Does Character Count?

by Phyllis Schlafly November 7, 1996

In the last weeks of the presidential campaign, Bob Dole keeps asking, why isn't there any "outrage" about Bill Clinton's ethical lapses and personal immorality? Good question.

Even the news media are commenting, why don't the voters react to the "character" issue? Don't they care what kind of a man sits in the White House?

The New York Times, which editorially endorsed Clinton's reelection (surprise, surprise), conceded that the newspaper did it despite the fact that "many Americans do not trust him or believe him to be a person of character." The Times called this Clinton's "most significant leadership problem," but endorsed him anyway.

While it didn't help Dole to imply that the voters are at fault in not being outraged, this question still deserves our attention. Why are the American people willing to vote for a President they don't trust, don't respect, and don't believe tells the truth?

George Stephanopoulos and Chris Dodd try to dismiss this issue as partisan bickering, personal attacks, and Dole's "desperation" tactics. "Desperation" is, no doubt, a word developed by a focus group.

But what matters is whether the allegations matter, not whether they are partisan or desperate. Most of the Clinton Administration spokesmen don't bother to deny the charges; they just say, "So what!"

The allegations are not really partisan, anyway. Even Democratic Senator Bob Kerrey is on record as saying, "Clinton's an unusually good liar. Unusually good. Do you realize that?"

Yes, the voters realize that, but apparently don't care. They will vote for him anyway, even though his opponent, Bob Dole, is admitted by friend and foe alike to be a man of his word.

The allegations are not personal attacks, either. It is not a personal attack to criticize the fact that Clinton's White House illegally demanded and got hundreds of FBI files on political opponents, or that his campaign took illegal and laundered campaign contributions, or that dozens of his close friends and appointees have had to depart under a cloud or even indictment.

There probably are several answers to these "character" questions. I'll offer three.

Dole is paying the price for the fact that our last two Presidents, George Bush and Bill Clinton, betrayed American citizens on the tax issue. Voters are still angry about Bush's "read my lips" promise and about Clinton's promise of "a middle-class tax cut."

The coinage of presidential promises has been debased. The voters would like to get Dole's 15 percent tax cut, but they don't believe it because they now don't believe any politician about taxes.

The Presidential television debates did nothing to motivate Americans to vote for Dole. The media fell all over themselves praising the debates because of their "civility" and the candidates were so courteous and gentlemanly to each other.

But that's an "Inside the Beltway" reaction. That very "civility" came across to the voters out in the hinterland as proof that Clinton and Dole are friends, that they happily work together, and so there isn't any significant difference between them.

Indeed, the message the public received was that the two presidential candidates agree on most of the important issues. These include jobs, trade, NAFTA, GATT, Mexican bailout, troops to Bosnia, welfare reform, a balanced budget, and most Big Government programs.

Can you blame the voters for failing to see any difference between the candidates when Clinton brags about signing the welfare reform bill (which he had twice vetoed and signed only as the election approached), while Dole bragged about passing the Kennedy-Kassebaum health care, specifically crediting Ted Kennedy as the sponsor (which takes us about one-fourth of the way toward adopting the discredited Clinton health care takeover we defeated in 1994)?

The voters could reasonably conclude that there isn't any real difference between them, so why change

horses in the middle of the stream?

Regrettably, another explanation is probably a change in the character of the American people. We now have a new generation of voters who were educated in the public schools under a process called Values Clarification.

Values Clarification (VC) teaches children to solve moral dilemmas by looking within themselves and deciding what they are comfortable with in the here and now, rather than by reference to any objective moral standard. VC teaches children to evaluate various circumstances of lying, cheating, killing, and sex and drug experiences in terms of the risks and the consequences, rather than what is right or wrong.

Accordingly, what's wrong for one person may be OK for another, depending on how he has "clarified" his values. After 25 years of VC in the public schools, we probably have millions of adult Americans who have been trained to be nonjudgmental about anybody else's moral lapses, so they don't find Clinton's objectionable.

The result is that millions of Americans are willing to vote for a man they don't trust, respect or believe.