

There Is No Honour In Victimhood

Former President Bill Clinton has been **talking** about his impeachment and the sexual peccadilloes that led up to it:

Clinton tells Rather he is proud that he fought the impeachment battle that failed to drive him from office. "I didn't quit, I never thought of resigning and I stood up to it and beat it back," he tells Rather. "The whole battle was a badge of honor. I don't see it as a stain, because it was illegitimate," says Clinton of the impeachment process that he calls "an abuse of power."

[...]

The failure high on his list of regrets is the affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky that he terms "a terrible moral error."

He's likely to come in for a lot of criticism for calling his impeachment battle a badge of honour. The fact is this: he made a moral error. But it was not that terrible an error. He tried to cover it up, by lying. That was much worse (mainly because of the harm it did to Monica Lewinsky), but neither the original error nor the lies were even remotely serious enough to warrant impeachment. Clinton was indeed the victim of an abuse of power. The perpetrators ought to be ashamed.

None of that confers any honour on Clinton.

Thu, 06/17/2004 - 14:24 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

huh

I thought he meant *beating them* was a badge of honor. Beating people who attack you, even if they shouldn't be attacking you, can have honor in it. I don't see any victimhood in the quote.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Thu, 06/17/2004 - 16:22 | [reply](#)

battle

The need for impeachment is not so easily deflected as you

describe. It was the cumulative effect of Clinton's multiple lies that pushed his detractors to propose a futile attempt at his removal when the electorate refused to do so.

He was and is slimey. He defamed the office of the president. He did not however deserve to be impeached, especially as he now views his sheer survival as honorable. But there is no honor to be found on either side in the whole mess.

KC Fleming

by a reader on Fri, 06/18/2004 - 15:18 | [reply](#)

Yes there is no honor in vict

Yes there is no honor in victimhood but there is honor in Clinton's support for Bush's Iraq policy today, especially compared with most other Democrats. The difference is, he had everything to gain and nothing to lose by "fighting" the impeachment, so it's no great credit to him that he did it. Supporting Bush today is case of doing the right thing whether it helps him personally or not.

by a reader on Fri, 06/18/2004 - 15:47 | [reply](#)

Impeachment should be easier, not harder

This Crackerjack-box history of the impeachment situation is somewhat unsatisfying in comparison with one's memory of the actual events (if one has any).

He didn't merely "lie". He lied under oath (perjury), and pressured others to do the same (subornation of perjury). In common parlance these are what is known as "crimes". He used the power of his political office to grant favors to a witness in exchange for her not giving damaging testimony against him, which was corrupt to at least some extent. You acknowledge damage done to Monica Lewinsky (for some reason; in fact, she committed perjury and deserves little sympathy) yet ignore damage done to Paula Jones, who was the actual complainant against Clinton in a civil case under a duly written law, and who was denied justice under that law because of Clinton's shenanigans.

Reasonable folks can differ about how serious these acts were or whether they justified removing him from office, but they cannot be simply papered over with the word "lie". "Lying" is something politicians regularly do and to some extent is unavoidable. Perjuring and suborning perjury are inexcusable for the chief of the executive branch.

One can also, by the way, use the discussion to seriously call into question the underlying *laws* which brought his acts into the legal spotlight (sexual harrassment laws). Yes, perhaps indeed he should never have been placed in a position where he was forced to tell the truth about adultery, or be committing perjury, in the absence of a criminal charge of harm against some person etc. I'll go with that.

I'm suspicious however of people who had that revelation suddenly

dawn on them only when the perjury-trapped person in question happened to be Bill Clinton. It can happen to a thousand and one Joe Schmoes and go un lamented. You will notice, in addition, that sexual harrassment laws have not in any way been pulled back or repealed as a result of the horrendous unspeakable absurdities perpretrated against poor Bill Clinton in their name. Why should that be? Didn't we all agree that it was horrible that Clinton was forced to testify about his personal life? Where are the impassioned pleas to repeal sexual harrassment laws then, in order to prevent such atrocities from taking place ever again? Or are sexual harrassment laws only absurd when applied against people we like? This is the true damage Clinton did - to the notion of rule of law, to justice applying equally, and blindly. The tacit message is that sexual harassment laws were *intended* only for use against (R)s but not (D)s; or for use against the plebes, but not the powerful.

Another thing I'd like to see put to rest is the idea that nobility or honor can, even in theory, somehow accrue to Clinton fighting *his own damn impeachment* (uh, excuse me, what did we expect?) merely by ex cathedra asserting that to impeach him was (somehow) "illegitimate". Sorry but there was nothing "illegitimate" about it and **The World's** assertion that it was not "warranted" is little more supportable. Impeachment is a perfectly legitimate procedure written into the US Constitution. The standards for who can be impeached and why are amazingly open-ended and, in the end - as was pointed out during Watergate, I believe - boil down to, An "impeachable" offense is whatever the House says it is. One of the things which bothered me *most* about Clinton surviving impeachment is that it seems to have raised the bar to the point where frankly, I'm pretty sure that no President will ever be impeached again. I'd almost rather see Presidents impeached left and right. But perhaps that's just me. ;-)

--Blix

by a reader on Tue, 06/22/2004 - 00:01 | [reply](#)

Not morally legitimate

Blix wrote:

Impeachment is a perfectly legitimate procedure written into the US Constitution. The standards for who can be impeached and why are amazingly open-ended and, in the end - as was pointed out during Watergate, I believe - boil down to, An "impeachable" offense is whatever the House says it is.

By writing this, are you not conceding that impeachment is a political and not a legitimately legal process? (This is reminiscent of **The World's** discussion [here](#), BTW.) Yes, it's constitutional, like a wide variety of other political processes. But not all political action is morally defensible. At his impeachment, Clinton was not facing the rule of law. He was facing a concerted misuse of Constitutional mechanisms with the intention of overriding the electorate's choice of President. His perjury, too, must be understood in that context.

It was perjury before a Star Chamber, not a rule-of-law court.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Tue, 06/22/2004 - 00:42 | [reply](#)

Not a criminal trial, Prez not a king

Again it's all well and good to assert out of clear blue sky that to impeach that particular President for those things was "not morally defensible", but that assertion is based on almost nothing of substance. Why don't you just come out and call it "EEEE-VIL"? That might *really* convince people! I don't see how Whether To Impeach maps so easily onto the "moral" spectrum as you seem to think. If at all. Perhaps one needs to have liked Bill Clinton to have seen this (not saying you did, but obviously I didn't, and perhaps it would've helped if I had ;).

But part of the problem is that the template through which you view these events is inapt. No, impeachment is not a legal process, "rule of law" or otherwise. But there is no reason to expect it to have been or criticize it for not having been. Impeachment is never a legal process, never obeys the "rule of law", and your criticism could be leveled against any impeachment, of anyone, past present or future. (But you choose to level it against that *particular* one for some reason, of course.)

Bill Clinton was not being criminally charged with anything in the first place. Had the Senate voted the other way, he would not have gone to jail or received any other form of punishment, or had his rights abrogated in any way whatsoever (absent a future, actual criminal trial for something). Impeachment was not a criminal trial. It was not even a civil trial (monetary damages were not on the table).

He would simply have been removed from the office of the Presidency, the occupation of which was not, as you seem to think, his inherent or civil right, but rather was a temporary privilege of authority he had been granted at the pleasure of the people of the US, and which - theoretically - could have been revoked at any time by their representatives in Congress, by impeaching and then voting to remove him. Or so it says in the Constitution. Impeachment is a (the only!) means for the people (through their representatives) to remove their chief executive from office.

Yes, the impeachment procedure, as set up, is *reminiscent* of a trial court - with the House, roughly, acting as a "grand jury" (deciding whether to "indict"), and the Senate acting as a "jury" (in what is actually called an impeachment trial). You seem to have read too much into that analogy though. So the fact that impeachment doesn't obey the "rule of law" (which it NEVER CAN) doesn't make it "morally indefensible".

To speak of the Congress removing the President by perfectly constitutional means, or just *attempting* to do so, as being "immoral" - *whatever* the circumstances - is quite odd. "Bad idea", "wrong", "not serious enough misdeeds to justify", sure... but "immoral"?? This seems prejudicial towards the interests of the guy

who has the privilege of being President over the rights of the people who allowed him to do so. And why on earth would one have such a prejudice? Bill Clinton still being President was a "moral" issue? Was he a king ruling by "divine right"?

"Moral indefensibility" as such simply is neither here nor there, and lack of "rule of law" doesn't matter; it can't make impeachment "morally indefensible". Unless of course it makes **all** impeachments "morally indefensible". Is that what you're saying? If so, I again lament the sad fact that Clinton has apparently ruined impeachment for us **forever**, depriving the people of the lone Constitutional procedure they had once enjoyed for removal of a President (prior to the conclusion of his 4-year term) they through their representatives desired to remove. Apparently he's convinced a lot of really, really smart people that to remove a President prior to the conclusion of 4 years can somehow be "immoral"! Presidents have a "moral" right to serve (reign?) for at least 4 years now! Again, this is the true damage his "noble" efforts did.

On a similar note, trying to use "with the intention of overriding the electorate's choice of President" as part of your case for "morally indefensible" is equally inapt. By definition, any impeachment trial of **any** President would have to be with the intention of "overriding the electorate's choice of President" (i.e. removing him in favor of his Vice President - I hasten to add that Gore, and not some Republican, would have ascended to the Presidency had Clinton been removed). Unless of course the particular President being impeached had reached that office by some other means than election, which happens relatively seldom. You make it sound oh so horrible to have this horrible "intention" but if so, one must wonder why the author of the Constitution explicitly provided for precisely that procedure, and why its signatories didn't correct the error. Guess they were just too dumb to think through the obvious straightforward "immoral" ramifications, that if they allowed something called "impeachment" this might (gasp!) "override the electorate's choice of President" and a President would be leaving office prior to the end of his 4-year-term, which apparently is "immoral" (?).

A lot of people seemed to have this impression, that what was being done was not merely an attempt to remove him from office but an abrogation of Clinton's rights, that in attempting to remove him from office this was somehow metaphysically tantamount to throwing him in jail or some other punishment. I can only marvel at the strong identification some people seem to have with a head of state and his fates and fortunes, in an almost vicarious way. "Poor Bill Clinton! He wouldn't get to be President anymore! Not fair! He has a right to still be President!" Huh????

I can only reiterate that ideally, impeachment should be easier and not harder. And in passing, people need to stop identifying so much with (fantasizing about being?) the President over and above the Congress; it's not healthy for constitutional republicanism.

P.S. As for what to say about your characterization of (former Bill

Clinton student, who eventually threw out the case) Judge Susan Webber Wright's court (the one in which the sexual-harrassment suit, under a duly-written law, was being heard against Bill Clinton) as a "Star Chamber, not a rule-of-law court", I'm somewhat at a loss. I suppose I could just give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you speak from a basis of legal expertise + firsthand knowledge of the proceedings that went on in her court, to characterize it as such. Surely it is not just a vile, unsupported slander of Judge Wright and her court based on nothing?

The World's and/or your post, even if correct in the main (impeachment not a good idea, etc), have the flavor of someone speaking about impeachment from a distance, without knowing much about what actually happened. It's a phenomenon I encounter quite often when speaking with non-Americans who viewed all of the events through the prism of stories in their press or perhaps CNN. "they impeached him for having an affair", "all that he did was lie about sex", etc. This is really a cartoon version of the actual events. And often there is no clear separation in such peoples' minds between the *sexual-harrassment lawsuit* (if they even know there *was* one - nevermind if they know who "Paula Jones" was), and the *impeachment trial*. I'm guessing (to be courteous) that your "Star Chamber" bombthrow was merely an instance of the same phenomenon. Unless of course you really do have good reason to (whether or not you know this is what you were doing) question Judge Wright's abilities, legal expertise, decisions, and application of the sexual-harrassment law(s) in question? Best,

--Blix

by a reader on Tue, 06/22/2004 - 14:50 | [reply](#)

p.p.s.

Two more points.

1. I see that like many, you imply that the "electorate's choice" was for Bill Clinton to serve as President for the 4 years 1997-2001 regardless of what were to happen during those 4 years. Not so. They did not and CANNOT make such a "choice", they have no right to do so.

It was their choice for him to serve as President *under the Constitution*, which is what defines and restricts that office. Implicit in that "choice", even if not all (or no!) Clinton voters were conscious of it as they cast their votes, is the possibility that he could be impeached by the House, since impeachment is explicitly provided for in that Constitution. The electorate (=51% of voters, or however many it takes to make up an electoral college majority) has no authority whatsoever to make, and have respected, a "choice" for someone to serve as chief executive/head of state/commander in chief for 4 years *independently of the constitutional provisions which define and restrict that office,*

any more than 51% of the electorate has the right to impose a

dictator on the other 49%.

Notice that Bill Clinton had to step down after 8 years because the Constitution says so - and this didn't violate the electorate's choice for him to be President because they were perfectly aware of this constitutional provision, or should have been, when they cast their votes. *Similarly*, Bill Clinton could be impeached if the House decided to because the Constitution says so - and this didn't violate the electorate's choice for him to be President because they were perfectly aware of this constitutional provision, *or should have been*, when they cast their votes.

The possibility of being "impeached" is part and parcel of being President. There is *no such thing* as "being President" apart from the Constitution which defines "President", and part of that definition is "can be impeached". Ignorance ("nobody told me he could be impeached! not fair! I wanted him for 4 years no matter what! respect that desire of mine!") is no excuse and I have no sympathy for it. 51% of the electorate has absolutely no right whatsoever to impose a "President" on the other 49% and insist that he remain so, without respecting the Constitutional restrictions on that office, and impeachment is one such restriction. Or **was**, anyway.

2. However true it may be that Republicans' support of impeachment/conviction was political and did not respect a "rule of law", the same criticism (for what it's worth - not much) applies equally to Democrats and others who opposed conviction. Notice that all (D) Senators voted Bill Clinton-(D) "not guilty" of the acts for which he was impeached, acts which (regardless of whether the impeachment should have been handed to the Senate for those acts) no reasonable person can possibly argue Bill Clinton did not actually commit. In other words their "not guilty" vote was not based on a sincere deliberation that Clinton did not commit those acts for which he was impeached, but rather, entirely on their desire that - regardless of whether he committed the acts - Clinton remain in office. In short, justice was NOT blind, the Senate vote NOT TO REMOVE was ALSO "political" and did not obey the "rule of law".

But hey that's ok I guess. For some reason.

by a reader on Tue, 06/22/2004 - 17:58 | [reply](#)

Did they vote him not guilty of the acts?

Notice that all (D) Senators voted Bill Clinton-(D) "not guilty" of the acts for which he was impeached

I can't remember the details, but did they ever vote on whether he was guilty of the acts for which he was impeached? Weren't they just voting on a motion which both said that he committed the acts *and* that they amounted to high crimes and misdemeanors for which he deserved to be removed from office?

by a reader on Tue, 06/22/2004 - 18:23 | [reply](#)

yes

Click: "**The perjury charge was defeated with 55 "not guilty" votes and 45 "guilty" votes. On the obstruction-of-justice article, the chamber was evenly split, 50-50.**" Vote breakdown (GUILTY or NOT GUILTY next to each name and under each article) can be found at that link.

by a reader on Tue, 06/22/2004 - 19:19 | [reply](#)

yes?

That CNN story quotes "guilty" and "not guilty" but did the senate really vote guilty or not guilty instead of aye and nay as usual or is that just CNN dumbing down the story? Anyway, that doesn't answer my question which was did they ever vote on whether he committed certain acts, or did they only vote on whether he committed certain acts *and* they amounted to high crimes and misdemeanors for which he deserved to be removed from office?

by a reader on Wed, 06/23/2004 - 14:20 | [reply](#)

Star Chamber

To Blixa: Yes, sorry about that: I confused the two proceedings! I forgot that (some of?) the perjury in question was in a real court and therefore much more serious morally than perjury in a political court.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Wed, 06/23/2004 - 18:43 | [reply](#)

to reader: you have a point

Everything I have seen suggests that the impeachment trial is a trial (political trial is a good way to put it) and that nominally the votes are called either "guilty" or "not guilty".

That doesn't mean I don't think you have a point. The most neutral way for me to answer is to point you to the text of the articles (**1**, **2**) of impeachment which they were voting on. I think we can agree that, plainly, and in effect, a vote of "not guilty" (despite being denoted by the phrase "not guilty") was a vote to reject some aspect or another of the texts, both of which contain "he did X" stuff and "he should be removed for doing X" stuff.

By voting "not guilty" are they rejecting the "he did X?" part or the "he should be removed for doing X part?" Well, I can't say. Maybe in some cases they really **didn't** think he did X (although I doubt it). Maybe in other cases they thought, or didn't doubt, that he did X, but didn't think X was serious enough to warrant removal (which is why you have a point). In at least Arlen Specter's case he seems to have decided that Clinton having done X was "not proven, under Scottish law" or Scottish rite or something.

But for at least some of them - I suspect most, your estimate may

differ - they thought he did X, but didn't really care, and although they might think doing X pretty serious in other circumstances, they weren't going to let a (D) President (or a President they liked..) be removed from office no matter what, at least not unless the polls indicated that they'd be punished on election day for not doing so (which they didn't), and so, because (obviously) they had full knowledge that the *effect* of casting a "guilty" vote was that it was a vote that said "yes remove him from office", they voted "not guilty" for this consequentialist reason, with virtually no reference whatsoever to the act X influencing that vote in their mind.

And that's basically what I'm saying: that (at least for some of the voters, at least to some extent..) the vote was *political* in nature, rather than a sober and objective deliberation as to Clinton's "guilt" of the acts or (although many affected this pretense of course) an objective, scientific weighing of those acts against some supposed objective, measurable standard of what is "impeachable" and what isn't. What I'm saying is that you simply can't squeeze the Politics out of that vote.

For what it's worth. (Again, not much.)

For the record, (and to avoid confusion) the reason I say it damaged the rule of law is not because the impeachment vote was politicized and didn't obey the rule of law (impeachment votes never really can..), but just because the chief executive pretty obviously broke the laws and was allowed to remain in office. That's just kinda bad, sets a bad example, etc. Maybe that Bad was outweighed by the other Good accruing from the fact that impeachment shouldn't have happened, I don't know.

Anyway, this point I've been hashing out with you is much smaller: "the (R)s' vote was politicized? yes but so was the (D)s". I don't think we're that far apart as long as I don't overreach to make this point ;-) Best,

by a reader on Wed, 06/23/2004 - 20:59 | [reply](#)

to DD

ok :)

I could also probably provisionally be convinced that the impeachment trial if not Webber's court was a "Star Chamber" then. The problem is, that criticism would apply to all impeachment trials, in the sense that: an opponent of any impeachment conviction can level the criticism, claim that it alone justifies a "not guilty" verdict, and there's really no rational way to rebut. Impeachment trials simply are never set up as rule-of-law courts and as I told "reader" you can't squeeze the politics out of them.

Which (if the logic that this makes them invalid "Star Chambers" carries the day) means, the American people have effectively lost a perfectly Constitutional means they (through their representatives) had once enjoyed for removing a President prior to the end of his 4 year term. This is what bothers me, the raising of the

"impeachable" bar to unattainable levels and the overblown rhetoric about "Star Chambers" makes impeachment highly unlikely ever to happen again. Which is, well, bad (even if it was indeed incorrect to impeach, and would have been incorrect to remove, Clinton).

On the other hand I suppose I could console myself with the thought that many of the impeachment-opposers were simply being disingenuous about all their "that's not impeachable" and "this is a Star Chamber/witch hunt" stuff, and would be completely inconsistent and withdraw 99% of those rhetorical objections to it if/when it comes to be used against a President of the opposite party ;-)

Best,

by a reader on Sat, 06/26/2004 - 00:18 | [reply](#)

webber

=wright

by a reader on Sat, 06/26/2004 - 00:19 | [reply](#)

Impeachment and Star Chambers

I think there should be such a thing as impeachment and I think it can only be a political process and not a judicial one. I think that the US Constitution gets it about right.

By 'political and not judicial' I mean that the criteria for impeachability cannot be specified in advance in a Constitution or in legislation. I do not mean that it is morally OK (even though it is Constitutional) for legislators to use the process to remove a President because his political policies are harmful or because they hate him, or that impeachment should ever be used to resolve a current political controversy. Equally, it is not morally right for legislators to shield a President from impeachment just because his political views are right. Therefore honourable legislators should formulate, in their own minds, a criterion of impeachability which gives the same answer if they imagine a President of the opposite party being accused of the same misdeeds. The criterion should be non-judicial in another sense too: the purpose of impeachment in the US system should not be to punish wrongdoers who happen to be President: that should be the job of normal courts. It should be to prevent the nation from being harmed by a bad President, acting as President. Of course the party opposing the President's will always consider that he is in some sense harming the nation and indifferent to its welfare. Impeachable crimes or wrongdoings should therefore be actions, such as accepting bribes or committing treason, in which the President displays indifference or hostility to the welfare of the nation in a sense that is independent of current political controversies. Sufficiently serious crimes which are not directly of that type should nevertheless be impeachable if it can be (honestly) argued that a person who would do X would also probably have no compunction in harming the nation, or could no longer have enough respect among the people to be able to lead them effectively, but those are slippery slopes that one should

resist going down except in uncontroversial cases.

It is not the fact that impeachment is a political process that made this particular one seem like a 'Star Chamber' proceeding to me. It is the fact that it did not meet most of the above criteria for being a morally right political process.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Sat, 06/26/2004 - 02:01 | [reply](#)

Clinton defamed office?

stuff and nonsense from a Clinton hater...explore the record of all of our presidents before you condemn one you so dislike...try reading up on the subject.

by a reader on Sat, 06/26/2004 - 14:42 | [reply](#)

DD,

I do not mean that it is morally OK (even though it is Constitutional) for legislators to use the process to remove a President because his political policies are harmful or because they hate him

How about cuz he broke the law and they think so? You impugn the motives of the (R) impeachment voters and in some/many cases you may be right, but again this is a criticism which can be made of any vote to impeach. You're entitled to be suspicious of motives of course but "be suspicious of their motives!" is obviously always going to be the rallying cry of the accused in any impeachment. Can't **always** be correct

Therefore honourable legislators should formulate, in their own minds, a criterion of impeachability which gives the same answer if they imagine a President of the opposite party being accused of the same misdeeds.

Sounds good to me. No doubt in my mind that these activities by an (R) President would have garnered lots of "guilty" votes from (D)s, but of course YMMV.

The criterion should be non-judicial in another sense too: the purpose of impeachment in the US system should not be to punish wrongdoers who happen to be President: that should be the job of normal courts. It should be to prevent the nation from being harmed by a bad President, acting as President.

Hm. I'll go with this too, with two caveats: (1) in some cases normal courts could be prevented from going after the President for reasons of "executive privilege" etc; (2) the "prevent harm" criterion could actually **lower** the bar for impeachment not raise it, in some cases. (example: it came out in the Clinton investigations that he had told Lewinsky they had to be careful on the phone cuz some foreign intel service [some say: Israeli] was probably snooping; was he just talkin', or did he really know this?

did this leave him open to blackmail? Blackmail re: an affair could

harm the country even if there were no illegalities involved. And notice how his reaction to knowing about foreign snoops on to his affair - assuming there really were some - was "continue the affair but try to be more secret", not "discontinue the affair because it's recklessly leaving me open to exposure and/or blackmail". Wouldn't the latter have been better for the country? Isn't it valid to think a President who chooses the former has made a choice which harms the country to at least some extent?)

Impeachable crimes or wrongdoings should therefore be actions, such as accepting bribes or committing treason, in which the President displays indifference or hostility to the welfare of the nation in a sense that is independent of current political controversies.

Bribery and Treason are no-brainers seeing as how they are specifically mentioned in the Constitution. Obviously it's in the "high Crimes and Misdemeanors" part where all the wiggle room is. Unless this was a vacuous addition to the Constitution then "Treason, Bribery" cannot be an exhaustive list of "impeachable" offenses.

And as for "indifference or hostility to the welfare of the nation" what exactly is "I'm being snooped on in my secret affair, but I'll keep doing it"? Maybe the threat this posed to the welfare of the nation was *small*, but I don't think it nonzero.

BTW I don't know what you mean by "independent of current political controversies"; aside from the impeachment scandal, what current political controversies do you have in mind?

Sufficiently serious crimes which are not directly of that type should nevertheless be impeachable if it can be (honestly) argued that a person who would do X would also probably have no compunction in harming the nation, or could no longer have enough respect among the people to be able to lead them effectively, but those are slippery slopes that one should resist going down except in uncontroversial cases.

Why? Why not err on the side of caution and, When in doubt kick him out? I say follow those slippery slopes pretty darn far.

Again: if we learn that X is of a type who will have silly illicit affairs, with the full knowledge that foreign intelligence services may try to learn about them (thus tries doubly-hard, futilely, to keep them secret), it's only a short step (down that slippery slope) to get you to exposure and blackmail. Why bother the risk?

Are individual Presidents *that* important? I still don't understand the "person-centric" thinking here, why all the focus on how high a bar there should be for removing an Important Person from office and the burden against. IMHO it's the *office* that's important, not the person. (Maybe I have to be a more Important person myself to instinctively sympathize with the person over the office, who knows... ;-)

It is not the fact that impeachment is a political process that made

this particular one seem like a 'Star Chamber' proceeding to me. It is the fact that it did not meet most of the above criteria for being a morally right political process.

I see, fair enough. IMHO it did meet most of those criteria *shrug* So, we have an honest difference of opinion. Obviously mine could be wrong but I still don't think it's as cut and dried as you'd made it out to be. Or perhaps (now seems likely) you didn't make it out to be as such, and I just overreacted to your assertion of immorality, which I should have better understood implicitly connotes "in your opinion" :-)

Best,

--Blix

by a reader on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 22:19 | [reply](#)

current politics controversies

like, you wouldn't impeach a president for lowering taxes, or for abolishing social security, or for banning gay marriage. these are all current controversies.

also, you seem to have said that b/c many Ds would have voted guilty for a R prez, they should have voted guilty for Clinton to avoid a double standard. well, you could just as well say, b/c they voted not guilty for clinton, they should also vote not guilty for the R prez. their votes should be the same in both cases, but that could mean twice guilty *or* twice not guilty.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 22:49 | [reply](#)

When in doubt, kick them out?

Why not err on the side of caution and, When in doubt kick him out?

Because the ability of our political system to foster the creation of knowledge depends on its ability to focus debate and creativity on the rival theories of what the nation as a whole should do, and abandon ones that are deemed to have failed to survive testing or criticism. For instance, at present, one of the most important areas is the area of how best to avoid 9-11-type disasters. Another one that has been near the top of the list for many decades is how much the government should intervene in the economy with taxes, subsidies and government services. If it were to become commonplace for politicians to lose or gain power for reasons independent of their positions on such issues, the creation of political knowledge would cease.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 22:57 | [reply](#)

to elliot

[current politics] like, you wouldn't impeach a president for lowering taxes, or for abolishing social security, or for banning gay marriage. these are all current controversies.

None of those (rather, their inverses) had anything to do with what Clinton was impeached "for". I'm still confused. There seems to be an assumption here that (R)s had some boring wonky reasons for wanting to impeach Clinton. I really don't get that, I thought the standard party line was that they were salacious puritanical reasons? which is it? ;-)

Explicitly: what "current politics controversies" is it being alleged here had something to do with the impeachment vote/trial? Again, aside from the actual impeachment scandal itself.

gays in the military? I really can't think of anything else.

well, you could just as well say, b/c they voted not guilty for clinton, they should also vote not guilty for the R prez.

I could've, but I didn't, because I don't think in such hypothetical they should've ;-). You're right tho. Consistency by itself only demands the votes be the same. One needs additional criteria to break the symmetry to select either "GG" or "NN", and I'm supplying one: "perjury = you're out". K? --Blix

by a reader on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 00:19 | [reply](#)

DD,

I agree that "commonplace" goes too far but I did not intend to imply by "err on the side of caution" that they should become "commonplace" at all. (We can make huge errors on the side of caution before impeachment convictions of Presidents would become anything close to commonplace.)

As for improving our political knowledge, the problem is you (like many) artificially circumscribe what is political knowledge and what isn't. One kind of, nontrivial IMHO, political knowledge you have ignored is, What kinds of people should we select to be our leaders. Rather, you short-circuit that question by effectively insisting that {has a more correct laundry list of positions on what the nation as a whole should do} be the only, or almost only, criteria for selecting leaders.

I think this is flawed because it ignores a leader's character completely. But surely you agree that to ignore a potential leader's character and vote for him because (you think) he will point "what the nation as a whole should do" in a more correct direction is foolish. Of what use is a seriously morally damaged spokesman for a correct cause? (The Left would do well to heed this lesson in Michael Moore's case, for example.)

Had Clinton lost power it would indeed have been for reasons independent of his (correct, let's stipulate) policy positions on, for example, NAFTA and gays in the military. You are right that this

would strike a blow against our polity learning/encoding/whatever the correct political knowledge in those areas. *However*, the reasons he would have lost power would still have constituted important political knowledge in and of themselves which (perhaps...) could outweigh those losses.

"Do not lie while under oath" is not a trivial message to be sending to either potential future leaders or to the public (by example). The idea that lying-under-oath should not be selected against in leaders means we never improve our political knowledge to an extent necessary to weed out Liars from seeking office. (Not that we ever will, but we can't even *try*?) Neither is "The President is not above the law" as political knowledge completely devoid of salutary benefits.

I do not accept "let's separate the personal from the political". Many people who insist upon doing this have all too understandable reasons for desiring that it be done: raw political ambition and "personal" skeletons. I do not accept that making it easier for such people to enter and hold political offices - rather, that forcing a kind of compartmentalization between the "personal" and the "political" which really amounts to insisting that voters vote based only on laundry lists of positions - is some kind of imperative for improving political knowledge. In fact I don't really even think it *will* improve political knowledge, but something like the opposite.

(Consider an extreme compartmentalization effect: the role abortion plays in U.S. politics. To extreme "pro-choice" people, being "pro-choice" is essentially the only variable they consider in a candidate... to "pro-life" people, just the opposite. In effect the candidates themselves never actually really matter as long as they are on the "correct" side, and the extremists from both sides will bend over backwards distorting their arguments to disingenuously laud "their" guy. This helps political knowledge how?)

Are (were) there no potential Democratic Presidential officeholders who would have supported gays in the military and NAFTA but have been wise enough not to engage in silly affairs with silly girls, let alone tried to cover it up with behavior up to and including perjury? Is it so quixotic for me to wish that our politics would at least have the *potential* for selecting for such people just a *little* bit? ;-)

Wouldn't convicting Clinton upon impeachment have, in fact, not only *not* destroyed whatever Political Knowledge he supposedly created, but, actually, sent the message "be more like Gore [Clinton-like policies but more squeaky-clean] than Clinton"?

And what's wrong with that? (not that I'm a Gore fan, just saying...)

--Blix

by a reader on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 00:56 | [reply](#)

Lying Liars

Blix,

I sympathise with your points above, but I think you're missing an important aspect of this. I'm not sure that it's helpful to select for truth-telling politicians before it's the case that the public generally prefers such people in office. All of the evidence that I see points to the contrary. Clinton was obviously a liar before he was elected the first time (Gennifer Flowers, "I didn't inhale", etc.)

People chose to elect him anyway because they didn't really care that he's a scumbag and a reflexive liar. He had charisma and charm and made them feel comfortable. Many people like being lied to. They want to believe that Social Security is solvent, that minimum wage laws help the poor, and that the rich are probably guilty of something and should be made to suffer. Most people lie themselves (as often they should) and don't want to be made to feel more guilty by a public punishment of just "lying about sex".

Try to change that. Good Luck. But, until that change happens most people will resent the removal of their lying politicians. They'll continue to vote for other lying politicians until they don't want to anymore. I suspect that impeachments will just entrench this preference.

The changes we seek will have to come from general changes in knowledge and opinions; not from isolated legalistic processes.

Gil

by **Gil** on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 05:11 | [reply](#)

Gil,

People chose to elect him anyway because they didn't really care that he's a scumbag and a reflexive liar.

That ain't good & demonstrates a distinct lack of "political knowledge". Which, I gather, we're trying to build.

Or, at the very least, not destroy. DD's position is (according to my parody) "keep him in there cuz the public should only select based on laundry-lists of issues and to remove him [&people like him] destroys that method of creating political knowledge". I doubt it does.

I suspect that impeachments will just entrench this preference.

Well we'll never really find out will we. You're so worried about a phenomenon which isn't actually in evidence and likely never will be.

The changes we seek will have to come from general changes in knowledge and opinions; not from isolated legalistic processes.

To be clear, I'm not here proposing that an "err on the side of caution" standard of impeachment would necessarily help create the "changes you seek" in political knowledge. I'm saying that it won't **destroy** that knowledge, and that this proposed firewall between the "personal" (BTW perjury is not "personal" but I digress and this

was my usage anyway..) and "political" which people seek (especially if they have political ambition & personal skeletons) does not help preserve or enshrine any valuable knowledge. I don't know why a lot of people have convinced themselves that it does (unless that ambition thing is the entire explanation).

--Blix

by a reader on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 13:56 | [reply](#)

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