institute consistently ranked Sanford as the most fiscally conservative Governor in the country. The problem was, Sanford also appeared on another list. A list of a completely different nature, put out by Citizens for Ethics and Responsibility in Washington. In that list Sanford ranked near the bottom. Listening to him speak you may have thought otherwise, as Sanford was vocal about his Christian faith, and seemed to be a straight shooter³. A family man, he had been married to his

¹ Jeff Sharlet, *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*, 1st ed (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 2010).

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ Sharlet, *C Street*.

wife Jenny for nearly two decades and had four sons. He had even pledged he would seek no more than three terms in the United States Congress, a rare admission in that line of work⁴. However, Mark Sanford had a weakness. It's no secret that extramarital affairs tend to plague powerful men, especially politicians, and Sanford was no different. In fact, the story of the affair had a particular flair to it. Rather than risk being caught, the sitting Governor of South Carolina simply disappeared for a week, and contacted no one. When spotted returning from Argentina in the Atlanta airport Sanford initially claimed he had gone on a hiking trip, however, as the details unfolded he knew he had to admit the truth⁵. Sanford called a press conference and admitted he had carried on an affair with a woman that was not his wife, and had gone to Argentina to see her, likely ending his political career. At the center of the biggest sex scandal since the Clinton administration, it was assumed Sanford would never be able to run for public office again⁶.

The common consensus was wrong. Not only was Sanford able to *run* for office again, he was able to *win* office again. After only 2 years away from the limelight Sanford was back in the public service, representing the people of South Carolina's 1st District. The Sanford case is the one that begs the question, just how much has the morality of political leadership changed? Evidently, quite a bit. No longer, it seemed, was morality in politics connected to morality in private life. Rather it seemed that a man's political character was judged on a different platform than his private character.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 9–12.

⁶ Sharlet, *C Street*.

Long gone were the days of Nixon, in which a man was exiled for being exposed. Maybe even more notably, long gone were the days in which leaders even had to leave the public eye to allow them to forget certain indiscretions. No, at this point it seemed memory was not a factor, that personal infractions were no longer career killers. After all, an admitted adulterer returned to office, before even doing so much as marrying his mistress.

A few years before Sanford, John Ensign took a different route. Ensign was both a man with promise and perceived to be a man of character. Not only was Ensign believed to be a future presidential contender, he was a member of the infamous network of Christian political leaders called “The Family”(notably so was Sanford, but Ensign’s scandal occurred first)⁷. Ensign had risen to power starting in 1995 with his election to the House of Representatives. Eventually he ran for the Senate and served as the Junior Senator from Nevada beginning in 2001. He was well-liked, and a consistent member of the party. Ensign was eventually elected Chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee for the 2008 election cycle, which is often a stepping stone to larger leadership roles within the party (John Cornyn was swiftly elected Minority Whip after serving in this role). Soon he was made Chairman of the Republican Policy Committee beginning in 2009, the fourth most powerful Republican position in the Senate. Ensign was climbing the ranks within the party and was quickly on his way to national prominence.⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

That's when the scandal hit. It was revealed that Ensign had a multiple year affair with Cynthia Hampton, who worked on both his campaign staff and for his Political Action Committee, and happened to be the wife of one of his top aides⁹. After discovering the affair and helping Ensign to cover his old tracks for years, Cynthia's husband Doug Hampton had had enough. He claimed Ensign had ruined his family and his career, and despite Ensign's best efforts to ensure good employment for Doug after leaving his post, he could no longer allow him to live a lie. Ensign's career was effectively over, and he has not done much in the public eye since. The Ensigns moved back to Nevada where John has returned to work as a veterinarian¹⁰.

Interestingly enough though, while Ensign handled the fallout in the same way as future scandal ridden politicians seeking re-election, he did not run again. Not only did he step out of the public service, he seemed to step out of the public eye all together. Why then would he handle the situation the same way in which politicians eyeing a return to public office do? Why would he admit to everything and save no face? While the final results still may yet to be seen, I contend that it is quite simply because there is a new normal in political leadership. Ensign simply handled the situation in the way that he had been socialized into handling it¹¹. First, he tried to make sure the public would never know and when that didn't work he quickly admitted to everything. It's worth noting that Ensign eventually would go under Senate Ethics Committee investigation and

⁹ Ibid., 77–83.

¹⁰ John Lofflin, "John Ensign Returns to Veterinary Practice," August 1, 2012, <http://veterinarynews.dvm360.com/dvm/Law+and+Ethics/John-Ensign-returns-to-veterinary-practice/ArticleStandard/Article/detail/781653>.

¹¹ Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*, 132–139.

resign, but he had admitted his sins to the public before those actions were taken. Realistically it seems like there are two possibilities for his actions: 1. He was attempting to save his seat and political reputation or 2. He was following the example set for political leadership. I also think a combination of the two could have been Ensign's motivation, but to argue the first option exclusively I would need some proof that Ensign has attempted to stay in political goings on, or that he intends to return in the future. Quite simply I have not seen anything of the sort, rather his actions seem to report to the contrary, that he is attempting to stay out of the limelight altogether. As such, I theorize that the way he handled/reacted to the scandal was at least in part motivated by an observance of the past. In today's political environment politicians have grown accustomed to admitting their flaws, they assume that if they don't the media will¹². Distinctly different from the past, shaping your message today simply means playing defense and not allowing the media to shape an alternate message for you, rather than shaping an ideal message¹³.

Elliot Spitzer and Anthony Weiner led similar lives in their youths. Both came from decent families, with fathers in respected professions. While Spitzer easily came from a wealthier upbringing, as his parents were well known tycoons in real estate, Weiner's father was a practicing lawyer and made a decent living. Their lives seemed to follow the same trajectory as their childhood. Weiner pursued a degree at the well-known state college of New York and went on to work in Washington D.C. for Congressman and future Senator Chuck Schumer. Spitzer on the other hand went to the

¹² Ibid., 129–132.

¹³ Spear, *Presidents and the Press*, 1–32.

more prestigious Princeton University and on to law school at Harvard. In short, while each was raised in New York and fairly well-off, Weiner had to be a little more scrappy than Spitzer in order to reach prominence, whom seemingly had a path laid out for him from the get-go.

Anthony Weiner is the model of a political success story. He was raised in a middle class family in Brooklyn, went on to play college hockey while pursuing a Political Science Degree, and then followed his love of politics to Washington. While in D.C. working for then Congressman Chuck Schumer it seems Weiner made quite the impression and later his boss recommend he move back to New York to start his own career in politics at the ripe age of 24. At 27 Weiner ran for city council and became the youngest city council man in New York city history. All this at only 27 years of age, after coming from a fairly typical Middle class New York family. Eventually Weiner went on to win a seat in the United States Congress from New York's 9th District, completing his version of the American Dream, with one exception: He lost his first bid for New York Mayor in 2005¹⁴.

Spitzer and Weiner were no exceptions to the trend of this piece. They too were caught up in sex scandals while in office. They too eventually admitted their indiscretions, and they too asked for forgiveness. What is interesting about the cases of Anthony Weiner and Elliot Spitzer though, is just how quickly after their scandals they attempted to run again for political office. Unlike Mark Sanford, they did not seem to be

¹⁴ Anonymous, "Arena Profile: Rep. Anthony Weiner," *Politico (The Arena)*, n.d., http://www.politico.com/arena/bio/rep_anthony_weiner.html.

going out on a limb on their own. Rather, it seems they both felt they could win election, and they both announced runs for public office in the summer of 2013 . There seems to be no better example to show just how far political leadership has come in a few short decades. No longer do leaders even feel the need to stay out of the public eye following scandals, rather it seems they feel after they admit their indiscretions they can win an election quite soon afterwards. With leaders like Mark Sanford able to convince their constituencies to give them another chance after committing immoral acts similar to those made mainstream by Bill Clinton and New Gingrich, a new generation of political leaders has new examples of success in quick turnarounds following scandal.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Relationship Between Political Leadership and American Morality

Few concepts are as critical to the success of the American experiment as leadership. Leadership remains a constant presence in American Politics. Americans are fascinated by the power that they vest in their elected representatives, because it is so innately connected to them. In fact the idea that leadership can be earned and maintained by a power vested in the people you are leading is a distinctly American idea. Upon the founding of our country, the ideas behind leadership were transformed to be more inclusive to the citizenry, and have largely remained so ever since. From the beginning America was a country that admitted leadership was earned, not simply awarded. In this way the ideals of the country are intricately linked with its perception of leadership. Thus the success and examples set by leaders are crucial to the future of America. Not only are leaders depended upon for the protection of our rights, but they are depended upon for the protection of our distinctly American notions and ideas. If American leadership fails, so too then does the American experiment fail.

It follows that Americans carry a vested interest in leadership. Essentially we have a level of connectivity to our leaders in a way different than most other societies. We see leaders as an extension of ourselves, rather than just figureheads. In leaders we see examples of what we strive for, and what we stand for. We see them as proof of the

American dream, and as providers of hope¹. This is never more evident than during a presidential campaign. Candidates vie for a connection with the American people, to be an example, and to instill hope. They attempt to earn both the respect and admiration of the voters, all while proving they are deserving of the trust and power of the citizenry. The function of leaders in America is simply unparalleled in modern politics. The standard to which leaders are held is above that of any other citizen. These standards are not simply in regards to their performance though, they also pertain to personal lives². Such is leadership, and these aspects have not changed much over time. Quite simply Americans have always expected their leaders to lead in every area³.

What has changed though, is access. Americans now have access to their leaders in ways like never before. The speed of expansion in investigative journalism over the past 40 years is seemingly unparalleled to any other time in history⁴. Leaders in today's society are not permitted the luxury of shaping their public image as was common in the past. The idea of public image has seen a dramatic shift, gone are the days in which public image is the product of careful craftsmanship and limited access⁵. Gone are the times in which politicians were subject of folklore and word of mouth. Gone are the days in which the professional politician depended on policy craftsmanship as much as positive publicity. The way in which press is conducted has quite simply reversed 180

¹ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*.

² Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 484–492.

³ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 5–9.

⁴ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 490–492.

⁵ Spear, *Presidents and the Press*.

degrees since the days of pre-Watergate Nixon⁶. No longer are the American people satisfied with a crispy image and the status quo, they want to know what is really happening, even teetering on the edge of having a consistent appetite for political controversy⁷. The press has responded accordingly, providing the public with detailed insights about the private lives of politicians, exposing past secrets, infidelities, bad personal choices, and all sorts of other wrongdoings. In response the press work of the past is all but a relic, try as they may, press offices are now rarely more initiatory than reactionary⁸. In fact it seems that when personal press offices are ahead of a story, it is simply reacting to another story, or playing premature defense. Of course this was not a change that occurred overnight, rather it is the product of the past 40 years and largely sped up by Nixon⁹. Journalism and the natural defense mechanism of political officials had aided each other in exacerbating this trend, with each spurring the other forward. Fast forward to the present, and we are left with and incredibly aggressive media and an incredibly defensive pool of leaders.

Of course as previously discussed, this trend is not one that was solely a result of the shift in journalism. Rather, key political events shifted the way in which political leadership responds to its moral component. This moral component that Americans expect to see from their leaders. The same moral component that seems impossible to live up to. Yet, morality in political leadership is not as easy to define as some would

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gormley, *The Death of American Virtue*, 527–532.

⁸ Spear, *Presidents and the Press*.

⁹ Ibid.

expect. In fact, it's not really even something that can be defined. Rather, morality in political leadership boils down to one distinctly American aspect: the will of the people¹⁰. While I wish I could point to a higher set of laws and principles established for those tasked with leading America, morality in politics is based in the people themselves. Those who vote are tasked with showing politicians what they perceive to be admissible and what they do not. No longer is there a moral status quo, rather political morality wholly depends on the actions of the electorate¹¹.

Continuing based on this conclusion, I have hoped to show that the way politicians react to scandal, and the way voters react to their response, has a substantial effect on future leadership responses. For all intents and purposes the major events I have outlined are the Watergate scandal of the 1970's, The Whitewater era sex scandals of the 1990's, and the modern sex scandals of the 2010's. I chose these events for a few obvious reasons: differences in decades, political parties, and political atmospheres. The events themselves help to show just how profound an impact the moral failings of certain political leaders can have on the future of political leadership and all work in piecing together a distinct leadership chronology in which each act serves to provide a platform to the next. While political leadership may shift with each scandal, it is important to learn about these effects, so that we may have a better idea of just how much impact leaders can have on the future of American politics.

¹⁰ Rozell and Wilcox, *The Clinton Scandal and the Future of American Government*, 171–194.

¹¹ Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 484–492.

The shift in leadership styles from the Watergate scandal to modern day can quite simply be explained as a shift towards reactionary politics. Over time as the media evolved into a 24 hour news machine, and the public became more aware of the day to day workings of Washington D.C., the way political leadership was conducted had to become more reactionary out of necessity if nothing else. No longer were constituents mainly hearing the goings on in Washington from their representative or staff, now they had outside sources that could put their leaders on the spot. As such leaders were forced to become at least somewhat more candid, and quite a bit more reactionary in response to news reports. Politicians were now ever more responsible for their actions, and the people were better equipped to hold them accountable. By the nature of a Representative Democracy politicians thus had to be attuned to the feelings and sentiments of those in their districts, and hope to stay ahead of their opinions. This required more openness and honesty on the part of the politicians.

This shift can be particularly focused upon in regards to political scandals. Political scandals seem to bring about reactionary politics in full force. Politicians are forced to react both quickly and correctly in the eyes of the public to avoid falling out of the good graces of their constituents, because ultimately the decision on if their act was admissible or not lies in the people. In a perfect world politicians would resign almost immediately upon being exposed as part of a scandal, better yet they'd never be involved in a scandal in the first place, but that is sadly not the case and the power to reinstate or dismiss leaders ultimately lies in the people through whom they gain their position. Based on the high stakes involved, political leaders are smart to recognize mistakes made in the

past, the most obvious being Nixon. As the old adage goes, two wrongs do not make a right, and that is exactly what caused Nixon's recovery to be so difficult. By denying his faults to the American people on multiple occasions, and initially attempting to cover up the Watergate scandal Nixon placed an innate mistrust in the minds of his constituents. Ultimately this tarnished his reputation and led to his inability to maintain enough public support to avoid impeachment, which then led to his resignation. The example set by Nixon cannot be understated. The way in which he handled the scandal fundamentally shifted the leadership response to scandal in the future. The public outcry made it clear that the American people do not respond well to dishonesty, and that attempting to cover a scandal up carried a large risk, a risk that backfired for Nixon. It may be seen as unfortunate that Nixon had few examples to follow, but the example he provided would be avoided for years to come. No one wanted to end up like Nixon.

Just as Nixon had fundamentally shifted how political leaders react to political scandals, Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton showed just how much influence leaders could have on the future of American Leadership. Clinton and Gingrich were the first leaders on a national stage to suggest that certain immoral and sexual acts were both admissible and forgivable as personal offenses for politicians. This is not to say they were the first politicians involved in sex scandals, quite the contrary. Rather, they both survived, and did so by being frank about the situation once it became evident there was no avoiding the issue. Despite what their own desires may have been in handling the situation, the way in which they did handle it put sex on the table as both an issue that was acceptable to publicly address, and a forgivable offense in American politics. Ultimately the

American voters deemed they were fit to lead. Gingrich went on to win quite a few primary states in the 2012 presidential election while Clinton was one of President Obama's biggest and most important allies on the campaign trail, carrying incredibly impressive approval ratings. Based on the positive outcome, the model for handling political scandals was effectively molded to include admissions of guilt and requests of forgiveness in sex scandals.

Each of these instances has led to where political leadership stands today. For good or bad, the standard for political leadership changes based on major events and the reaction of the voters. Whether these reactions lead to closer watch of politicians, or a more accepting nature for moral wrongdoing, change does occur. Modern political leadership is currently in a state where morality is defined by the acceptance of the voter. Politicians will push to the brink what the voter will deem as acceptable enough to re-elect them. No longer do politicians live by a simple standard they think the American people expect, rather this standard is in a continuous state of flux, which leaders are constantly attempting to monitor and decipher. As such, they take cues from each other. When one leader proves an act or sentiment is acceptable in the mind of the voter (meaning they are re-elected), others will follow. While it does seem upsetting to state that American leaders do not follow a set moral code, this sentiment is not necessarily permanent. The cycle will continue as long as voters allow it to, as they have the ability to voice approval and disapproval with their leaders. Voters hold the true power over understanding morality in political leadership, and despite shortcomings and sentiments of inadequacy towards the electorate, having this power vested in the citizenry

is a truly American institution. Ultimately, while Americans do look to political leaders for hope and example, the power to interpret and enforce moral virtue in politics is left to the people.

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