

# The Second Coming of Scandal

"What Happened to Sex Scandals? Politics and Peccadilloes, Jefferson to Kennedy" by John H. Summers, in *The Journal of American History* (Dec. 2000), 1215 E. Atwater Ave., Bloomington, Ind. 47401-3703.

At the 1912 Democratic National Convention, which nominated New Jersey governor Woodrow Wilson for president, there were whispers about Wilson's close friendship with a woman not his wife. He worried about possible public scandal, but none occurred. The country by then, writes Summers, a doctoral candidate in American history at the University of Rochester, had entered a new era of public reticence about the sexual transgressions, real or imagined, of active political leaders. This represented a sea change in American politics.

"In the early republic and throughout the 19th century . . . the sexual character of officeholders [was subjected] to close, steady, and often unflattering scrutiny," he notes. Alexander Hamilton was forced to acknowledge an adulterous affair; Thomas Jefferson was accused of a liaison with one of his slaves; Andrew Jackson was denounced for having lived in sin with a married woman; William Henry Harrison supposedly had fathered illegitimate children; and Grover Cleveland was accused during his 1884 presidential campaign of having seduced a young woman and fathered her child. (Cleveland candidly acknowledged his possible paternity, and was elected.)

Intense partisanship, openly expressed after the emergence of the party system, played a role in the close scrutiny of politicians' character, Summers says, but so did genuine conviction. "American republicanism . . . regarded solid moral character as a *sine qua non* of good government." Evangelical Protestantism also encouraged 19th-century voters to seek men of sound character for public office.

The uproar over Cleveland's derelictions, however, "proved the last major scandal of its kind for more than 100 years," Summers says. Though Theodore Roosevelt in 1913 noted "the foul gossip which ripples just under the surface about almost every public man," what was new, Summers points out, was that the foul gos-

sip stayed below ground. Only after they were dead did the public learn of the apparently adulterous behavior of Warren G. Harding, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy.

Progressive reformers, favoring "a more intellectualized, 'educative' brand of politics," altered public life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, says Summers. American jour-



"Ma, Ma, Where's My Pa?" Republicans gleefully chanted in 1884, but Cleveland and the Democrats had the last laugh.

nalism underwent a metamorphosis—from fierce partisanship to high-minded "professionalism." *Harper's Weekly* editor George Harvey declared in 1908 that the journalist had become "the accepted and most potent guide of the masses," and must seek "to uplift humanity, not to profit by its degradation."

"Once, evangelicals and republicans appealed to the populace to discipline and monitor the morality of political elites," observes Summers. "Now, political elites were charged with the discipline of the populace." The new reticence proved especially useful to reporters, allowing them "to get closer" to government officials, who could rest assured that their "secrets" were safe. As the century progressed, and the government, faced with the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, grew larger and more powerful, keeping offi-

cials' peccadilloes secret came to seem vitally important. In recent decades, with Vietnam and Watergate, that changed, of course. And with

the impeachment of President Bill Clinton in 1998, says Summers, the era of reticence definitely came to an end.

## *Federalism's Phony Rebirth*

"Does Federalism Have a Future?" by Pietro S. Nivola, in *The Public Interest* (Winter 2001), 1112 16th St., N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

"WE WIN," exulted the conservative *Weekly Standard* after President Bill Clinton declared in 1996 that the era of big government was over.

Soon thereafter came welfare reform, and talk of further devolution of power to the states grew louder. On education reform and other major issues, states seemed to be taking the lead. And the U.S. Supreme Court, in several decisions, seemed to be trying to shore up state prerogatives.

But the supposed shift of power to the states is largely an illusion, contends Nivola, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Though devolution appeared to prevail in welfare and other areas, Nivola points out, Congress and federal regulators frequently have preempted state authority with new prescriptions and prohibitions. Congress intervened, for example, in enforcement of child support laws, eligibility of legal aliens for public assistance, and state taxation of Internet commerce. Federal grants-in-aid to the states often acquire new strings after the states undertake the programs, Nivola observes. "And typically, federal rules remain firmly in place even if congressional appropriations fall far short of authorizations. The local provision of special education for students with disabilities, for instance, is essentially governed by federal law, even though Congress has never appropriated

anything near its authorized share of this \$43 billion-a-year mandate."

Legislation proposed in 1999 to require Washington to assess the impact of new statutes or regulations on state and local laws came to naught, Nivola notes. The reason, he says, is that corporations "fear aggressive regulators and tax collectors in the state legislatures and bureaucracies even more" than they fear Washington. They *want* Congress "not just to set baselines (floors) below which state policies must not fall but to secure compulsory *ceilings* on the possible excesses of zealous states." Though congressional Republicans "have . . . paid lip service to decentralization," Nivola says, a study of roll calls from 1983 to 1990 found the GOP lawmakers "more prone than the Democrats to overrule state and local regulations."

As for the Supreme Court, its decisions on federal-state cases have been "a mixed bag," Nivola says. Along with some rulings in favor of the states, there have come plenty that went the other way (e.g., decisions overturning state policies on child visitation rights and oil-tanker safety training).

In short, concludes Nivola, the era of big government is definitely not over. "A bigger, or at least more invasive, central government has been the dominant trend for decades. And signs today . . . augur anything but a radical reversal."

### FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

## *Trimming the Force*

"Come Partly Home, America" by Michael O'Hanlon, in *Foreign Affairs* (Mar.-Apr. 2001), 58 E. 68th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

George W. Bush charged during last year's campaign that the Clinton administration had deployed troops on too many peacekeeping

missions around the globe. The charge was "greatly exaggerated," says O'Hanlon, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. But, he