

# Clinton's problems reflect the times in which we live

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Shortly after his re-election, Bill Clinton and his one-time spin doctor, Dick Morris, engaged in the futile but entertaining exercise of assigning former presidents to a certain "tier" of greatness. When Clinton asked where he fit in, Morris replied, "Borderline third tier." It was not a compliment.



According to a respected jury of professional historians headed by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., such a ranking would place Clinton along with the likes of William McKinley, Chester Arthur and Rutherford B. Hayes — men who were viewed as the instruments of party bosses with no clear vision and no significant agenda.

Now, well into his second and final term in office, Clinton finds himself confronting allegations that he had an affair with a young White House aide and then persuaded her to lie about it. It is a scandal that threatens to destroy his presidency and if nothing else, serves to reinforce two fundamental truths about holding executive office: 1) that, ultimately, any president has very little control over his legacy, and 2) that sexual scandal is no stranger to the White House.

Shelly Ross, in her muckraking work, *Fall From Grace: Sex, Scandal and Corruption in American Politics*, informs us that great presidents like Thomas Jefferson who had an affair with Sally Hemmings, his 17-year-old mulatto slave; and Franklin D. Roo-

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sevelt, whose personal secretary, Missy Lehand, became his mistress, were propelled to greatness by war or national crisis.

Near-great presidents like Andrew Jackson who killed a man for alleging that his wife Rachel was an adulterer and Woodrow Wilson, who shared intimacies with Mary Peck, the wife of a Pittsfield, Mass., manufacturer, are recognized for almost singlehandedly reinvigorating the presidency by asserting its powers or mobilizing public opinion to meet their needs.

But the vast majority of presidents range from just “above average” to “failure,” though it has become unclear in these revisionist times, whether their ranking is based on their performance in the Oval Office or in the executive bed chamber.

Take, for example, John F. Kennedy. After his assassination, he was placed on the pedestal of greatness, a martyred leader of the Free World. He was credited with staring down the Soviet Union during the Cuban missile crisis and hailed as a peacemaker for the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

Over the last decade, however, his stock has fallen among historians who have accused him of everything from purposely fabricating crisis situations in order to enhance his public image to

being a womanizer with an insatiable appetite for sex.

JFK is usually forgiven, though, because he was so young and handsome and, according to one of his mistresses, not all that great in bed.

Interestingly, Clinton has credited JFK's example with inspiring his own political career. Perhaps it inspired a few indiscretions as well.

The real shame of all this is that Bill Clinton has the potential to be much better than “average” as a president. If he can get beyond the character issue and balance the budget, improve educational standards and get the American people to come to terms with the issue of race, his legacy will be secured.

To be sure, whether Clinton is guilty of poor judgment and perjury are important issues, but just as important are the other issues that have created this latest scandal. Should the rights of a private citizen take precedence over those of an incumbent president?

Can one person be expected to carry out the complex and demanding duties of the presidency and simultaneously lead a fish bowl existence? Is the media even capable of drawing the line between inflammatory gossip and the “truth” in a society that has become obsessed with conspiracies, infidelity and scandal?

When these questions are considered, perhaps Bill Clinton's greatest sin was being elected to the presidency in the post-Watergate era.

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