

Public Officials Tarrred by Private Lives

By Deni Elliott

WHEN HENRY Cisneros became the latest Clinton appointee to come under the scrutiny of an independent counsel, we were reminded that no political party holds the reins on public virtue.

The Clinton administration is beginning to look as suspect and scandal-plagued as the administrations that preceded it. Cisneros is the fourth cabinet member under review. The current tally: Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy was forced to resign, Commerce Secretary Ron Brown is under investigation and Transportation Secretary Federico Pena was cleared by Attorney General Janet Reno. The Clintons face a special prosecutor's probe into the Whitewater affair. It takes a long and spotty memory to find a presidency that wasn't peppered with disgraced nominees and discredited officials. The nation is, by now, braced for it.

Even Franklin D. Roosevelt's incredible record of four terms without any forced resignations or serious scandals is, well, incredible. It likely reflects the nation's distraction with the Great Depression and



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World War II as much as a truly clean slate.

The executive branch has always had its share of rogues, beginning with George Washington's Department of Treasury, but for most of American history, the public assumed a separation between an official's public persona and private life. Now that distinction is blurred and we have no choice but to discard it. In a world of tell-all talk shows and pseudo-news magazines, what were once regarded as private intimacies are fodder for public consumption. Those who aspire to public life know that how they handle the backwash of private woes on the public screen is considered a clue to their character and standards, and reasonably so.

Since Aristotle, most ethical theorists have thought that we needed rules to deal with strangers in civic life, but not in private relationships, where trust, loyalty, friendship, kinship and love were expected to govern. But when trust, loyalty and the other principles of personal relationships disappear from private life, we can no longer separate the private and public spheres. The result is that a public official's character and ability to lead are judged partly by how he handles private scandals.

When Cisneros was nominated for Housing and Urban Development secretary in 1993, he mused to the FBI the amount of money he had paid to his ex-mistress. The special investigator will decide whether it would have made a difference to his nomination if it had been known that Cisneros had paid Linda Medlar \$200,000 instead of \$30,000 over a three-year period and whether that the warrants prosecution. From the secret tapes that Medlar

made of their conversations and sold to Inside Edition, we know that they worried about the effect of their relationship on the HUD nomination.

Cisneros' willingness to lie to the FBI is as troubling as any illegal or unethical act by a public official, but we can't ignore the fact that it was private deceit that forced him into public deception. Cisneros cheats on his wife, only to find his illicit partner has been taping their private conversations for the four years of their affair. It's hard to decide whether to be more outraged by Cisneros' philandering or Medlar's anticipatory documentation.

Maybe we can't expect that our public officials will be paragons of virtue who create the moral climate for the nation as well as provide political leadership. But we can expect them to appreciate the effects on their careers of the loss of separation between public and private life. We can expect them at least to be cynical — not to expect that a person coming on to them is necessarily attracted by some sexual or personal magnetism. It may just be book and film profits and celebrity status they seek.

As nice as it might be, it's hard to imagine the pendulum swinging back to a clear separation between private and public spheres or that the media will tire of rewarding people for prostituting their privacy. It's even harder to imagine that the glare of public scrutiny will encourage many public figures to clean up their acts. But seeing politicians laid bare reminds us that there are no heroes, that we need to be more thoughtful about determining what qualities make a good leader. The images we see on television may not give us information enough.

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