

Sex, Religion, Politics, and Power Make a Powerful Quartet.
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I have waited until the salacious reporting on General Patraeus\222 fall from grace has died down before I weigh in. It is no secret that the United States has conflicting standards on that most difficult of human issues, sex. On one hand, in the public sphere today, anything goes. But we are still the children of our Puritan beginnings, and remnants of these values remain with us, particularly with our leaders.

\225 Power. From our beginnings as humans, the relationship between power and libido was obvious. It seems that the same male hormone, testosterone, fuels both war and sex. One of the first acts of an invading army after a long and painful siege is to rape every female there, both to humiliate the defeated males, but also to complete the aggression of conquest. The most beautiful women were generally then doled out as booty to the most powerful men in the hierarchy.

We know this is true of human behavior in warfare, from Native Americans raiding enemy tribes (there was always a shortage of childbearing-age women) to the Soviet rape of Berlin and the Japanese rape of Nanking. The most cynical use of rape as a weapon of war was seen in the rape camps of the Serbs in their war against the Bosnian Muslims and the Congo\222s war on civilian women.

\225 Religion. In early Judaism, prophets warned that when the Hebrews conquered Canaan (today\222s Holy Land), the conquered women would seduce the Hebrews away from their religion. Biblical prophets inveighed on this issue for centuries and were hostile to intermarriage, a stricture among the pious even today.

For Islam, which is a latter-day resurrection of the earliest Semitic culture, the Koran permitted that in conquest, they could take as many of the enemy\222s women slaves as \223pleased them,\224 even though they were limited to only four legitimate wives. Mohammad himself had 11, (some say 14) wives. In all matters, men had the upper hand in relationships with women, and women were to have no say in it. This is still so among the pious in Muslim-majority countries, where the \223honor code\224 even permits the murder of disobedient wives and daughters.

Christianity from its inception, had a keen dislike and suspicion of sexuality. Celibacy was preferred to marriage, but within marriage, it was expected to be monogamous and the partners were urged to love and honor each other through lifelong faithfulness. Those rules have frequently been violated by men (with little punishment) and sometimes by women (with terrible punishment, but unlike Islam, not murder). Christianity has been conspicuously monogamous, even today, but the demand for sexual self-control within marriage has proven difficult. Our high standards are not easy to sustain.

Christian celibacy was practiced (more or less) in monastic life, and celibacy was promoted for centuries before plagues swept to death half the population of Europe. Catholic priests, who have been bound by oaths of celibacy since the 12th century, have long suffered from the temptations of the flesh. Protestantism attempted to remove this temptation by encouraging their ministers to engage in monogamous marriage. Even this, however, has not kept some ministers from creating sexual scandals, a frequent disaster among the most ostentatiously religious.

Americans have the most difficulty in accepting the sexuality of their leaders, leaders who are expected to be exemplary. It pains us that political testosterone is often inseparable from sexual testosterone. We grant all sorts of sexual license to our athletes and entertainers but we do not smile upon bad sexual behavior among our political or military leaders.

There is a good reason for this, which our snooty European colleagues do not recognize: marriage involves an oath of sexual loyalty (and trust). If a man (or woman) betrays this oath, what other duties will they betray? We take most seriously the abuse of power, in which a powerful leader exploits a sexually-vulnerable subordinate (or child) or betrays or abuses a loyal wife. This is a sin that we do not forgive easily.

Sexual behavior remains an ever-present dilemma for us.

671 words

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