



Bipartisan hypocrisy

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Recently, several conservative politicians, moralists, and evangelicals have been embroiled in scandal. As congressmen, Tom Delay and Duke Cunningham had publicized brushes with ethics laws, while their former colleague Mark Foley and Ted Haggard, who was pastor of a large evangelical church, were implicated in embarrassing sexual affairs.

In the past, scandal has hit other prominent conservative commentators who preach public virtue while indulging their private appetites, whether for gambling, drug use, or other vices.

But moralist Republicans don't have the market cornered on hypocrisy. If giving into excess embarrasses some of them, for a number of Democrats – supposedly the party of the peo-

ple – hypocrisy arises from enjoying elite privileges while alleging that America bestows favors unduly on the few.

In today's Roman circus, talking populist while enjoying the high life mixes no better for the Left than mouthing old-fashioned virtue and living the low life do for the Right.

Billionaire liberal George Soros has harangued the Bush administration for its supposed amorality in Iraq. But he's bought into it – literally. Capitalist profit seems always to trump his loud leftist ideology. That might explain why Soros' management company just purchased nearly two million stock shares of Halliburton, the contractor formerly run by hobgoblin to the left Dick Cheney and now demonized by liberals as a war profiteer.

Al Gore has preached to millions about the dangers of climate change caused by profligate carbon emissions. But his mansion and the private jets he has often used burn up far more fossil fuels than what the average citizens whom Gore browbeats to change their wasteful lifestyles consume.

Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi promised to end the privilege of Republican elites. Well and good. But as speaker of the House, she requested a gas-guzzling outsized jet for her personal trips back to San Francisco — at a cost that far surpassed that accorded to her predecessor.

Presidential candidate John Edwards serially laments the "two Americas," one wealthy, one poor. But this multimillionaire trial lawyer just finished building a new 28,000 square-foot mansion. His palace is beyond the means even of most people belonging to Edwards's rich nation who supposedly benefit at the expense of poorer Americans.

For both liberals and conservatives, the days of the simple-living Harry Truman and clean-living Dwight Eisenhower are apparently long gone — and for two reasons.

First, the country has changed. Globalization, high technology, and billions in borrowed money have made Americans in general materially wealthy beyond our parents' wildest imagination.

All that money and leisure have brought constant temptations for

indulgence. For all the rhetoric of "family values" and "two nations," Americans from all walks of life gobble up everything from video games to luxury cars on nearly unlimited easy credit.

Debt, drink, drugs, gambling, lotteries, and sex all happen without much restraint or rebuke — and our most prominent are often the most susceptible to these new appetites. In modern American life, "do you own thing" on a charge card is the new national gospel. Despite the nostalgic rhetoric of morality and populism, few Democrats or Republicans have constituents in bib overalls plowing alone till dusk out on the south 40 acres.

Second, in our world of celebrity sound bites and media saturation, talk, not reality, is what counts. Multimillionaires lecture us about fairness, while sinners rail about sin.

In politics, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each election year on campaigning. Image-makers, pollsters, and media advisers shape every election. Fluffy candidates are removed enough from the electorate that the old idea that their own actions should match their rhetoric is seen as hopelessly old-fashioned.

The political leaders of this country are essentially too often homogeneous. Republicans may represent constituents of traditional values; Democrats may champion the underprivileged. But their similar lifestyles reflect more a political class's shared privilege than the inherent differences of their respective con-

stituents' beliefs. National figures may talk conservative or liberal, but

they both are more likely to act like libertines.

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