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Certainly it is true that the matter of Dick Morris and his fatterable whore has produced more than its share of pathetic journalistic rattering. Those of us who have been granted the license to air our opinions in public too often do so with little regard for anything except our own self-righteousness, and the Morris business is precisely the sort of story—an arrogant, unprincipled inhabitant of the corridors of power caught, quite literally, with his pants down—that provides an irresistible temptation to make pious fools of ourselves.

Still, two wrongs don't make a right. Just because various journalistic hominids cast errant thunderbolts from their pulpits doesn't mean that Morris's behavior is somehow excusable or even admirable, yet that seems to be what David J. Garrow wants us to believe. Writing last week on the Op-Ed page of this newspaper, Garrow chastised several writers for innocence and naivete, then praised Morris for his "understanding of the public dynamics of personal reputation," arguing that his "refusal to go through a public ritual of shame and apology has been tactically brilliant and already is speeding his resuscitation."

These are the words of a man who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for a biographical study of Martin Luther King Jr. and has also written a book called "Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade," but they sound for all the world like standard-issue Washington damage control, not to mention situational ethics. To Garrow the lawdy side of Morris's private life is "of no moment whatsoever" and "of no public relevance"; what matters to Garrow is that Morris and his wife, Eileen McGann, "have handled Morris's sex scandal with considerable class and splendid skill," while the moral implications of his behavior—not to mention his betrayal of the trust of the president of the United States—are nonexistent because, so Garrow would have us believe, everyone knew Morris was a sleazeball from the outset and should not have expected any better of him.

Or that at least is what Garrow appears to be saying; his line of reasoning is so shaky and his

prose so muddly that he could well be saying precisely the opposite. There can be little doubt, though, that in essence he is offering nothing more than another variation upon the orthodox faith of Washington's power crowd, the essential tenet of which is that so long as you stay out of jail, you are morally impeccable. It is hard to distinguish between Garrow's tortured logic and that of such earlier apostles of the Washington Creed as Richard ("I am not a crook") Nixon and John ("Watch what we do, not what we say") Mitchell. ("Cynical *Realpolitik* such as this sounds natural coming from the likes of Nixon and Mitchell—or Lee Atwater or James Carville or anyone else who turns politics into profit—but coming from a member of the professorial who has set himself up as an authority upon, if not indeed an exemplar of, the higher morality, it is not pretty. Perhaps Garrow has weaned of *la vie academie* and is trying on the battle garb of hardball political consulting. Whatever the case, his supine homage to Morris's "naturity and intelligence," his "audacious tenacity," is as ludicrous as it is distasteful.

It is also very much in tune with a culture that no longer believes private morality has any bearing on the performance or trustworthiness of public figures. In the not so distant past this conviction was honored silently, as the press declined to publicize the personal shortcomings of political leaders, and the public pretended—or may actually have believed—that they did not exist. Then we went through the Gary Hart Period, during which we indulged ourselves in the fancy that if a person couldn't behave decently in private, he probably couldn't do so in public. Now, though, we have reached the end of the road: We will gobble up a whole plateful of gossip—Gannett Flowers, Sherry Rowlands, you name it—and then pronounce it "of no moment whatsoever," "of no public relevance."

Not merely is it irrelevant, it is the raw material of private gain. Thus we have the spectacle of Morris and McGann at luncheon with Harry Evans and Tina Brown—oh, to have been a fly in *Wat* soup!—apparently to negotiate for-profit schemes to benefit not merely the unrepentant

whoremonger but also Random House and the New Yorker. This was followed by the even more spectacular appearance of Morris at a Manhattan breakfast, this one held by the New Yorker to flatter would-be advertisers. With the magazine's reportorial and editorial staff in the role of Greek chorus, Morris lectured these eminences "about his ethics and insights," according to the New York Times. It must have been a very short breakfast.

According to one who was in attendance, Morris denied that he had betrayed Bill Clinton and minimized the importance of his dalliance with Rowlands: "He spoke in sweeping terms about how the American public no longer cares about these things. I think he said, 'You journalists are the prudes in this country.' " Perhaps he is right, but if so it is a sad commentary on the state of public—and private—American morals. If ever there has been a fox-henhouse relationship, it is the one between the press and the higher morality. The press has the morals of a cat burglar, or a pusher, or a madam, and is about as reliable a guardian of the public morals as Al Capone; but in a country of the blind, the one-eyed man is philosopher-king.

It would be easy to claim that the rise of amorality is largely limited to the power circles of Washington and New York and Los Angeles, where profit and publicity are the essence, but that, in the words of the great moralist Nixon, "would be wrong." As a survey last week in *The Washington Post* made clear, the public itself no longer cares about the private lives of the people whom it chooses as its leaders. Though sentiment runs overwhelmingly against Bill Clinton's personal life and his standing as moral exemplar, it runs overwhelmingly in favor of him as presidential candidate. Presumably David Garrow would say that Clinton is a keen manipulator of "the public dynamics of personal reputation," and would applaud him for that; but to this pride in the press box he—just like his erstwhile Svengali—is merely the personification, as well as the chief beneficiary, of our moral bankruptcy.