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Scandals Past

By EDMUND DEMAITRE

The dictionary defines "scandal" as "reproach or indignation over discreditable circumstances, events or actions." The word, however, acquires different connotations according to the traditions and temper of various societies.

However they are described, political scandals have much wider implications than the sensational stuff of which they consist. This is because the reproach of indignation they trigger is likely to affect the existing power situation in a country — regardless whether it is the government's or the opposition's reputation that is getting mangled in the process. The famous "Necklace Affair," involving, unjustly, the French queen, Marie Antoinette, contributed greatly to undermining the prestige and popularity of the French monarchy. The involvement of Charles Parnell, a 19th century Irish political leader, in an unsavory divorce suit dealt a serious blow to the opposition which was then close to forcing the British government to grant home rule to Ireland.

A DEFINITIVE theory of political scandals, including their history, evolution and their impact on political institutions has not yet been worked out by political scientists, historians or sociologists. In the meantime, however, the *chroniques scandaleuses* of several centuries offer sufficient material to identify the most salient features of the strange anatomy of that perennial phenomenon.

One of the most interesting aspects of political scandals is their universality. There has never been a country, regime or system that has not been rocked at one time or other by scandals of various dimensions. Imperial Germany had the Eulenburg affair involving the Kaiser's most intimate counselor, Prince Philip Eulenburg, denounced by the liberal journalist Maximilian Harden as a homosexual.

At the turn of the century that was a devastating charge and, following angry press polemics, the prince had to retire from public life.

Republican France was profoundly shaken by the Dreyfus and Panama affairs. The scandals surrounding the sinister monk Raspoutine dealt the *coup de grace* to the tottering Czarist regime. Britain had the Profumo case and Sweden that of Ivar Kruger, "the match king," who ruled a worldwide financial empire from a mysterious "red tower" in Stockholm where forged bonds were printed.

A second interesting aspect of political scandals is that as a rule they are triggered by some seemingly trifling incident. A cleaning woman finds a note, to be known in history as the "bordereau," in the wastepaper basket of a French artillery officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, and five years later France, shaken by a long series of scandals involving the general staff, the government and the secret services, is on the verge of civil war.

An obscure municipal pawnshop goes bankrupt in Bayonne, Southern France, and in no time France is in the throes of the Stavisky affair, a financial scandal with wide-ranging political ramifications, that threatens to bring down the Third Republic.

A man fires a shot in the home of a London prostitute and a few months later the secretary of defense, John Profumo, is forced to resign.

THE SMALL incidents that trigger political scandals are the curtain-raisers to portentous events that have all the ingredients of authentic drama — mystery, *coups de theatre* and the grave issues of public and personal ethics. The classic elements of drama, terror and catharsis, are provided by the misfortunes or death of the protagonists and the solemn re-affirmation of the ethical principles they had violated.

The mystery-man of the Panama affair, Baron Reinach, poisoned himself. Colonel Henry, chief of the French counter-espionage services who provided the "evidence" for Dreyfus' guilt, cut his throat shortly after his arrest on charges of forgery.

Whatever their outcome, scandals alone have never destroyed a regime. The Third Republic did not collapse in the wake of the Dreyfus and Panama scandals. It not only survived, but during World War I it succeeded in cementing a national unity of almost unprecedented solidity. The Weimar Republic did not fall because one of its most powerful architects, Matthias Erzberger, leader of the Catholic Center party, became involved in what the judge presiding over a sensational trial described as "unwise and inconsiderate financial dealings." And in the wake of the Teapot Dome scandal no one ever suggested that the United States replace its republican institutions with a frugal and virtuous monarchical system.

Prominent individuals involved in sensational political scandals quite often manage a comeback after spending some time in the safe haven of inconspicuous retirement. There was the Italian statesman Giovanni Giolitti whose meteoric career was brought to a sudden halt when an inquiry disclosed that as prime minister he appointed to the Senate a financier of shady reputation — in full knowledge of the man's highly questionable antecedents. Compelled to resign, Giolitti left the country for a while, returned, got re-elected to parliament, headed four more governments and remained for several decades a towering figure in Italian politics. He is remembered as a ruthless political manipulator and "the grand old man" of Italian liberalism.

And there was Georges Clemenceau, "The Tiger" of French politics, whose connections with Reinach and other shady characters exposed him to charges of participation in the Panama swindles and of being a British spy. When Clemenceau rose in parliament to answer the charges, he was greeted by a chorus of deputies chanting, in English, "Aoh, yes, yes . . ." A few years later, Clemenceau became prime minister. He filled the same post in the last crucial years of World War I. In 1918, when he announced the surrender of the Germans, the Chamber that once silenced him with "Aoh, yes, yes . . ." rose to acclaim him as "the father of victory."

CLEMENCEAU and Giolitti were exceptional men: while their reputations might have been temporarily tarnished by political scandals, they knew how to restore confidence in their ability as well as their personal integrity. Others were less fortunate. They lost after taking terrible risks. For power, or the proximity to power, does not invest men with an angelic nature. It surely does not shield them from the temptations of the Unholy Trinity — ideological passion, money and sex — that provides the stuff of which nearly all political scandals are made.

Political scandals rooted in fanatical commitment to a cause or idea usually involve treason, espionage or sabotage. However, political scandals of that type are relatively rare. While the case of two high-ranking British diplomats, Burgess and Maclean, caused some consternation in Whitehall, it neither endangered the government nor left permanent scars on the Foreign Service.

One of the weirdest political scandals with strong ideological overtones erupted in Hungary in the mid 1920s. Like all political scandals, it began accidentally when in a bank in The Hague, a well-dressed foreigner attempted to exchange a bundle of French banknotes. After examining them the clerk called the police, who promptly arrested the man. In his hotel room they found several suitcases filled with forged French banknotes.

The man arrested in The Hague, Colonel Jankovics, was well known in Budapest society, where he enjoyed the reputation of a perfect gentleman. Nobody believed that he would engage in any criminal activity for his own profit. The opposition, supported by the press, and energetic diplomatic demarches by France, demanded a parliamentary investigation.

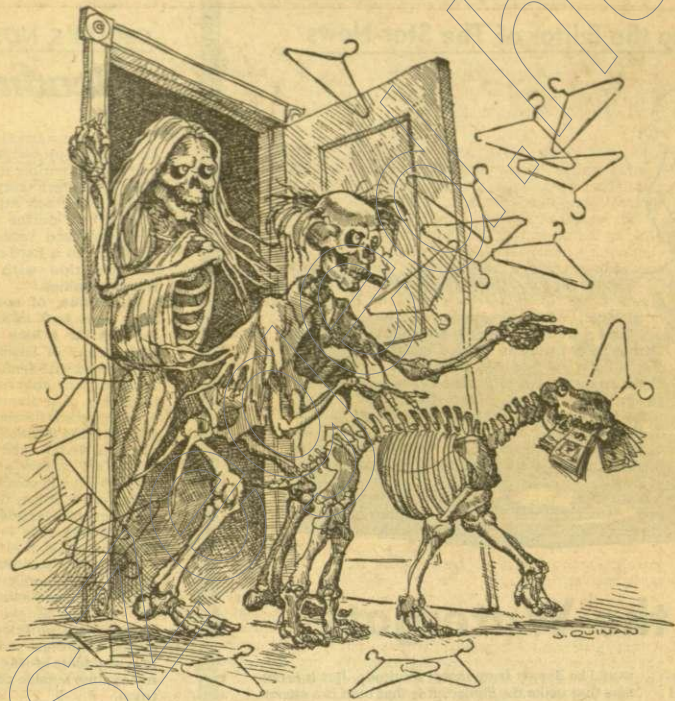
The affair turned into a major political scandal when it appeared that the colonel, and two other men arrested in Holland, were members of a semi-secret society whose main objective was to recover the territories lost by Hungary to the three countries — Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia — which formed the Little Entente under French sponsorship.

The leading members of the society, whose patriotic fervor quite obviously outweighed their knowledge of international finances, hoped that by swamping the world markets with counterfeit French money they could ruin France and thus deprive the Little Entente of the support of the then greatest military power in Europe.

The French banknotes were printed in the Cartographic Institute of the army on machines imported from Germany. From the institute the trace lead to Prince Louis Windischgraetz, a former minister, and Imre Nadassy, Captain General of the State Police. At their subsequent trial both were found guilty and sentenced to four years in prison. Neither implicated the government or the military authorities supervising the Cartographic Institute.

While the affair of the forged French francs was unique in its genre, political scandals involving corruption, graft or influence-peddling are recurring phenomena in every country and under every regime. For, as Machiavelli observed, "most people find it extremely difficult to decide whether to be good or bad."

TO DECIDE whether to be or not to be



virtuous seems to be equally difficult judging from the many political scandals triggered by the amorous escapades of monarchs, statesmen and other prominent public figures.

The divorce of King George IV of England, who charged his wife, Queen Caroline, with adultery was a domestic as well as political scandal of first magnitude. There were demonstrations, street battles, cabinet crises, debates in Parliament and, finally, a solemn trial in the House of Lords. In the meantime, the king lived peacefully with his mistress.

And there was the case of Felix Faure, sixth president of the French republic, who died of a stroke while entertaining a married woman in the Elysee palace. France was in the throes of grave political crises that followed the Dreyfus case. Faure was supported by political groups whose program put particular stress on the respect of traditional virtues. It was also remembered that the president had not been in favor of opening the Dreyfus case.

Thus, the Dreyfusards spared no effort to turn Faure's death into a political scandal. It was then that a French wit remarked that "a statesman suffering from hypertension who likes to spend his leisure time with young women should not be either for or against anything."

There were many grisly stories circulating in the Paris salons on how Faure's secretaries and doctors tried to put some clothes on the dead president before placing the body on a chair behind his desk. And this points to one of the most intriguing facets of political scandals — the question of how they are handled.

Owing to their very nature, political scandals cannot be handled well. The only question is whether they are handled very badly or less badly. The reason for this seems to be the almost insuperable difficulty political leaders face in trying to determine whether to intervene in a political scandal or let it die a natural death.

It is a well-known historical fact that many potentially dangerous political scandals begin to germinate and then, suddenly, die away because of lack of public interest, more important or sensational developments or self-imposed restraint by the press. That was the case when Wellington, the Iron Duke, and later, Lloyd George were blackmailed by young women in whose company they sought to ease the stresses brought on by the complexities of British politics. Whitehall knew about it and Fleetstreet knew about it. But the danger that those matters would come into the open never materialized. (Both Wellington and Lloyd George paid).

AN EVEN MORE explosive case was that of the German general Huelsen-Haeseler who died, like Faure, of a stroke while entertaining not a young married woman but the emperor William II and a group of high-ranking officers. The trouble was that the general who was the chief of the Imperial Military Cabinet, died while performing a dance — dressed in the pink tights and lace skirt of a ballerina. Although the facts were known, the

press remained silent. And "the case of the dancing general" that could have become a major political scandal endangering the regime faded away to be revived only after the collapse of the Hohenzollern empire.

Another factor that complicates the proper handling of political scandals is the difficulty in assessing their proportion and significance while they are still in the making. In their initial stage, most political scandals appear to be of limited importance. If that proves to be the case, an energetic intervention risks investing the affair with a significance it does not really possess. It also might violate, even if indirectly, the principle according to which every accused should be considered innocent until proved guilty.

Non-intervention, on the other hand, exposes the powers that are to charges of indifference or worse. In the Dreyfus case, a government fell because it did not order an investigation; another was ousted because it ordered it.

Still another difficulty arises from the hierarchical structure of political institutions. Since in that structure everybody is supervised by or subordinated to somebody, a political scandal is always likely to trigger a chain-reaction whose exact range cannot be determined in advance. Whenever a political scandal erupts, people involved in it usually defend themselves by implicating others. The annals of political scandals list very few cases of self-sacrificing martyrdom.

IN ALL those tragic, tragicomic or sordid affairs, the press proved to be the most important cog in the self-correcting mechanism of free, or relatively free, societies. It was Emile Zola's famous "J'accuse . . ." article that turned the Dreyfus affair into a major political scandal. On the other end of the political spectrum, it was Edouard Drumont's anti-Dreyfusard paper, *La Libre Parole*, which unleashed the Panama affair by charging that 180 members of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies accepted bribes for voting a law that was to save the Panama Canal Company from impending bankruptcy. Both revelations had equally cathartic effects even though Zola wanted to save the republic while Drumont tried to destroy it.

Neither the Dreyfus nor the Panama affairs, nor the Watergate affair for that matter, could have erupted in a totalitarian society; for the accidents that triggered them would never have been brought to public attention.

Totalitarian societies are scandal-free. In those societies, indignation or reproach which are constitutive elements of political scandals can only be expressed by those in power or their spokesmen. And when that is done, the expression of indignation implies automatic condemnation and, in many cases, the prompt physical liquidation of the accused. When something amounting to a political scandal erupts in a totalitarian society, the scandal is a stage-managed or fabricated.

Mr. Demaître is a former foreign correspondent.

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