In the spring of 1987, Sen. Gary Hart of Colorado was the odds-on favorite to get the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. Following a stakeout of his Washington, D.C., townhouse, and allegations in the Miami Herald that he had had an affair with Donna Rice, Mr. Hart abruptly withdrew from the race.

If Mr. Hart is remembered at all, the memory is filtered through a photograph of Ms. Rice sitting on his lap on a boat called Monkey Business bound for Bimini.

In “All the Truth Is Out: The Fall of Gary Hart and the Rise of Tabloid Politics,” Matt Bai, the national political columnist for Yahoo News, revisits the Hart affair. His account serves as a reminder of the tricks memory can play on us.

The Miami Herald reporters, Mr. Bai reveals, did not know about, let alone respond to, Mr. Hart’s challenge to reporters to follow him around if they did not believe his denials of extramarital affairs.

The Monkey Business photograph, Mr. Bai reveals, did not appear until weeks after Mr. Hart withdrew his candidacy. Mr. Bai uses his narrative to make a persuasive case that Mr. Hart’s fall marked a paradigm shift in election campaigns in the United States and coverage of them in the mass media.
Acknowledging that Mr. Hart was reckless and foolish, Mr. Bai indicates that the senator, whom he characterizes, a bit hyperbolically, as a political genius, was the first presidential candidate to be sucked into a “vortex” in American society. Elements of this vortex included a lack of substance in political discourse, changing ideas about morality, assertions that “the personal is political,” new technologies in the media, and a tabloidization of virtually every aspect of American culture that effaced the lines between entertainment and politics.

As it became clear that sex scandals “exerted a powerful force of gravity” on popular culture, reporters, who claimed to disdain the stories that “a thirst for entertainment made necessary,” led readers and viewers into the age of the politics of personality and personal destruction.

Mr. Bai acknowledges that exposure of the character flaws of politicians can be salutary. President Bill Clinton’s relationship with “that woman, Ms. Lewinsky” in the White House, Sen. Robert Packwood’s harassment of women, and Rep. Anthony Weiner’s “sexting” do tell us something about their judgment.

That said, Mr. Bai maintains that an exclusive preoccupation with exposing lies and character flaws, sexual or not, degrades politics, reducing entire careers of public service to sensational headlines, and leaving little or no room for an examination of public policy differences between candidates.

Mr. Bai is not alone, I suspect, in wishing that the contention of former U.S. Sen. Robert Kerrey — “We’re not the worst thing we have ever done in our lives, and there’s a tendency to think that we are” — was posted on the wall of every newsroom in America.

These days, Mr. Bai suggests, candidates know that the vast majority of voters will encounter each of their comments in 140 characters or seven-second sound bites. Acutely aware that a single ill-advised assertion can bring a candidacy to a screeching halt, they now “traffic in poll-tested blandly comforting” platitudes about “putting people first,” “ending business as usual,” and “eliminating waste and fraud.”

They complain that reporters are more interested in the horse race and “gotcha” moments than the substance of governing, but with few exceptions, when asked to make nuanced or potentially controversial recommendations about important issues, “their reflexive response is no.”

Is it any wonder, then, that trust in politicians and the mass media has reached all-time lows? That, as Sarah Palin demonstrates, politics is now a pathway to celebrity, rather than the other way around. Is this why Mitch Daniels, George W. Bush’s budget director and the governor of Indiana, a thoughtful intellectual who had a troubled marriage, decided not to run for president of the United States and settled for the presidency of Purdue University?

It’s time, Mr. Bai concludes, to rethink the role of private conduct in American politics.

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