

The politics of sex and power

The sexual revolution in the White House

The Sexual Revolution comes to the doorstep of the White House. As Jimmy Durante would say, "What a revoltin' development 'dis is."

Bill Clinton's a moral victim of his times, held to looser standards than most candidates, elected despite grave reservations of character. He was the first presidential candidate to go on national television to imply, if not quite say, that he had committed adultery, suggesting that if his wife could stand behind her man, we should, too.



Suzanne Fields

It worked. The Clinton's quasi-confessional fit the television age perfectly, with its proliferation of talk show hosts encouraging interviews that

only a priest, psychiatrist or indulgent best friend might have heard in the past. It was inevitable that a teen-ager asked the president — on MTV — whether he wears boxers or briefs, and got an answer.

This is dumbing down the dignity we've always accorded the No. 1 citizen. But it's more than that. Manners as well as morals have been downgraded for just about everybody in the last 25 years.

It can hardly surprise anyone to find on the front pages the repeated and detailed accusations brought by Paula Corbin Jones that Bill Clinton propositioned her with particular crudeness when he was governor and she was a

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state employee. The sexual revolution that pulled aside the cloak of discretion that once hid illicit private intimacy erased the more intimate decencies of that behavior, as well.

Sexuality, as experience impatiently teaches, is a private matter that requires concern for the feelings of others, not just for oneself. That understanding is lost in the public and private attitudes born at the dawn of Age of Aquarius. If Paula Jones is telling the truth, Bill Clinton is the first president to fall prey to an absolute loss of absolute moral standards, heretofore honored, if even in the breach.

Private lives of presidents don't always live up to public images; we all know that. Warren Harding fathered an illegitimate child, Franklin D. Roosevelt took a mistress, and Jack Kennedy kept a Washington apartment for his liaisons. Thomas Reeves, author of a biography of JFK, says that reporters' silence over President Kennedy's philandering stemmed mostly from their sense of shared values. (Or a shared lack of values.)

Is it possible that feminist silence over the accusations against Bill Clinton stems from a similar affinity? Paula Jones, whose corroboration is far more substantial than that of Anita Hill, has hardly galvanized the sisterhood. Patricia Ireland is skeptical of "the motivation of the people who are pumping this story," whom she perceived as making every effort to embarrass the president enough to bring him down. (She didn't show any such skepticism of the motivation of those who persuaded Anita Hill to try to sink the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court.)

This is a president whose flaws of public policy can be seen as a direct reflection of failures in private life.

Joe Klein, columnist for Newsweek, calls this the "politics of promiscuity," a personal character flaw that infects decisions of both public policy and the body politic.

Public trust erodes as flawed character affects public judgment. Seductiveness can be a means to an end, but it can also be an end, as in dead end. The president's engaging ways fail to impress world leaders because the charm suggests only hollow commitment. His friends don't trust him to act in a disciplined way and his enemies have no fear of his threats.

When Christiane Amanpour of CNN asked the president whether

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his "flip-flops" on policies toward North Korea and Bosnia had undermined his credibility, the president snapped: "No, [but] speeches like that may make them take me less seriously than I'd like to be taken."

He later apologized for his testiness and said, almost boyishly: "I don't blame her for being mad at me, but I'm doing the best I can with this problem from my perspective."

This is a lot like something he might say to a woman who scolds him for his roguish randiness. But it is clear that more than perspective is at the root of the president's problem.

A tale of two very different cases

By Marianne Lombardi

"I want to withhold judgment until I see the complaint, but I have to seriously question a complaint filed years after the alleged event, particularly when it is first made public at what was essentially a political forum. There are political forces at work here."

Who said this? Sen. John Danforth defending Clarence Thomas against charges of sexual misconduct by Anita Hill? Some male troglodyte who "just doesn't get it" about sexual harassment? No, it was Robert Bennett, Bill Clinton's new attorney and scandal spin doctor for the Washington elite.

Withholding judgment or examining the evidence did not concern Clarence Thomas' opponents. Anita Hill simply made the accusation and, therefore, it was true. Anyone who demanded proof or, worse yet, questioned Miss Hill's complete lack of proof, didn't "get it" and so America was force-fed feminist rhetoric about sexual harassment for months. Now Bill Clinton is once again charged with sexual misconduct (he apparently didn't "get it" either) and his accuser is being compared to Anita Hill.

Paula Jones, a former employee of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission, filed suit Friday accusing Mr. Clinton of sexual misconduct on May 8, 1991, when he was Arkansas governor and five months before he launched his presidential campaign. She claims he touched her, kissed her neck and exposed himself to her in an attempt to obtain a sexual favor. She says she feared her job might be at stake. Some liberals, including columnist Richard Cohen in last Thursday's Washington Post, say that "the Jones story and the Hill

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story have much in common." Nothing could be further from the truth. Paula Jones is no Anita Hill.

Miss Hill accused Justice Thomas of talking dirty and asking her out. Miss Hill admitted Justice Thomas never touched her, never asked her for sex, never made a sexual advance. Mrs. Jones accuses Mr. Clinton of all of these. This goes beyond sexual misconduct; the lawsuit describes behavior that is closer to sexual assault, as well as a gross abuse of power. Miss Hill never told anyone any details or named Mr. Thomas to anyone. The only "corroborating" witness testified that Miss Hill's only revelation occurred before she ever worked for Justice Thomas. Mrs. Jones immediately — literally within minutes of the alleged incident — confided in at least two co-workers and later to two members of her family, explaining details and naming names. Their sworn affidavits already exist.

Miss Hill waited more than 10 years, and then claims she came forward voluntarily to do her civic duty. Strange, since she never thought to be a good citizen during Justice Thomas' four previous confirmation hearings. His nomination to the U.S. Court of Appeals was among the most visible and controversial in history, yet no one heard from Anita Hill. Mrs. Jones' accusation is less than three years old, and she came forward to clear her own name only after being included in an article in the American Spectator about Mr. Clinton's sexual exploits.

Miss Hill never filed a lawsuit or even a formal complaint. She even claimed that, though she was a lawyer at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, she did not even know how to file a sexual harassment charge. She never entered a forum or allowed discussion of her claim under procedures with any hope of finding the real truth. She stayed in the shadows attempting to manipulate how the story leaked out. Though she said she had nothing to gain, last year

she raked in more than \$500,000 in speaking fees and reportedly has signed a million-dollar deal for two kiss-and-tell books. It was purely a political stunt. Mrs. Jones has filed a lawsuit and is willing to let a court of law decide the merits of her case.

Miss Hill followed Justice Thomas from job to job and kept in touch with him after she left Washington. Mrs. Jones immediately ran out of the hotel room where the assault presumably took place and later quit her state job.

Perhaps the most compelling difference between these two stories, and the most compelling reason for why Mrs. Jones should be taken seriously, is the character of the accused. Clarence Thomas had never been accused of sexual indiscretions, and followed a strict code of personal ethics in order not even to appear to use his office to treat women inappropriately. Bill Clinton has been accused of so many sexual indiscretions that they even have a name — "bimbo eruptions" — invented by Betsy Wright, the person designated by his campaign to quash them as they arose. The term "Fornigate" now refers to the scandal involving his use of state resources and personnel to facilitate his insatiable appetite for womanizing. He even appeared with his wife on "60 Minutes" to admit "causing pain in his marriage."

This newest Washington sex scandal is not the same as the last one. The accusers are worlds apart when it comes to the facts about the accuser, the accusation, and the accused. It is ironic that Miss Hill's accusation — the one which never had any proof to back it up — is the one never examined by any legal process. Will the feminists who are so serious about sexual harassment support Paula Jones? Will the Democratic women in Congress stride from the Capitol to tell all the president's men that they "just don't get it"? Paula Jones may just accomplish more than Anita Hill ever dreamed of doing.