

## Social Relations

# Hypocrisy

*What's so bad about doing one thing in private  
and saying another in public?*

BY JOHN SEDGWICK



**D**URING LAST FALL'S UNFORGETTABLE CONFIRMATION hearings for now Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, there were many amazing spectacles: images of pubic hairs on Coke cans, fits of distemper among senators, the reptilian Strom Thurmond's jet black hair. But for those of us watching from Massachusetts, what was possibly most startling was the sight of our own senator Edward Kennedy spending three days before the cameras imitating a pet rock. Here is a man known for loudly championing women's rights and liberal causes, and yet, except for one too-brief outcry, he just sat there while senators Arlen Specter and Orrin Hatch stuffed Anita Hill into the mixmaster.

Pundits attributed Kennedy's silence to what *Washington Monthly* once called "Kennedy's Woman Problem, Women's Kennedy Problem"—meaning Chappaquiddick, countless grubby trysts, and most recently his famous shirt-but-no-pants appearance in the Willie Smith affair.

I'll grant that in his private life Kennedy uses women pretty much like Kleenex. But what does that have to do with his ability to stick up for Anita Hill?

Oh, I know. With his own sexual history, Kennedy is supposedly in no position to defend a woman who is under attack for her claims of sexual harassment. But why, exactly? Because his own sexual past suggests that he is incapable of seeing injustice? That would make sense only if Kennedy refused to believe Hill, but in



## Social Relations

fact, as his few comments and subsequent vote suggest, he was quite inclined to believe her. Perhaps his guilt makes him all too ready to see injustice, even if none exists? That's hard to believe in this case, given Hill's detailed testimony. Or maybe his private behavior simply shows that he has no capacity to distinguish between right and wrong? If so, I can only say that the relatively few squeaky-clean public figures aren't any better at it: look at Michael Dukakis.

If all politicians had to be 99.44 percent pure to speak out on a public issue, the world would be a much quieter place. As it was, Hatch and Specter had no known history as sex offenders, but I don't think they distinguished themselves during the hearings with their compassion toward women or their disinterested search for the truth.

No, what Kennedy was afraid of is the H-bomb of American politics: being called a hypocrite. He was afraid that he'd be attacked for doing one thing in private and saying another in public. And that's silly.

The silliness became apparent as the Thomas hearings went along and other bystanders got sucked into the holiness vortex. For the first time in memory, journalists themselves had to pass the "character test" that they had been applying to politicians. The results provided a useful gloss on the Kennedy goading: Nina Totenberg, the NPR legal-affairs correspondent who helped break the Anita Hill story, had supposedly been fired from her first job at the *National Observer* for plagiarism; and, here in Boston, fervid Thomas-backer and Boston University professor Glenn Lowry had himself once been accused of assault. It appeared that nobody was clean enough to render an opinion on the case.

**W**ELL, ONLY IN AMERICA. HYPOCRISY is a uniquely American bugaboo, our own eighth deadly sin. And our obsession with it reveals what a simple, idiotic people we are. Other cultures understand that there is an important difference between outward shows and inward selves, and would never dream of trying to square the two. Hamlet sagely counseled his scheming mother to "assume a virtue, if you have it not." And Machiavelli, whose advice is far more useful than any etiquette book, pointed out that the successful ruler doesn't really need to possess certain virtues like goodness, kindness, and decency, "but it is very necessary to seem to have them."

Citizens of other countries realize this. When, as president of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was stopped for speeding late one night, the gendarmes sensibly

took no notice of the curvaceous blonde seated beside him. (Needless to say, she was not his wife.) Here, there would probably have been a congressional investigation.

In America we all cooed with delight when Jimmy Carter said he would never lie to us, and then professed amazement that he turned out to be such a chucklehead. We wised up and elected a president who lied to us constantly. The only problem was, Reagan believed those lies himself. For all his other faults, the current incumbent at least seems to know when he's telling a whopper.

Of course, politicians lie! Just as we all do, and have to do, to get smoothly through the day. Social intercourse would be absolutely impossible if everyone had to tell the truth at every minute. "How are you?" someone asks. Do you say, "Well, my kid's up on armed-robbery charges, my dog got run over, my wife's taken up with her hairdresser, and my herniated disk is

---

*Only a clod would want  
the truth to be revealed at  
all times. It is more fun  
to wonder than to know.*

---

acting up"? No. You say, "Fine, and you?" And then, there are the bigger lies that avoid trouble. An old friend asks for a favor you can't do. "I hope I haven't hurt our friendship," he says. Only a total schmuck replies, "Actually, you have."

The thing is, such evasions weave a skein of mystery over everything and give life much of its fascination. Only a clod would want the truth to be revealed at all times. It is more fun to wonder than to know.

The very behavior that we abhor in public officials, we admire in movie stars. Actors can't help being hypocrites—it's their job. The word *hypocrisy* comes from a Greek word meaning "to play a role." We delight in exploring the differences between a star's persona and his or her "real self." As with the case of the surprisingly randy Rob Lowe, it can give a nice career boost if it appears that there is more there than meets the eye.

On the other hand, it can be deflating to discover that there is less. Nowadays, Hollywood is cultivating a kind of reverse hypocrisy by which people claim to be worse than they are, and it is becoming increasingly common for performers to be eclipsed by their calculatedly outrageous public selves. Madonna's *Truth or Dare* documentary showed that, far from being an ever-bubbling sexpot, she is actually an enterprising den-mother type who just happens to be in the stripper's business of personal exposure. Andrew Dice Clay fi-

nally burst into tears on "Arsenio" after the whole country came down on him for acting like such a jerk. And, now that the country is being whipped into a frenzy over Michael Jackson's new *Dangerous* album and "Black or White" video, we have the spectacle of a slickster trying to look wicked when he is merely weird.

When it comes to hypocrisy, TV evangelists play in a higher league. Yet even they have apparently been chastened by the "Heavensgate" scandals of the eighties, which dispatched so many televangelists to federal penitentiaries. This time, when Jimmy Swaggart was caught with a prostitute, he didn't make a big deal of it. No crowd-pleasing tear-streaked pleas for forgiveness this time. He just said, hey, that's the way I am.

**T**HE TRUTH IS, WE'RE ALL ACTORS. Simpletons might see a single face in the bathroom mirror, but really we're multifaceted, like the glittering ball hovering over the dance floor, and we present a different image to every onlooker. As sociologist Erving Goffman has pointed out in his wonderfully cynical little book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, all humans play roles, and the roles go with the setting. But the settings shift, and the roles change with them. There is one code of behavior for the office, another for the locker room, another for the bedroom, another for the bar, another for the in-laws' house. A lot of what we decry as hypocrisy is merely the unfair application of a set of standards from another setting. We catch a senator making an off-color joke at a party, and we assume that he is unfit for his office. But no—he's just making an off-color joke at a party. Universal standards of behavior make no more sense than universal standards of dress.

So I would let Senator Kennedy have his woman problem. And while we're at it, I would permit Bill Clinton his marital indiscretions, too (although I do wonder why, with a wife like Hillary, he would bother with anyone who spells Jennifer with a G). The Clintons are absolutely right to request a zone of privacy around their marriage. The problem is enforcing it, given that a juicy sex scandal is a lot more interesting than, say, the details of Clinton's health-reform package, no matter how un-nineties that might be to admit.

Like Clinton, Kennedy should be entitled to have his private life stay private. It is we who should feel ashamed for poking our noses into it. At the next Supreme Court confirmation hearing, I hope he will, like Hamlet's mother, assume a virtue, if he has it not. He should speak up for what he knows is right in Washington, even if he can't bring himself to act on it in Palm Beach. □