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'Character': Opiate of the electorate

By Kenneth F. Janda

Thirty years ago, the media limited coverage of political candidates and officeholders to their political acts. Today the pendulum has swung dramatically to the other side, and even the sexual liaisons of past political heroes are being widely scrutinized. In 1990, two books detailed the womanizing of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In Kennedy's case the evidence is abundant, including reports of liaisons with Marilyn Monroe, and in King's case the documentation is contested but credible. In both cases, reporters covering these men sat on their inside knowledge and suspicions.

Thus, considering that the reports were credible and the current trend to tell all, two questions beg to be answered. Did the media fail the public 30 years ago by not telling on Kennedy and King? And are the media doing the public a great service by pecking into politicians' bedrooms today? Months after major media went into a feeding frenzy over tabloid rumors about Bill Clinton's alleged affair, George Bush made front-page headlines about his alleged liaison with a female aide.

Publicizing Kennedy's sexual appetite certainly would have cost him his victory over Richard Nixon in the razor-thin election of 1960, and reports of King's indiscretions undoubtedly would have impaired his leadership of the civil-rights movement. Would the nation have been better off without these unfaithful husbands? Would it have been better if their political careers were marred, as Gary Hart's was when the media's obsession with him and Donna Rice cost him the Democratic nomination in 1988?

Many would argue vehemently that the nation would not have been better off without King and Kennedy—no matter their marital infidelity. The more important

question is: Why do reporters pursue these stories of sex and scandal?

The answer clearly has to do with increased media audiences and profits and enhanced journalistic careers. The media cloak their private motives with public values in two ways. First, reporters defend their investigations into private lives as justifiable assessments of the candidate's "character." Since anything may influence character, there is no limit to what reporters feel entitled to investigate.

Second, the media raise the shield of "freedom of the press" against all attempts to limit their coverage of "news." Consider Madonna's music video, "Justify My Love," which celebrates "voyeurism, masturbation, group sex, soft-core sadomasochism and bisexuality." Even MTV refused to air it. ABC's "Nightline" rode to the rescue, showing the steamy video in its entirety to a nationwide audience while soberly treating it as an issue in freedom of expression. The news-starved public responded by giving the program its highest rating of 1990.

Not many businesses can camouflage their private interests—making money—under the guise of the public interest. But are voters really served by media pursuit of the "character issue"?

Most of us pride ourselves on being good judges of "character." But are we? Sometimes our trusted next-door neighbor proves to be a serial killer, or our local schoolteacher emerges as a child molester. If we can't reliably judge persons we know first-hand, how reliably can we judge candidates through the media?

People often defend their scrutiny of candidates' personal lives through the delusion that they are "following the campaign"—while ignoring candidates' policy statements. Although voters may find it difficult to judge whether a candidate's policies benefit or harm them, they are better equipped to determine than to speculate about a candidates' personal life.

By feeding on the character issue, the electorate avoids its real responsibility in choosing between candidates' political records. It's like smoking opium.

Kenneth F. Janda, Payson S. Wild Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, is co-author of the college textbook "The Challenge of Democracy: Government in America."