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Blagojevich & Scandal

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Distinctly Catholic

It is not with a sense of schadenfreude that I heard the news that former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich had been convicted on multiple charges of corruption, most but not all relating to his attempt to "sell" the Senate seat President Obama vacated upon his election and which Blagojevich had the legal right to fill. I take no delight in the prospect of any man going to prison for 300 years, which is what Blagojevich is facing. But, I do take delight in the verdict as a vindication for the idea that no man is above the law and that, in the realm of politics, no crime is more grave than manipulating our constitutional system.

Anthony Weiner did not mess around with our constitution. It is not even clear that he messed around with anyone but his wife. His behavior was immature and irresponsible and I was happy to see him exit the political stage having diverted his party and the country from the important work of governance on account of his childish behavior. Shame should be enough to induce a resignation, but apparently Weiner broke no laws and, as far as we can tell, he may have abused himself but he did not abuse his office. I am not a prude, although I have my moments of prudishness. Still, I think Weiner's indiscretions were sufficiently reflective of atrocious judgment to warrant his leaving office. And, need it be said, I hope that Weiner's wife makes, to quote the Mikado, the punishment fit the crime.

John Edwards, the former Senator and presidential candidate, is charged with breaking election laws but it is far from clear that any law was broken. A rich donor friend paid for his mistress to keep her quiet. That donor also contributed to his campaign. But, for all I know, that donor also wrote hundreds of checks to hundreds of organizations that overlapped in some way with Mr. Edwards' career. To be clear: Mr. Edwards' behavior has exposed him as a first-class schmuck and I would not want him for a neighbor, still less a Senator. The way he treated his wife is unconscionable. But, as a scandal, nothing so far alleged rises to the level of constitutional manipulation.

There is a difference between trying to influence the political system and trying to corrupt it. If politicians could not influence it, there would be no campaigns. But, we know when a line is crossed. When Nixon's campaign ordered a break-in at the Democratic National Committee's offices in the Watergate building, that crossed a line. When the President and his aides lied repeatedly about the break-in and ordered government officials to help cover it up, that crossed a line. That is why the Watergate scandal remains the worst in recent history: Bad enough that these powerful men behaved so badly, but it was all done with the intent to subvert first the election, then the constitutional offices of the Attorney General and the President, and, finally, to make a mockery of the rule of law itself. Nixon and his team thought they were above the law. They weren't.

Recently, the former County Executive in my hometown, Jack Johnson, was indicted of several corruption charges. He has worked out a plea bargain with the government. There, the charges were the more classic variety of corruption: The man tried to cash in on his office, soliciting bribes from developers and the like. This is very bad and it is evidence of abuse of office, to be sure. Morally, of course, it is different in degree but not in kind from taking pens from your office to your home so your kids can use them. It is theft, pure and simple. The County executive is no different from a waiter who gives away a free drink or a free dessert to a friend without the approval of his boss, and both are no different from a thief on the street, except of course the thief on the street has the courage to show his face. But, while this type of corruption threatens the integrity of government, and is a monstrous problem in the developing world to be sure, it gives off a different, and slightly less stinky, odor than the charges Blagojevich faced. Slightly.

It is because of these repeated instances of political corruption, of varying degrees of moral severity, that we voters have every right to demand a great deal of information about our candidates and elected officials. The disclosure forms for a campaign, the tax forms from the candidates, the various and sundry legal hoops through which elected officials must jump, all are designed to teach these adults what their mothers taught them but they have evidently forgot: Don't be bad. None of us should be bad, but those who are given the privilege of holding elected office need no further perk. Shame on them for compromising the integrity of any office they hold. Throw the book at them. Send Blagojevich to jail for 300 years. The sentence will not prevent corruption, but it might make a future politician think twice.

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