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## On Leadership



LEGAL SCHOLAR

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### THE QUESTION

## Compelling Story or Too Much Information?

Last week Barack Obama drew on his own background to reinforce [his speech to the Muslim world](#), while [Sonia Sotomayor's comments about her ethnicity](#) have drawn fire. Should leaders make personal histories part of their public persona?

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## We've Lost Authenticity

In this media-saturated age, where almost every political act has manipulative spin, public officials, candidates and even Supreme Court Nominees paradoxically seek "authenticity" to counter public suspicion. "Authenticity" was certainly one of the dominant buzzwords of the 2008 presidential campaign.

From time immemorial, politicians have used their personal histories selectively to reveal a character that the public will admire. Think of Lincoln the Rail Splitter.

The question for politicians really isn't whether to use personal histories--anyone in public life will have a "public" personal history--but for what purpose and how.

At their best, these life stories give the public in a democratic society insight into the character of the governmental actor. Character may give more insight into how someone will do their job than the schools they attended or jobs they held: it influences how they will make decisions, relate to people and operate in organizations. The popular sense of a candidate's character can be an especially powerful force in electoral politics--maybe the most powerful force.

But personal history and character should not be pushed so far it dictates an arbitrary approach to the complex issues the person will face in the future. It is just a necessary foundation for the person's record of accomplishments and positions on critical policy issues--part of a "merits" evaluation, but only one part.

Barack Obama wasn't going to say that being a child of a Muslim father and growing up in Indonesia for part of his life propelled him to a pro-Muslim position, but he could use his life experiences to say that he had personal sensitivity to Muslim culture.

Sonia Sotomayor surely didn't mean that she is going to favor the poor, minorities or women when she said growing up in poverty in New York informed her decision-making. In the best light, she meant her experience gave her an ability to understand different perspectives and perhaps the implications of a decision. All judges bring their personal backgrounds to a case, but that hardly dictates their decisions--even on the Supreme Court, where hard constitutional questions may not have clear answers.

The key in revealing personal history is to not use it for immediate political purposes when skeptics and average citizens are likely to discount it. Barack Obama wrote a long, revealing autobiography long before his political career. Sonia Sotomayor gave an honest speech in front of students for no seeming ulterior purpose than explaining where she had come from and how her past affected her. John McCain rarely used his searing personal experience as a POW on the campaign trail because his story was so well-known and told by others, and perhaps because he thought he would demean this experience by trying to exploit it for political purposes.

Authenticity is a lost value in our media-controlled, public life, as described by Joe Klein in his book "Politics Lost." Judicious, fair and limited use of personal history can direct us back towards that vital quality. Crossing the line between selectively opening windows into personality and clear manipulation will send a public official tumbling down into the seventh circle of political hell, Spin City.

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