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Trends. Sex and the Totemic Presidency

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A prevalent line of discourse concerning the relevance of the Lewinsky-Clinton relationship to the United States (U.S.) Presidency is whether so-called personal behavior is relevant to national leadership. Some might argue that in an era wherein investigation can be supported by high technology--often unencumbered by moral or ethical proscription--this discourse is but an abstraction without a reality base.

Even if personal behavior were feasible, however, one must conclude that personal behavior--more specifically, beliefs and attitudes about the leader's personal behavior harbored by citizens--is vital to the Presidency. This is because there is an inevitable psychodynamic process continually in operation from the citizenry towards the President.

This psychodynamic process encompasses the President both as a container and as a mirror for the hopes, joys, fears, anxieties, and conflicts of the citizenry. Many of these elements are unconscious and therefore unspeakable. How this psychodynamic process is handled by the President--and it will be handled in one way or another regardless of the President's knowledge of it or intent to handle it--usually has more relevance to the President's political power than policy successes and the winning of wars.

The optimal manner for the President to handle this psychodynamic process is to afford the greatest latitude for the citizenry to imagine what the President is really like. For this to happen, the greatest degrees of freedom for this imagination must be maintained by limiting how many facets of the president's life are known or seem to be known by the citizenry with certainty.

In essence, the President must become a totem--not merely a venerated symbol but one that appears to have a clan or family linkage to the citizenry. Most totems do not exhibit kinetic communication; instead, they serve to draw in the communications of others through their thoughts, images, speech, and external behaviors.

Yet the President--by lowering degrees of freedom in the citizenry's beliefs and attitudes about his personal behavior through his own specific statements (regardless of truth) about his personal behavior--has totemically failed. Thus, the varying responses of others--from the "feeding frenzies" of politicians and mass media representatives; to expressed feelings of disgust, betrayal, and discomfort; to exhortations to move beyond the scandal and magically put the totem back together.

That President Clinton would still have a serious problem and be confronted with very, very powerful and often unconscious forces has been foreshadowed by Sigmund Freud's classic Totem and Taboo. One interpretation of this work is Freud's positing that the first totem was a human one--the father. When the father inevitably let down the sons--i.e., failed as a totem--they collectively killed him and then collectively ate of his flesh to share his power and the guilt of patricide. To help resolve their very ambivalent reactions to the patricide, they erected the first inanimate totem.

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The powerful psychological forces confronting the father of the past and, today, President Clinton cannot fully be contained or mirrored--nor to a lesser degree can the psychodynamic process that otherwise is prepotent in non-crisis situations.) At best, an extraneous event may help deflect these forces. Or, somehow, the leader may survive--but in a damaged manner--these forces even as they damage all that come into contact with them.

In conclusion, although the discourse of relevance to the Presidency is misguided, many analysts are correct. The current crisis in U.S. politics is not about sex. It is about something more unspeakable: the unconscious. That which cannot be spoken. (See Freud, S. Totem and taboo. Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, 13. (Original work published 1913.)) (Keywords: Bill Clinton, Freud, Leadership, Monica Lewinsky, Presidency, Sex, Unconscious.)