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February 10, 2019: This Political Moment

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Title: This Political Moment

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2/10/2019—Bret Stephens wrote a good column urging Virginia Governor Northam not to step down. He wrote that at least in the case of non-criminal acts long ago, we should not judge people by their worst moments. You have to judge a whole life. David Brooks wrote something similar about call-out culture that banishes people over lapses of judgment, like sending an unwelcome photo. This is something to think about and I admit to mixed feelings. There is a phrase—to be like Caesar's wife. Politicians should understand that standards for them will be higher. It's too bad that President Trump got elected despite his horrible behavior—too bad he got nominated. And Northam was not young—he was a medical school graduate. Plus, racism by doctors is especially heinous. Zero tolerance is sometimes a good thing. But the Germans decided that not all members of the Nazi Party were to be banned from public life. (Heidegger was a notable member). Then there is the question of crime. Virginia Lt. Governor Justin Fairfax has been accused of conduct that was criminal. Sexual contact without consent is assault or rape—both serious crimes. But despite the unfairness of past standards, I don't believe that you just say, always believe the woman. It is reasonable to look at the context and try to decide who is telling the truth. If even they know. In the case of Dr. Tyson, engaged as they were in kissing in a hotel room, I suppose Fairfax might not have even known she did not want to go further. I can understand why she never said anything. The case of Meredith Watson seems much worse in terms of potential crime. Her attorney called it rape; there was no consensual romantic activity; she immediately told her friends and posted that there had been date rape. If these things are all true, this was no misunderstanding by Fairfax. And it would have been rape pure and simple. He would still be in jail. Fairfax has asked for an investigation and he deserves one—so do the people of Virginia. But unlike non-criminal conduct that is shameful, there should be no political statute of limitations on serious crimes. Serious criminal conduct should disqualify someone forever from public life. So, yes, it's a good moment to confront our own casual wrongs—racism and sexism and other wrongs. But the overwhelming majority of men have not committed rape or other serious crimes. It is not too much to say that conduct like that is a lot worse than a social error.