



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE / AP / CORBIS

**The master:** After the Starr Report was released in September 1998, President Bill Clinton issued several public apologies for his involvement with intern Monica Lewinsky, including this one in Miami: “I also let you down, and I let my family down, and I let this country down. But I’m trying to make it right. And I’m determined never to let anything like that happen again. And I’m determined to redeem the trust. So I ask you for your understanding, for your forgiveness on this journey we’re on. I hope this will be a time of reconciliation and healing.”

# STILL THE REDEEMER NATION

**The ceaseless quest for redemption in politics and culture is one of the chronic infirmities of American national life. But God forbid we should ever give it up.**

BY **WILFRED M. McCLAY**

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THIS PAST FEBRUARY, AS THE MAMMOTH snowstorm dubbed “Winter Storm Nemo” bore down on the northeastern United States, all eyes turned to the elected officials in the region. Many of them had done a poor job of handling the effects of such storms in the past, with unhappy political consequences, and even after the expensive and highly publicized relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, many New York and New Jersey households remained in severe distress. New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg was laboring under an especially large cloud of distrust, thanks to his fumbling performance during the blizzard of December 2010, when snow removal was ineffective, ambulances and fire trucks got stuck in the uncleared streets, and there was a backlog of 1,400 emergency calls. So a lot was at stake this time. As Nemo approached, the local CBS affiliate proclaimed, “For Bloomberg, Getting Response to This Storm Right Would Be Redemption.”

Ah yes, *redemption*. Meaning deliverance from sin, atonement, expiation, absolution, regeneration, the debt forgiven, release from stigmatization, the

ransom paid, the captive set free—a new beginning, a fresh start, a transformation, a liberation from guilt, a new lease on life, even if not an entirely clean slate. It may take more than a snowstorm to penetrate the awareness of the famously self-righteous Bloomberg, the scourge of smokers and soda drinkers and trans fat consumers and other enemies of humanity. It might not yet have occurred to him that he too stood in need of redemption. But most of us understand the need for it, both for ourselves and others. Politicians, as cynosures of the national psyche, may need it rather more than most, or at least the convincing appearance of it, particularly when it is dispensed by the likes of CBS News. Figures as different

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**Richard Nixon with Checkers, the spaniel he made famous in an unprecedented national television broadcast to defend himself against charges of campaign finance irregularities. Nixon, then Dwight Eisenhower's running mate in the 1952 presidential campaign, called upon viewers to redeem his reputation and career by writing to the Republican National Committee. As for Checkers—a gift, he conceded, from a political supporter—“regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.”**

as Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, two men who rode the roller coaster of fall-and-redemption all their careers, could attest to its value, and each was, in his own way, a master of its giddy heights and harrowing depths. Indeed, their tarrings and their laurels are impossible to separate.

But the phenomenon seems to go beyond particular personalities, and touches upon one of the deepest moral and emotional foundations of American life. In his classic 1968 book *Redeemer Nation*, the Berkeley scholar Ernest Tuveson identified one of the most

enduring strains in American life as a belief in the nation's divinely ordained redemptive role in the world, a belief for which he found seeds in America's origins, and which flowered in the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly with regard to the nation's external relations and foreign policy. Yet Tuveson's insights can surely be turned inward as well, since the externally aimed logic of redemption is just as applicable, if not more so, to individuals as well as nations. In fact, as the external has become less plausible, the internal has taken on greater and greater importance.

The algebra of fall-and-redemption, always a part of American culture, seems to have become an ever more integral part of the psychological drama of American politics. Leaders are more likely to be embraced fully and heartily when they have first been shown to stumble badly, to be flawed and human and vulnerable, and then allowed to rise again, scarred to be sure, but also contrite and humbled and seasoned. William Dean Howells famously observed that “what the American public wants in the theater is a tragedy with a happy ending”; the same is true in the theater of public life.

**T**HE REQUIREMENT THAT POLITICIANS be flawed bears some resemblance to the equally imperative rule that presidents demonstrate something we call “a sense of humor.” The historian Daniel Wickberg has written a brilliant study (*The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*) showing how the very idea of a sense of humor is modern, and reflects a softening and socializing of the individualistic ideal. For politicians today, having a sense of humor clearly means demonstrating the willingness and ability to mock or make light of themselves and allow their spouses to complain in public about their

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foibles. It is a strange requirement. Why should we want to elect as president a man who wants to convince us that he does not take himself too seriously? That his self-abasement is almost certain to be, well, somewhat confected, indeed, entirely phony, seems not to matter. A sense of humor is taken seriously, and to lack it, as a “wooden” Al Gore Jr. was said to lack it in the 2000 election, can be fatal.

The democratic leader is supposed to be “the uncommon common man.” But to be anointed as such, one must first provide a believable demonstration of one’s all-too-commonness, of the common human need to be redeemed of *something*. The story is told that when Elliot

Richardson, the quintessential Boston Brahmin and the man with the perfect resumé, perfect breeding, and perfect appearance, ran for the U.S. Senate in Massachusetts in 1984, he was mocked by William “Billy” Bulger, then president of the Massachusetts State Senate and a quintessential Irish pol, who held up a fake newspaper with a headline reading “Vote Elliot, He’s Better Than You!” It was a brilliant stroke. Needless to say, Richardson lost. He didn’t even survive the Republican primary.

Some of this posturing is, of course,

traceable to one of the fundamental requirements of democratic politics—the need to affirm equality in all ways at all times, and find ways to discreetly conceal the many and inevitable divergences from that ideal. Politicians are often accused of hypocrisy in such matters, but the charge is self-serving; the rest of us are guiltier than they are, precisely because we insist that they dissemble to us. On the face of the matter, would it not make sense to entrust the nuclear football to someone who is demonstrably better than oneself? Yes, but it would be



DAVID HUME KENNERLY / GETTY IMAGES

**President George W. Bush’s gathering of presidents past and future, convened shortly before Barack Obama’s inauguration in 2009, served to dramatize the fact that almost every modern presidency yields at least one redemption saga.**

a fatal mistake for that better someone to betray even a hint of awareness of his superiority. Much smarter to divert attention from himself by attacking the privileged status of an opponent, as Bulger did. One can at least hope that such cunning has its essential political uses, and that the most cunning politicians will be, if not the best, at least not the worst.

It would not be cynical to say that many Americans felt comfortable voting for Bill Clinton eight years after Richardson's defeat precisely because they felt confident he was *not* better than them. But there was, and is, something more in play in Clinton's case than the dynamics of democratic egalitarianism. Even after the disgraces of Monicagate and impeachment, and the pardons and disquieting scandals attending Clinton's departure from the White House, and dozens of other embarrassments, his stock remains high. It is not only that he is a quintessential democratic figure. He also has a near-endless native capacity for evoking and receiving the public's redemptive generosity. People tend to forgive him his faults, even if they smile and snicker as they do it.

Few others can get away with this on such a monumental scale, and sometimes a politician's bid for redemption is a bit

more than the market will bear. Consider the case of philandering former South Carolina governor Mark Sanford, who in 2009 was impeached, censured, and nearly removed from office in disgrace, who had a very public split from his wife, Jenny, and now, logically enough, is running for the U.S. House of Representatives. "I'm a sinner and I'm a flawed man but I think God can use flawed men or women, and I hope that the voters in this case will choose to use a flawed man," he told ABC radio affiliate WTMA in an interview. It is patently a play for redemption. Sanford is refusing otherwise to talk about his personal life, and yet his flawedness seems to be his principal asset. This gambit makes the logic of redemption seem a bit too pat, as if it could be reduced to a calculated form of leading with one's jaw; but there is no doubt that redemption-through-reelection is what is on Sanford's mind. And who knows? He just might get it.

Similarly, redemption clearly has been on the mind of ex-president Jimmy Carter for the past 33 years. Carter has never gotten over the stern rebuke administered by voters in 1980, and the harsh judgment of many observers that his was a failed administration. In his case, a craving for redemption has animated an energetic, sometimes

admirable, but often clumsy and self-seeking post-presidential career. In group photographs of president-elect Barack Obama and his four living predecessors at the White House, it was noticeable that Carter stood apart from the others, seemingly weighed down by a lingering sense of failure. One might think that his Christian beliefs would make him more at peace about how he is regarded in this world, given the priority his faith accords to the next one. But very few of us, and least of all the kind of man who wants to be president, can be genuinely indifferent to how we are regarded by others, and by history. And Carter is a proud man, in all the best and worst senses of that word. Redemption in the here and now, in the eyes of others, would be too sweet a vindication for

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him not to seek it; but it will likely elude him, because of the conspicuous pride that has motivated his quest for it. Who would be exalted must first be humbled.

**W**HAT WOULD AMERICAN POLITICAL culture look like without its pervasive moral dramas of sin and redemption, sometimes expressed in forms lofty and noble, but at other times resembling nothing so much as the smarminess and vulgarity of soap opera? One thing can be said for certain: We are not only intensely fascinated by these episodes of political theater, but fully in the grip of them, as far more than mere on-lookers. For an allegedly secular society, the United States seems to be curiously in thrall to ideas, gestures, emotional patterns, nervous tics, and deep premises that belong to the supposedly banished world of religion. These habits of heart and mind are evident everywhere we look, and they possess a compulsive and unquestioned power in contemporary American life. It is as if the disappearance of religion's metaphysical dimension has occasioned a tightening hold of certain of its moral dimensions, particularly so far as these relate to guilt and absolution.

Consider the range of manifestations: The feeding frenzies over malfeasances by public officials, real or imagined,

eventuating in obligatory rituals of public confession and abasement before the altar of Oprah Winfrey or some other secular priest or priestess invested with the power to give or withhold absolution. The obsession with our environmental sins, both as an overconsuming society and as individuals leaving carbon footprints, giving rise to such phenomena as “carbon offsets,” schemes that have been decried by skeptics as little more than “green indulgences,” transparent sops to voracious (and credulous) consciences. The almost bottomless reservoirs of racial guilt and recrimination, most recently illustrated by the embarrassingly abject apology proffered by James Wagner, the president of Emory University, for the sin of mentioning in an essay the formulation of the three-fifths rule in the U.S. Constitution as an example of political compromise, instead of condemning the rule with thundering, absolute, and final moral certainty, as so many on his faculty demanded he do, no doubt in the spirit of academic freedom. The similar and related tendency to shout down all unwelcome speech as being a form of bigotry and therefore morally unacceptable: anti-Semitic, racist, sexist, homophobic, un-American, and so on. On many college campuses, the inhibiting fear of saying the wrong thing at

the wrong time in the wrong way to the wrong person has all but rendered vigorous debate impossible. Whatever else one might say of these manifestations, they do not reflect a culture in which easygoing relativism, tolerance, skepticism, and laissez-faire permissiveness reign. It is instead a culture clenched taut with every imaginable form of moral anxiety, seemingly convinced despite its own secular professions that we inhabit a universe that has an inherent and unforgiving moral structure.

Hence, the yearning for redemption is not likely to go away, since the need for a certification of one’s blamelessness is so strong. And it must be said that, despite all the pathologies I have named, there are many reasons why we should not want it to go away, even if we could somehow miraculously banish it. For we all have serious faults, often grievous ones, and the yearning for redemption is the rightful call of our consciences and the proper object of our hopes, the very thing for which hope is forever hoping, especially in dark or troubled times. Howells’s conjecture that Americans want “a tragedy with a happy ending” is another way of saying not only that we want things to turn out happily, but that we want them to turn out in a way that redeems all our suffering in the end—we

want our world to prove to be purposeful and orderly, the kind of world in which nothing is wasted and the animating virtue of hope is not futile. The pathologies stem, in part, from the fact that we want redemption more than ever, applied to a wider range of things.

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Howells's dictum echoes the core Christian meaning of redemption as Saint Paul understood it, that there is a way of taking what was bad, even what was meant for bad, and turning it for good. (The classic exposition can be found in chapter 8 of Paul's Epistle to the Romans.) It was not for nothing that the New England Puritans spoke of their "plantation" as a New Zion, a utopian restoration of a godly commonwealth, whose ultimate aim was to provide an example for the

redemption of the world.

But redemption is not merely a restoration of a *status quo ante*. More fundamentally, it is a form of alchemy, a making of something fine and noble and new out of what once was ordinary, commonplace, even debased, and severely confined by its limitations. Such transformative alchemy has long been at work in the American experience, and is indeed at the very heart of it. After all, America, and more specifically the United States, began life thinking of itself as a kind of second chance or new beginning for the world. Americans still retain much of this belief, and their feelings of guilt over American failures and malfeasances are the flip side of that continuing belief in America's redemptive responsibility to the rest of the world. It's a more ambitious guilt, actually, one that reflects expectations that are less and less susceptible of being easily met.

Such guilty feelings are often sources of social and political division. But Americans remain as one in ardently resisting the idea that the conditions of our birth should place automatic limits on who we are, or what we can become. Our natal identity itself, while always viewed as something to be affirmed, is not to be regarded as final, but instead as something to be redeemed and

transformed. That is why Americans have always valued education as a ladder of personal and social mobility. And it is also why America has always been such a magnet for immigrants—men and women who were, and are, eager to cast aside the heavy lumber of their Old World in order to have the opportunity to make a new beginning for themselves.

**S**O THE MYTH OF REDEMPTION—myth not in the sense of a falsehood, but in the sense of an overarching story about the larger meanings of our lives that we cannot otherwise know—is as powerful as ever as an organizing and regulative force in American culture. It surely played a role in the 2008 election of Barack Obama. He made “hope” and “change” the mantras of his campaign because he grasped some deep need in the American people to which no other political figure on the scene had spoken. It was a need for *their* redemption.

In 2008, rather than the *subject* in need of redemption, Obama promised



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**Campaigning for the presidency in 2008, Barack Obama offered what many Americans saw as national redemption.**

to be the *agent* of national redemption, a restorer of national innocence in matters of race, foreign relations, and environmental policy, among other areas. In a June 2008 speech celebrating the Minnesota primary victory that guaranteed him the Democratic nomination, a speech given in, yes, the city of Saint Paul, he referred to his nomination as

a “defining moment for our nation,” declaring that he was “absolutely certain that generations from now . . . we will be able to look back and tell our children” that “this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal,” the moment when we “restored our image as the last, best hope on Earth.” With such grandly redemptive rhetoric in play, small wonder that the 2008 campaign sometimes took on the atmosphere of a national psychodrama.

Small wonder, too, that the result would soon be disappointment. There was never the slightest possibility that Obama, or any other mortal politician, could deliver the things his more impassioned voters sought from him. However the second-term Obama evolves, things will never again be as they were in 2008. Democratic regulars will support him, Republicans will oppose him, but the redemptive myth has gone into hibernation, and the true believers have nearly all gone home.

One should not draw the wrong lesson from this. The desire for redemp-

tion, even if it sleeps from time to time, is real, powerful, and insistent. It will not sleep forever, just as it is unlikely to be satisfied by any conceivable political expedient or program or person. One could be forgiven for thinking that it should therefore be ignored, even disdained, as the kind of irrational human weakness to which practical people should give no quarter. Yet the politician who ignores it, who thinks that politics in America can ever be strictly a matter of sinks and sewers, of calm and passionless administration (or self-interested distribution of party booty), of calculated instrumental reasoning about the management of practical objectives either by accredited experts or cunning pols, is going to lose eventually.

Even if he is better than we are. ■

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