

Robert Bentley: A Campaign Affair

Robert Bentley surprised many political analysts by winning the 2010 Alabama gubernatorial election. An unlikely candidate who proved popular, he was re-elected in 2014 with nearly twice the number of votes of his opponent. As governor, Bentley was praised for his handling of a tornado outbreak that hit much of the state. He was also admired by conservative voters for his opposition to same-sex marriage and aggressive immigration legislation. In 2015, he surprised some of his supporters by ordering four Confederate flags to be lowered on the grounds of the State Capitol. In 2016, he was one of several Republican governors who did not endorse Donald Trump during the presidential campaign. A devout Christian, Bentley often cited his faith as guidance for his leadership of Alabama.

His role as governor, however, came to an end in April 2017. He resigned from office in the face of impeachment proceedings and criminal investigations. For several years prior to this, Bentley had been having an extramarital affair with Rebekah Mason, one of his top advisers. Despite confrontations between Bentley's and Mason's families, Bentley denied they had ever had a physical relationship and the affair remained secret. Spencer Collier, secretary of the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, saw evidence of the relationship between Bentley and Mason. In August 2014, Collier told Bentley to discontinue the relationship. In March 2016, Bentley fired Collier, who then exposed the affair. Soon after, a recording of a sexually explicit phone call between Bentley and Mason was released to news media. Alabama lawmakers called for an investigation into whether or not Bentley used state property and funds to carry out the affair and began discussing impeachment.

Bentley responded on Twitter, stating, "There are no grounds for impeachment, & I will vigorously defend myself & administration from this political attack." After months of investigation, the Alabama House Judiciary Committee's attorney released a report on the affair. The report concluded, "Gov. Bentley directed law enforcement to advance his personal interests and, in a process characterized by increasing obsession and paranoia, subjected career law enforcement officers to tasks intended to protect his reputation." The Alabama attorney general's office also found that Bentley failed to disclose \$50,000 in personal loans from his campaign account and nearly \$9,000 of campaign money used for Mason's lawyers. Under pressure to resign, Bentley defended himself, "Those who are taking pleasure in humiliating and in shaming me, shaming my family, shaming my friends, well, I really don't understand why they want to do that."

Bentley pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor charges: failing to file a major contribution report and knowingly converting campaign contributions to personal use. In addition to fines, he was sentenced to a suspended jail



term, one year of probation, and 100 hours of community service. Lieutenant Governor Kay Ivey succeeded Bentley after his resignation. She stated, “The Ivey administration will be open, it will be transparent, and it will be honest.”

Concept: Moral Equilibrium

Ethical Insight:

Most people keep a sort of mental moral scoreboard in their heads. They constantly compare their vision of themselves as good people with their actions. When they do something wrong, their scoreboard is in deficit and often they will look for an opportunity to do something good to make up the deficit. This is called moral compensation. But if they feel they’ve been very good, then their mental scoreboard has a surplus and they may give themselves permission to not live up to their own moral standards. This is called moral licensing. Moral compensation + moral licensing = moral equilibrium. Former Alabama governor Robert Bentley saw himself as a good religious man. He was praised for his handling of a tornado outbreak in Alabama, and he was admired by many voters for his policies. But he may have given himself license not to live up to his own standards when he misused campaign funds for an extramarital affair.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does the concept of moral equilibrium make sense to you? Explain.
2. Have you seen examples of moral compensation in action? Describe.
3. Have you seen examples of moral licensing in action? Describe.
4. In what ways did Robert Bentley demonstrate moral equilibrium? Explain. Based on the information provided, do you think that moral compensation and moral licensing may have played a role in Governor Bentley’s choices and actions?
5. Do you think Bentley saw himself as a good person? Why or why not? How might Bentley’s personal character and accomplishments as governor affected his actions to cover up his extramarital affair? Explain. What other factors may have played a role here?
6. Role morality is the notion that people sometimes fail to live up to their own ethical standards because they see themselves as playing a certain role that excuses them from those standards. In Bentley’s case, how might role morality have affected his moral equilibrium? Explain.
7. Bentley is one of many politicians whose career ended abruptly due to scandal. Can you think of examples of other politicians whose career ended similarly? What happened? In these examples, do you think moral equilibrium was a factor? Why or why not?

8. Do you think politicians are more susceptible to the failings of moral licensing than other professionals? Why or why not? How can politicians and governments guard against the vulnerabilities of moral licensing?
9. It has been pointed out that during times of the worst wrongdoing by bankers on Wall Street, those same bankers tend to be the most philanthropic. Could this be an example of moral equilibrium action? Or do you think other factors contribute more to this phenomenon? Explain.
10. If you think moral equilibrium does play a role in the example above, which is more significant, moral licensing or moral compensation? Do the bankers, feeling a surplus on their mental moral scoreboard after making donations, give themselves license to act corruptly at work? Or do bankers, feeling a deficit on their mental moral scoreboard after acting corruptly, seek moral compensation by making charitable donations? Discuss.

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