

On their moral high horse: The media and the Clinton scandal

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How is the following anomaly to be explained? Despite the massive coverage given to Bill Clinton's alleged sexual improprieties over the past few weeks, his popularity, as registered in opinion polls, has risen sharply.

To what extent this is a genuine endorsement of the Clinton administration and its policies is questionable. The real feelings of working people, who find themselves without a mass political organization or voice of their own, can only be reflected in a very distorted fashion in such polls. To the extent that the numbers do register a growth of illusions in Clinton and the Democrats, they show a negative side of the impact on mass consciousness of the present political crisis.

There is no doubt, however, that these polls express, far more than an endorsement of Clinton, a revulsion at gutter journalism and a rejection of the scandal-mongering so beloved by the media. There is, moreover, a sense in the population at large—not consciously worked out by any means—that political questions are driving this scandal. There is a certain recognition that those in the forefront of the campaign against the White House have been the most vociferous in pushing the right-wing agenda, to which Clinton has sought to adapt himself, of attacking every social reform enacted in the course of the century.

Manipulating public opinion through scandals has been a tried and true technique of capitalist politics. That the bulk of the population has thus far not allowed itself—despite the barrage of media coverage—to be distracted from what it considers to be larger issues, has produced considerable resentment in certain ruling class circles.

The columnists, news anchors and other officially sanctioned representatives of public morals have said the issue is sex; the population has expressed a contrary

opinion. In their frustration and anger, the media commentators have turned reality on its head and discovered the truly culpable party in the whole affair—the American people. For its failure to rise to the bait, the population has been found guilty of indifference, cynicism and immorality, among other crimes.

One of the principal centers of moral righteousness over the past few weeks has been located on the *New York Times* editorial and op-ed pages.

Times editorial writers have a genuine talent for pomposity in an undiluted form. After noting recently that a “heavy majority” of Americans have apparently decided “to muddle through with a leader they do not believe,” they remarked, “It may be a wise choice, but it is an ineffably saddening one.”

One gets the sense that the *Times* editors find the supposed moral relativism of the American populace more “saddening” than almost anything else they can think of—say, the destruction of the welfare state or the saturation bombing of Iraq.

The occasional voice of *Times* liberalism, Bob Herbert, is not saddened. He is angered. No beating around the bush here:

“The President’s poll numbers are up and large numbers of Americans are trying to cover their ears and close their eyes to any further developments.... You would think a great country like America would deserve better,” Herbert pontificates. That is to say, the population would do better to listen to the likes of Herbert.

Columnist Frank Rich is amused and paradoxical. In his piece cynically entitled “Joy of Sex,” apparently based on the viewing of the Larry King talk show, he draws the conclusion that the American public, despite claims to the opposite, is obsessed with the details of

the Clinton-Lewinsky case. “While 75 percent of the public tells ABC pollsters that there’s too much media coverage of the scandal, it has nonetheless consumed that coverage avariciously,” Rich writes. The public’s attitude toward the sex lives of Clinton, Lewinsky and company? “That’s all it’s interested in.”

Gertrude Himmelfarb, the admirer of Margaret Thatcher and wife of neo-conservative Irving Kristol, is most categorical about the real culprit in the whole affair. Comparing, improbably, the Clinton sex scandal to the Dreyfus and O.J. Simpson cases, Himmelfarb writes that there comes a “defining moment in every historic trial ... when it is no longer the defendant who is on trial, but the public.”

Himmelfarb has made a name for herself as an advocate of a return to the morality of Victorian days, which she sums up (in *The De-Moralization of Society*) as “the belief in family and home, respectability and character.” Victorian morality was hypocrisy par excellence: the Christian family man who made his money from the blood and sweat of the factory or the colonies, and paid regular visits to the brothel.

There is a large element of hypocrisy, which borders on the farcical, in the current morality debate. Is there a class on the face of earth less bound by moral scruples in its foreign policy, economic dealings and day-to-day life than the American bourgeoisie? And even in regard to the current scandal the moralizing is quite selective; it does not extend to Starr’s tactics of intimidation, illegal wiretapping and press leaks.

Referring to the polls indicating support for Clinton, NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw commented in another *Times* op-ed article: “I worry that this response is one more manifestation of the growing gap between what the public cares about and what politicians and the news media are focused on.” Mr. Brokaw, not renowned for his insight, may be on to something.

The commentators in the *Times* and all those in Washington and elsewhere who are following every detail of the sex scandal with baited breath generally belong to the most privileged layers of society. There are various sides to their fascination with the affair. Those who have accumulated vast wealth in the recent period are politically activated, almost exclusively, by discussions on taxes and spending and by the possibility of new measures to eliminate restrictions on their capacity to accumulate even greater wealth. They

hope the removal of Clinton might make possible a further shift to the right and a new financial windfall.

The upper-middle class media pundits, to whom problems of low wages, health care and job security are also non-issues, can only see the world in terms of the degraded concerns that dominate their own lives. It would be to give sexuality a bad name to suggest that it was one of these.

Sex is here a weapon, a status symbol, an indication of power held or power lacking. Their chief and abiding interest lies in the attainment of the trappings of wealth and power, and they impute those same strivings to the population at large. Anyone not apparently consumed by these desires is deemed to be content or dull and apathetic.

Opportunism and political expediency also play a role. The liberal or formerly liberal sections of the ruling class and the petty bourgeoisie are determined not to be outflanked by the extreme right on the morality front. They want the world to know that they too take virtue and family values very seriously. This element gives the *Times* editorials, in particular, their extremely hollow quality.

The media pundits and politicians have been genuinely shaken by the popular response to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. They are used to manipulating public opinion at will. Suddenly their methods are not having the desired results. Something is happening here that they do not understand, but instinctively fear. This response itself expresses the crisis of a system whose ruling elite is disoriented and entirely out of touch with the needs and feelings of the population.



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