

## **PSYCHOLOGY; The Politics of Confession**

*The Los Angeles Times OPINION SECTION; Los Angeles, Calif.; Sep 2, 2001; PETER WOLSON;*

### **Abstract:**

*The most pressing need is for a believable expression of guilt and remorse for the harm the politician has perpetrated against his constituency and others. Assuming responsibility for hurting others is the sine qua non of caring for one's fellow human beings. Politicians are elected as our political and moral leaders. They represent America's conscience, like our parents. If a politician is incapable of showing remorse for a betrayal of the public trust, as was initially the case for [Bill Clinton]--"I did not have sex with that woman!"--and, more recently, for [Gary A. Condit], who has expressed no guilt over his putative affair with the missing Chandra Levy, the public cannot forgive him for his trespasses. He is judged as too self-serving and narcissistic to deserve office.*

*Perhaps the most shocking function of the political confession is providing sexual material for voyeuristic gratification. The American public eagerly awaited details of Condit's affair with Levy. For many commentators, his refusal to admit the affair, let alone provide salacious sexual gossip, was the most disappointing aspect of his prime-time interview with Connie Chung. Unlike independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr, whose graphic report on Clinton's and [Monica S. Lewinsky]'s sexual affair entertained Americans for months, Condit refused to let the public into his bedroom. This merely fueled the public's frustration with him.*

### **Full Text:**

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In our media-driven society, is a politician's confession of transgression designed simply to gratify America's appetite for salacious theater and to protect the politician's self-interests? Or does it express a meaningful, human connection between the public and its elected representatives?

The customarily scripted expressions of remorse, coupled with the public's voyeuristic excitement over possible revelations of sexual details, has led to the widespread belief that political confessions, like former President Bill Clinton's and what was expected of Rep. Gary A. Condit (D-Ceres), are all show and no substance. They can ruin or save a politician's career, but because of their self-serving, theatrical nature, one can barely tell if they also reflect a caring, responsible relationship between the politician and his constituency.

If these confessions are merely libidinal theater, why do the media and the public demand them from transgressing politicians? What needs do they fulfill in America's psyche?

The most pressing need is for a believable expression of guilt and remorse for the harm the politician has perpetrated against his constituency and others. Assuming responsibility for hurting others is the sine qua non of caring for one's fellow human beings. Politicians are elected as our political and moral leaders.

They represent America's conscience, like our parents. If a politician is incapable of showing remorse for a betrayal of the public trust, as was initially the case for Clinton--"I did not have sex with that woman!"--and, more recently, for Condit, who has expressed no guilt over his putative affair with the missing Chandra Levy, the public cannot forgive him for his trespasses. He is judged as too self-serving and narcissistic to deserve office.

Even though they know these confessions are often well-rehearsed, Americans require the political confession to determine if the politician is capable of caring for his constituency and upholding an appropriate moral standard. Americans look very closely for "believable" expressions of guilt and remorse, to see whether the politician is willing to accept responsibility for betraying them.

However, the politician is in a highly precarious position. He knows that if he confesses his political "sins" too openly, his reputation can be ruined instantly. This probably motivated Clinton to initially deny his affair with Monica S. Lewinsky and Condit to "stonewall" about Levy.

The electorate's need for appropriate repentance and redemption often competes with its need to sully the politician's reputation out of envy. This is because leaders inevitably arouse envy in their followers, who desire their power, success and money. As an assemblyman and congressman who built his reputation on being a model of Christian propriety--he was one of the first to condemn Clinton for his infidelity--Condit became a perfect candidate for envious attacks. When his infidelity with Levy was revealed, the media and the public derived great pleasure from turning the tables on him. However, his fatal flaw was in not expressing appropriate remorse.

By revealing the weaknesses of their political leaders, public confessions allow Americans to reduce their envy through triumphant devaluations. While envious attacks can potentially destroy good politicians, like Sen. Edmund S. Muskie, the exposure of a politician's weaknesses may have the positive effect of making idealized political leaders appear more human and accessible.

Moreover, the political exposure of infidelity frequently threatens other politicians, who are inclined to disown and project their own infidelity onto the vulnerable confessor. Among Clinton's most vicious attackers were politicians like Condit, Rep. Henry J. Hyde and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, all of whom had committed infidelities themselves. They scapegoated him for their own boundary violations.

Perhaps the most shocking function of the political confession is providing sexual material for voyeuristic gratification. The American public eagerly awaited details of Condit's affair with Levy. For many commentators, his refusal to admit the affair, let alone provide salacious sexual gossip, was the most disappointing aspect of his prime-time interview with Connie Chung. Unlike independent

counsel Kenneth W. Starr, whose graphic report on Clinton's and Lewinsky's sexual affair entertained Americans for months, Condit refused to let the public into his bedroom. This merely fueled the public's frustration with him.

It is no wonder that politicians have to be very careful about how they reveal themselves. After the Nixon-Kennedy debates, in which Richard M. Nixon's refusal to wear make-up may have cost him the 1960 presidential election, politicians have hired consultants to orchestrate their every move, especially when they are forced to give a public confession.

The political confession is pervasively flawed. It provides ammunition for envious attacks on politicians. It arouses and gratifies the public's prurient, voyeuristic interests, and it motivates politicians to turn to theatrical performances to salvage their careers. Yet, to the extent that it allows the public to evaluate whether the transgressor is truly remorseful for betraying the public trust, even if the confession is theatrically staged, it remains one of the best litmus tests for determining a politician's capacity to accept responsibility and care for his constituents.

Credit: Peter Wolson, a psychoanalyst, is past president of the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies