

AlbertMohler.com

Character in Leadership: Does it Really Matter Anymore?

“Character,” said President Calvin Coolidge, “is the only secure foundation of the state.” The controversies swirling around the California recall election may demonstrate that Americans are not certain they agree with President Coolidge’s assessment. Americans seem to be ambivalent about character and uncertain of what citizens can rightly expect of those in political leadership.

Wednesday, October 8, 2003

“Character,” said President Calvin Coolidge, “is the only secure foundation of the state.” The controversies swirling around the California recall election may demonstrate that Americans are not certain they agree with President Coolidge’s assessment. Americans seem to be ambivalent about character and uncertain of what citizens can rightly expect of those in political leadership.

The issue of character has been part and parcel of American politics from the very beginning. President George Washington is famously known as a model of character, and in his younger years Washington had even written a small book of moral maxims that would guide his life and professional career. He was self-consciously determined to be a man of character and integrity. Nevertheless, accusations of power mongering and a lust for personal aggrandizement were leveled against Washington in the course of the nation’s first presidential election.

In more recent years, the character of the founding fathers has been called into question over the issue of slavery. The blight of slavery had sorely tested the consciousness of men such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, but both men owned slaves throughout their lifetimes. Jefferson, of course, has also been posthumously charged with having a sexual relationship with a slave in his household. While the historical truth behind this allegation may never fully be known, enough is known about Jefferson’s personal life that such a charge is conceivable.

Some Americans would quickly point to President Abraham Lincoln as a prime example of character. Lincoln demonstrated unquestioned virtues of courage and moral responsibility. His second inaugural address includes some of the most morally insightful language ever uttered by an American president. At the same time, Lincoln’s character has been called into question over his suspension of civil rights and the rule of law during the wrenching experience of the Civil War.

More recently, presidents including Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton have been caught in sexually compromising situations. In the case of President Roosevelt, his adulterous relationship with a long time friend was unknown to the public until long after his death. The press covered for Roosevelt, and also for President John F. Kennedy.

We now know that Kennedy had sexual relationships with women ranging from Hollywood starlets to a known Nazi spy. Had the American public known that Kennedy had engaged in a sexual liaison with a spy serving the Axis powers, his political career would have surely been ended even before it began.

Americans seem to be certain that sex is somehow related to moral character, and that this is important in considering the fitness of individuals for leadership. Nevertheless, America’s moral confusion in this postmodern age has never been more glaringly obvious than in the aftermath of the Clinton sex scandals. Americans seem to be saying that character is important, and that Clinton’s sexual liaison with a White House intern was completely unacceptable, but that he should nevertheless not be removed from office. Confused?

Money and power have often emerged as equally controversial matters of character in leadership. Among modern American Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon left thousands of hours of White House recordings

demonstrating the lengths to which they were willing to go in order to secure and preserve power—regardless of moral considerations.

Accusations of immoral behavior are especially confusing in the days immediately preceding an election. The mixed motives of the media in dealing with these issues leads a good many Americans to be uncertain about both the veracity and the importance of late hour accusations. This was clear in the 2000 presidential election when President George W. Bush was revealed to have been arrested for drunk driving as a young man. The accusation of sexual harassment leveled against Arnold Schwarzenegger in the California recall election evidently had little impact on voters. Was it because they do not care about sexual harassment, or because they did not trust the politicized reports? We may never really know.

Arnold Schwarzenegger is an example of a candidate whose primary qualification for office is more rooted in charisma than in character. It is hard to imagine that California voters were shocked when accusations of lecherous behavior were leveled at Schwarzenegger. He has presented himself throughout his adult life as one of whom this behavior is conceivable. Governor Gray Davis, on the other hand, was quick to go to the airwaves to condemn Schwarzenegger's "unacceptable" behavior while standing alongside former President Bill Clinton and activist Jesse Jackson. Evidently, Gray Davis missed the irony of his association with Clinton and Jackson, both caught in notorious sex scandals, even as he condemned Schwarzenegger.

Some observers are convinced that the issue of character is simply overblown. Richard Reeves, biographer of John F. Kennedy, complains that "the current political debate as it revolves around character issues is literally destroying American politics." Peggy Noonan, speechwriter and biographer of President Ronald Reagan, argues the opposite: "In a president, character is everything. A president doesn't have to be brilliant he doesn't have to be clever; you can hire clever You can hire pragmatic, and you can buy and bring in policy wonks. But you cannot buy courage and decency; you can't rent a strong moral sense. A president must bring those things with him."

Our difficulty in dealing with the question of character is directly related to the fact that we have no common concept of what character really is. University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter explains that the American people demand character but the concept of character lacks any public content. He argues that American culture is so deeply influenced by psychological approaches that moral character has been highly subjectivized. Lacking a clear concept of character, most Americans just hope for the best.

As Hunter explains, "character matters, we believe, because without it, trust, justice, freedom, community, and stability are probably impossible." Of course, if character is reduced to a postmodern icon without content, it is not likely to be actualized in those who lead—or in those who follow.

Three principles may offer us guidance in considering the issue of character in leadership, whether that leadership is exercised in the political sphere, in the church, or in any other consequential endeavor. These principles, rooted in the Christian worldview, may help us to think as we ponder the issue of character.

First, character really is important. We are right to demand moral character of our leaders and to believe that character is inseparable from credibility in leadership. This is especially true in a representative democracy. The history of the world is filled with various despotes, warriors, and hate mongers who have held onto power by autocratic force. But in a democracy, we are eventually responsible for our own leaders. Because of this, our leaders represent the nation's moral expectations writ large.

Many of us came face to face with this reality during the Clinton crisis. While most Americans were certain that the President's sexual infidelities were morally wrong, there was no popular momentum to remove him from office. The American people had their first postmodern president, and he was well tuned to the spirit of his age.

Nevertheless, Clinton's leadership credibility was greatly diminished and nearly destroyed by his demonstration of blatant disregard for the moral expectations of the people he led. This should serve to remind all citizens that character does matter in the end, and true character will be revealed in the crucible of leadership.

Second, we must understand that character is inevitably rooted in conviction. President Harry S. Truman once remarked, "A man cannot have character unless he lives within a fundamental system of morals that creates character." Character does not emerge from a vacuum; it is tied to convictions that shape not only a leader's life, but also the politics

he represents. Character consists of beliefs as well as actions.

Third, as Christians we also understand that sin is a fundamental reality we must take into account when considering character. We cannot expect moral perfection of those who would lead us. Believing that character is important, and that character is inseparable from conviction, we also understand that all human beings are sinners and that moral failure will happen.

This perspective requires that Christians be careful and mature in our thinking about issues of character in leadership. Clearly, leadership is destroyed at some level of immoral involvement. At the same time, true character in leadership is also demonstrated when a leader responds to his own moral failure in a way that shows true repentance and moral courage.

Americans have retained enough moral sense to know that personal character still matters in the choice of a babysitter. If this is true, we can hardly claim with a straight face that character is irrelevant to those who hold high positions of political leadership. In the end, our concept of character must be filled with specific content if it is to be meaningful. We must press on to think as Christians, refuse to be daunted by the complications, and show that we care about character—even between elections.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

