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School for Scandal

by Sissela Bok

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The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center

PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

INTRODUCTION

The irony is inescapable. Democracy is the rage if not yet the reality of political life in Eastern Europe. Political gurus from past Republican and Democratic campaigns are racing to Prague, Warsaw and Budapest to offer lessons in politics, 1988-style. But here in the United States, where democracy got its first opportunity to flourish on a transcontinental scale and to inspire the likes of Václav Havel and others all over the world, it has rarely been subjected to as many doubts, as many questions about its tactics and techniques. This is not a universally held view, of course, not in a country as diverse in political argumentation and rich in myth and heritage as this one. Many American politicians and scientists are aglow with the conviction that the collapse of communism means the triumph of democracy. After decades of Cold War, when communist tyranny was always counterpoised against western freedom, as though there were no other real options, there is a certain logic to such a rosy view of American democracy.

And yet among many journalists and scholars, who have watched voter participation drop and television squeeze the vitality out of political discourse, there is a gnawing anxiety about the quality of American democracy. Campaigning has become so rough and expensive that some politicians refuse to enter the fray while others find the prospect of running for re-election so daunting they'd just as soon duck the challenge and save their sanity. Crisis is in the air. Robin Toner, writing recently in *The New York Times*, describes political campaigns in military language. They have become "a kind of harrowing arms race, fueled by ever more sophisticated technologies, waged with ever more brutal and efficient techniques, covering more and more personal and political terrain."

Paul Taylor of *The Washington Post* is equally depressing in describing "our mudslinging campaigns." He writes: "Political campaigns are drifting farther into the abyss. Candidates do not treat them as occasions to articulate or defend political ideas. They treat them, in the main, as exercises in character assassination."

David Broder, also of *The Washington Post*, now on a crusade against dirty politics, denounces even the winning candidates in both parties for having "force-fed a garbage diet of negative TV ads down the country's throat." The campaigns are "negative and nauseating," and, Broder adds, "we need to do something about this win-at-all-costs mentality."

Here at the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, we have had the notion of "doing something" ever since the 1988 presidential campaign ended. Roger Ailes, a Republican strategist who has emerged for some as one of the new "heroes" of American politics, prompted the notion by telling a postmortem conference here that "if you didn't like '88, you're going to hate '92." I figured that he should know. Within days, the JSB Center launched a four-year research project called "Campaign Lessons for '92," led by Center Executive Director Ellen Hume. By examining the role of television, the use, misuse and overuse of polls, the fixation with "character," generally meaning sex, rumor, gossip, the "debates" that weren't debates, the sound bite substitute for substance and those Hortonized campaign ads—by systematically looking into these components of a presidential campaign, and then leaning on expert opinion and careful research, we might be able to help the press and the politician come up with a better way.

Since then, the JSB Center has sponsored or co-sponsored six conferences on these issues. The last one took place on March 29, 1990, at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. It was called "School for Scandal: Lessons for the Politicians and the Press." This conference, like the others, attracted many politicians, journalists and scholars, among them, Senator Alan Simpson; Representatives Julian Dixon, Lynn Martin, William Thomas; journalists David Broder, Timothy Russert, Michael Oreskes, Hodding Carter, Dotty Lynch, Paul Taylor, Gwen Ifill, Brooks Jackson, James Squier; consultants Ed Rollins, Frank Greer, Doug Berman, Bob Squires; and scholars Gary Orren, Stephen Klaidman and Lewis Wolfson. Many ideas and

proposals were advanced, criticized, praised, and denounced. But if there was a single message that emerged from the Conference, it was, by common consensus, the exceptional one articulated by Sissela Bok, a professor of philosophy at Brandeis University and one of the nation's top ethicists, who was our luncheon speaker.

Professor Bok is a brilliant, soft-spoken scholar, who was educated at the Sorbonne, George Washington University and Harvard University, where she got her PhD in 1970. She has written dozens of articles and seven books, the most recent being *A Strategy for Peace*:

Human Values and the Threat of War. Two of her books have had a major impact on me and my students—*Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, and *Secrets, On The Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. She chose to speak about the state of collapsing values in American politics. It is my pleasure to present the text of her address, and to suggest that any of your comments be sent to her at Brandeis University or to me at Harvard University. I'll make sure she gets them.

**Marvin Kalb,
Edward R. Murrow Professor,
Director, Joan Shorenstein
Barone Center on the Press,
Politics and Public Policy**

**John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University**

SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

The concept of a "School for Scandal" in the context of today's politics raises intriguing questions. What kinds of teaching and what kinds of learning might be at issue? Who are the instructors when it comes to scandal? And what would it take to begin unlearning some of the lessons they purvey?

If we look to Richard Sheridan's play, "The School for Scandal," we come upon a tantalizing spectacle of domestic scandals brewing, of trust violated, and of a hypocritical scoundrel seemingly triumphing over unsuspecting innocents. Three scheming scandal-mongers—Lady Sneerwell, Sir Benjamin Backbite, and Mrs. Candour—preside over it all in what they call a "college of scandal." They know just how to "strike a character dead at every word." But just as all seems lost, a rich and astute uncle, Sir Oliver Surface, returns unexpectedly from India. With a few masterful strokes, Sir Oliver manages to nip the scandals in the bud, unmask the hypocrisy and the scheming, restore harmony in the household, and silence the scandal-mongers, at least momentarily.

Then as now, it mattered to be adept at getting certain scandals into the papers and at keeping others out. As David Garrick points out in the prologue to the play, the press plays a central role in disseminating such information:

*A School for Scandal! tell me, I beseech
you,
Needs there a school this modish art to
teach you?
No need of lessons now, the knowing think;
We might as well be taught to eat and
drink.
Caused by a dearth of scandal, should the
vapours
Distress our fair ones—let them read the
papers;
Their powerful mixtures such disorders hit;
Crave what you will—there's quantum
sufficit.*

Garrick then recounts how Lady Wormwood, who loves tattle, calls for the morning papers,

praising their "bold and free" gossip, only to be aghast when she comes across an item about herself:

*Oh! That's me! The villain!
Throw it behind the fire and never more
Let that vile paper come within my door.*

Sheridan's domestic comedy of abuses planned and unmasked was first produced in 1777. A year before, the American colonies had declared their independence in response to very different abuses calling for a more dependable remedy. They protested government actions violating the rights of citizens and in turn the public's trust. And the remedy had to be a government that derived its "just powers" from "the consent of the governed."

By now, however, one scandal after another has eroded the public's trust in "the just powers of government." And the distortions and smear tactics of recent elections have led many to doubt the very meaning of that phrase "the consent of the governed."

The results are paradoxical: at the very time when politicians, reporters, and citizens seem to have become obsessed with scandal, they also seem strangely inured to abuses and to societal needs that would otherwise constitute intolerable scandals. And just when peoples the world over look to our democratic traditions for guidance in how to safeguard fundamental rights, many in our own country feel trapped in a vicious circle of manipulative and trivializing political discourse.

In any vicious circle, a number of factors contribute to a downward spiraling. We see it, for instance, when our nation's drug crisis is exacerbated by poverty, family break-down, inadequate health care, crime, and discrimination, and in turn exacerbates all of these. When it comes to the erosion of public trust in government, politicians, the press, and the public affect one another in similarly debilitating ways. The way to begin to break out of such vicious circles is to bring about forceful change at as many points as possible of their downward

spiraling. As social theorists have argued, vicious circles are dynamic systems, not static ones; by changing the direction and momentum of any one factor, all the others will be affected. That is how one can help to turn a vicious circle into what they call a "virtuous circle."

As we grapple for ways to regulate the most nefarious forms of political campaigning and misconduct in office, a number of proposals for legislative and other reforms have been put forth. Some will doubtless cut back on abuses. But no set of reforms will set things to right by themselves, so long as we do not address the underlying problem of the erosion of trust in our society. So long as there is such deep distrust between the public and the government, between the government and the press, and between the press and the public, the political will to make adequate reforms succeed will be missing.

If citizens do not trust what candidates for public office or public officials say, and if they place equally little confidence in what they read in newspapers or see on TV, then they cannot interpret the information that is all they have to go on in voting or in making other choices affecting public life. This cuts at the very roots of what we mean by democracy and by its being founded on the consent of the governed. It becomes one more reason for not exercising the right to vote, one more reason to opt out of social and community responsibilities. Once that happens, it becomes increasingly difficult for a society to meet even its most urgent needs with anything like adequate cooperation and resources.

In America, distrust of government and cynicism about the political process have reached crisis proportions. Voter participation is at an all-time low, and many who do vote are disillusioned about the political process. A Gallup poll after the 1988 presidential election found that 15 percent of those who actually did take the trouble to vote said that they would very likely have cast a vote of no confidence in any candidate for president had they had the opportunity to do so; another 15 percent said it was somewhat likely that they would have done the same. As for all those who never voted at all, an even higher proportion would surely give as their reason for staying home precisely such a lack of confidence.

If we ask what it is that creates such a level of distrust in politicians, the answer is that it is no different from what makes people distrustful of anyone else, including family members, col-

leagues, and friends. Above all, it is the suspicion, based on past experience, that their word cannot be trusted: that they will lie and break their promises, so long as they think they can get away with it.

Some lies, moreover, turn out to have been only the tip of the iceberg. Many in the voting public did believe President Lyndon Johnson's assurances about Vietnam, only to learn that they had been drawn into a huge and divisive war and to find out, over time, about the webs of deceit and lawlessness that it had involved. As citizens have learned about the Watergate, Iran-Contra, HUD and other scandals, their cumulative experience of being deceived continues to build up. Once that begins to happen, even the most honest politicians are suspect in the public eye.

The damage goes beyond the erosion of trust. Inevitably, it leads also to imitation. The examples of lawlessness and deceit by individuals in politics as on Wall Street and elsewhere have come to create a "school for scandal" all their own. Studies show, for example, a rise on many campuses in the proportion of students who say that they have cheated on examinations in the past. Their rationale appears to be that since they regard the nation's leaders as amoral, they might as well follow suit when it serves their purposes. A recent poll of high school seniors shows that 66 percent say that they would lie to achieve a business objective—a figure which led one business executive who heard it to exclaim that the other 34 percent must surely be lying. These students have gotten a message loud and clear—that it is all right to cut corners so long as it works.

All public figures influence what students and others conclude about what is and is not acceptable conduct. But government officials who lie and violate the law exercise an especially debilitating teaching function all their own. As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, government breeds contempt for the law when it becomes a law-breaker: "it invites every man to become a law unto himself."

The public distrust of government that comes from genuine or only suspected scandals is increased still further by calumny and innuendo—what Maimonides called "the dust of the evil tongue." Contemporary techniques of polling and publicity have brought practices of distortion to new levels of sophistication. Whether these practices are employed to destroy opponents in political campaigns or infiltrated into press reports as disinformation, they

contribute greatly to the present erosion of public trust. Domestically, they damage the social fabric; when found to have been employed internationally, as in the Iran-Contra affair, they also injure a nation's credibility and good name abroad.

The dilemma for political candidates can be sharp. They may be told that they will lose an upcoming election unless they engage in forms of innuendo and distortion to which they have, in the past, taken strong exception. They know how much money has been invested in their campaigns and how many supporters have a stake in their victory. But if they go along for the sake of winning, they will not only have contributed to the erosion of trust in society but also compromised their own principles and raised doubts about their character.

In recent political campaigns, the "character issue" has come to stand for concern about the personal aspects of a candidate's life and about sexual matters in particular. This concern has obscured the more fundamental view of character as personal integrity and adherence to principles. If candidates invoke principles that they plainly do not take seriously, it is their character, in the sense of integrity, that is in doubt; and this, in turn, gives reason to distrust, not only their campaigning but their conduct in office, should they be elected. It is this connection between character and trust that Emerson stressed in saying that we know very well "which of us has been just to himself":

In that man, though he knew no ill of him, he put no trust. In that other, though they had seldom met, authentic signs had yet passed, to signify that he might be trusted as one who had an interest in his own character.

Representatives of the press and of radio and television, likewise, have reason to be concerned about their role in disseminating rumors and falsehoods. Many in the media have to balance possible short-term gains against the social and personal damage to which they may contribute, however unwittingly. Many in the media are currently reexamining their role in the proliferation of "attack ads" and character vilification in recent campaigns. How should they balance reporting, criticism, and being the paid conduits for such messages? However distorted, accusations are known to sell copies and improve ratings. Other choices are equally troubling. How should reporters go about

verifying the torrents of leaks that they receive, many of which will turn out to be false? And by what criteria should they weigh whether even verifiable leaks are overly intrusive?

Scandal-mongering, too, breeds imitation, creating a school of its own. Campaign consultants instruct political candidates. In turn, their campaigns offer lessons to the public and invite retaliation on the part of their adversaries. Here, again, the damage goes far beyond the intended victims to affect the entire society. By now, many highly qualified individuals are reluctant to run for public office. Those who do run often feel that they are caught up in a system that they are powerless to change. And that same sense of powerlessness is reflected among reporters and in the public, to the point where urgent national problems that constitute scandals in their own right go untended.

The consensus is building that we can no longer afford to go on with politics as usual—least of all in its present guise. The distrust that is now rampant stands in the way of all that we want to accomplish as a nation. But if there is going to be meaningful change, then we have to do more than pass new laws. We need to challenge, first of all, that debilitating sense of powerlessness, and then consider the means of restoring a modicum of trust.

Few could help us more with both endeavors than Václav Havel, the playwright and current president of Czechoslovakia, who recently visited our country. Havel's speech before Congress generated both admiration and uneasiness on the part of his listeners. Here, truly, was a patriot and a man of character—one who, in Emerson's sense of the word, "had an interest in his own character" to an exceptional degree. He had the courage to struggle against a political system with a virtual stranglehold on public officials, the press, and the public. True, not everyone is cut out to be a hero. But in hearing Havel speak, it was difficult to avoid reflecting on how much less it would take to stand up against the pressures and temptations of even the most ruthless American campaign.

In a remarkable article published five years ago in translation—"The Power of the Powerless"—Havel takes issue still more directly with the excuse of powerlessness. It is possible to threaten even a rigid totalitarian system, almost entirely built on lies, he argues, by refusing to go along with those lies in one's own life and by choosing, instead, to "live within the truth," as he puts it. Shopkeepers can refuse to hang mendacious political slogans in their

windows, writers can refuse to contribute to the propaganda machine, reporters can refuse to collaborate with staged government events, judges can refuse to carry out unjust laws. Clearly, it is dangerous for them to do so. They may lose their jobs, see their children denied a chance for education, go to prison, even face death. But each refusal to go along threatens the system by openly challenging the entire structure of lies on which it rests.

This past year, we have seen the impact, in one country after another, of individuals like Havel joining together to overcome the confining political systems imposed upon them. By now, they serve as models for many others asking how they might help in breaking out of seemingly invincible vicious circles. Who are we, in that case, to claim powerlessness and the necessity for going along with shabby practices that are also so harmful to society as a whole?

No one imagines that refusing to take part in such practices will wipe them out for good. The question is, rather, how best to cut them down to size. A good place to begin is in one's own life and one's own line of work. And a good set of issues to begin with are those connected with lying—from the minor lies in everyday life all the way to the carefully planned schemes of public deceit—since they damage trust so directly. Citizens can join in protesting deceptive ads meant to influence their votes and support candidates whose word they have reason to believe they can trust. Politicians can run strong campaigns based on the issues and respond forcefully when attacked without stooping to innuendo—even make pacts to that effect with their opponents early in a campaign. Doing so will take ingenuity and planning ahead. But it is wrong to leap to the conclusion that compromising one's principles, as in taking

part in political smear campaigns, is the only "workable" choice.

Public officials and candidates for public office bear special responsibility for that damage. In today's school for scandal, they are the principal teachers. But in a democracy, it is not enough for citizens to respond by voicing their distrust of government and of the press. Their categorical and often unthinking dismissal of all politicians contributes greatly to the problem. By opting out of serious participation in the political process, they help corrupt that process.

Likewise, in a country with a free press, it is not enough for journalists to bemoan the shallowness of political discourse and the evils of campaigning without asking about their own collusion. Even the choice of scandals on which to focus too often represents the path of least resistance.

In reflecting on the practices that most erode trust, and on what changing them would mean, we have to begin to see trust as the fragile social resource that it is—one that can be cumulatively damaged, polluted, even poisoned just as much as the natural resources of water or air. As soon as we do, then the same questions arise for each one among us and for every profession: To what extent do our actions debilitate or help restore that social resource—the atmosphere of at least minimal trust needed for any society to address even its most urgent problems? How can we avoid being free riders damaging that environment? What can we do to help shift the balance? And isn't it just possible that the time has finally come to take concerted steps to unlearn some of the lessons taught in today's political school for scandal?