

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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SOME THOUGHTS ON "MONICAGATE"

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It is pretty clear that the subject this week must be the allegations that Bill Clinton had an affair with a 21-year-old White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. None other than the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, and all three of the major networks think this is an important story.

This is, of course, fine with me. But I can't help wondering if the top people at these organizations aren't a little surprised by it all, given their apparently sincere protestations throughout the Clinton presidency that "character" isn't important, either to them or to the American public.

This is a tough issue to address in a publication like this, where the lead time, for me at least, is five days, and the press is all over the story like a duck on a June bug. So I thought I would simply offer some thoughts that I have had while watching this incredible tale unfold.

For starters, it is probably mandatory to point out that there is always a possibility that Bill didn't do anything wrong; that the maelstrom of charges and counter charges that have entangled the lives of Ms. Lewinsky and Bill is all a misunderstanding; and that the whole thing will be over in a week or so.

Bill has, after all, flatly denied having a sexual relationship with Ms. Lewinsky. And he is, after all, the President of the United States. Furthermore, most of the senior members of his cabinet have stated publicly that they believe him. And these are the people in whom Americans have placed a great deal of trust, based on their reputations for honesty and good judgment.

Nevertheless, as anyone who has followed this story knows, Bill has not been acting as though he is truly innocent of all wrong doing. I haven't heard anyone say this, but I believe any veteran Washington observer knows that if there were no truth whatsoever to the allegations (that is, if

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this were just a delusional young girl who needed psychiatric help), a couple phone calls from the White House to the right people in the media would have stopped the story in its tracks.

The problem is that there are problems with Bill's denials; problems like the fact that Ms. Lewinsky received numerous presents from Bill and visited the mansion a number of times at odd hours after she left her job there. And then there is the fact that Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr has over 20 hours of tapes on which Ms. Lewinsky reportedly describes in detail her illicit affair with Bill, whom she now apparently refers to as "the creep," and "Mr Schmucko."

Finally, even Bill's strongest supporters must admit that his track record for honesty about such things isn't good, especially now that he has owned up to having had an affair with Gennifer Flowers, after vehemently denying it for the past five years.

Assuming that there is something to the story, the big question that comes to my mind is whether the legal ramifications of the case will be aggressively pursued by Mr. Starr.

Call me cynical if you like, but when Janet Reno handed the investigation of the matter over to Ken Starr, it was not an auspicious sign for Bill's critics. Starr's operation, despite all the hollering to the contrary by people like presidential pal James Carville, has, so far, been little more than a graveyard for both allegations and real evidence of wrong doing by the Clintons and their current friends and associates.

For the life of me, I don't understand where people get the idea that Starr is a "Clinton hater." Four years and \$30 million later, Starr has gone after a few old-time Clinton associates from Arkansas, and has thrown Web Hubbell into jail for stealing from his law partners. But he hasn't even come close to laying a glove on the Clintons, or on any of their Washington associates, despite overwhelming evidence, publicly available for years now, that crimes have been committed by at least some of them, including perjury and the illegal possession of over 900 confidential FBI files.

Now I am not trying to make the case here that Starr will never indict anyone of contemporary importance. As I have said numerous times, I think it is likely that he will eventually charge someone in the Clinton crowd with something. After all these years and money, he can't not, as they say. And he might even charge one of the big shots, if he discovers a smoking gun that is smoking so profusely that there is no chance whatsoever that he could be embarrassed by losing the ensuing legal battle.

But the fact is that Ken Starr is not a risk taker. The question that arises is whether the Lewinsky scandal has so weakened the legal and public relations juggernaut that protects the Clintons that the risk of taking them on is now low enough to entice someone of Starr's feckless nature to take action.

For the record, I am not the only one who wonders about Starr's timidity. Tod Lindberg, editorial page editor of the *Washington Times*, reported in a recent column entitled "Mr. Starr's

Baffling Whitewater Inquiry," that Sam Dash, who was once chief counsel to the Senate Watergate committee, and is now ethics counsel to Mr. Starr, made a not-so-veiled reference to it himself recently.

In a statement responding to an attack on the independent counsel statute by political gadfly Norm Ornstein, Dash said that "if Ornstein were a fly on the wall of an independent counsel conference room, as I have been more conveniently at the table as ethics counsel to . . . Starr, he would observe overcautiousness and restraint rather than the buccaneering conduct of his imagination." Lindberg stresses that Dash used the term "overcautiousness," not "cautiousness."

Lindberg noted that Starr recently paid a ten-minute visit to the White House to ask Hillary Rodham Clinton some questions, under oath, about the "filegate" matter. Lindberg speculated that since "the record indicates discrepancies between Mrs. Clinton's account and other accounts of what happened, it seems plausible to me--and to some criminal law practitioners around town, too--that Mr. Starr's actions last week would be more consistent with the actions of a prosecutor about to indict than with those of a prosecutor about to exonerate someone."

If Starr doesn't indict Mrs. Clinton, Lindberg said he would find his visit with her "inexplicable," or "explicable only by reference to 'overcautiousness,'" and not "restraint" but "paralysis."

I have no way of knowing whether Starr's reticence is because he is stupid, lazy, extremely timid, too busy with his extremely lucrative private law practice, or all of the above. But don't be surprised if the next, and possibly last, thing you hear about the legal ramifications of this matter is that Starr has "brought it before the Grand Jury," where the dried corpses of "whitewater," "filegate," "travelgate," the aftermath of the Foster death (not to mention the circumstances surrounding the death itself), and parts of "Lippogate" rest in apparent peace.

If the legal aspects of the case disappear into the black hole of Starr's investigation, and Bill launches a massive air attack on Saddam (what-are-you-mad-at-me-for-I-didn't-even-know-the-girl) Hussein, which is certainly possible, it is also possible that the whole matter could fade from the headlines, and soon be forgotten by everyone except a few unreasonable "Clinton haters," as numerous other scandal stories have. This is, I would guess, one of the scenarios Bill is hoping will materialize.

But frankly, I don't think the story will fade no matter what Starr does, and no matter what Bill does in Iraq. For reasons that escape me, members of the mainstream press seem suddenly enthralled by stories about Bill's sex life, despite the fact that a few short weeks ago they would have collectively sniffed at the idea that such a thing was important.

Anyway, now that this feeding frenzy has begun, I have a hunch it will continue. And if it does, there is certainly no shortage of leads to keep the story alive. Indeed, according to one CBS News report last week, Ms. Lewinsky is heard to complain on one of the tapes that Bill "was cheating on her with four other women," three of whom were supposedly White House staff members.

If I am correct about this, and the press keeps the story on the front pages, it will, in my opinion, place the Democratic Party in a highly perilous situation. As I have said numerous times, the Democrats are already deeply in debt as a result of corrupt White House fund raising practices during the presidential race, which required the party to return millions of dollars of donations that had already been spent.

In addition, the party is having to spend millions more for lawyers to defend senior party officials against legal charges connected with the campaign, and to accompany them while they testify before Congressional committees investigating Democratic fund raising practices.

Even before the current scandal broke, Capitol Hill Democrats were growing increasingly worried that the party would not have enough money to adequately fund their congressional candidates next fall against a Republican party that is likely to be flush.

Bill has been able to assuage these fears somewhat by assuring Democrats that he would personally raise millions of dollars in the next few months. In my opinion, it is highly questionable now whether he can honor this pledge. As a practical matter, it is easier to raise money when party regulars are in a good mood than it is when they are depressed. And unless this story goes away quickly, they are surely going to be depressed for a while.

For Bill at least, there is more at stake in this situation than the outcome of the November elections. He must have strong support from Congressional Democrats if he is to have any chance at all of weathering the on-going storm over his personal life. And he is not going to get support from Democratic legislators who are broke and scared, and blame him for it.

Personally, I have been amazed at how supportive congressional Democrats have been of Bill for the past five years, given that his presidency has been an absolute disaster for the party. Since Bill was elected, Republicans have picked up 12 seats in the Senate, and 52 seats in the House, gaining control of both bodies. During this same period, they have increased the number of state houses they occupy from 18 to 32, and added hundreds of new state legislators, the farm club of any political party.

It is common for political writers of all persuasions to glibly proclaim that congressional Republicans are stupid. And there is considerable empirical evidence that this is the case. But it is hard to argue, I think, that the Democrats on Capitol Hill have been all that smart themselves in defending Bill against any and all charges in the face of overwhelming evidence that he has little regard for moral, ethical and legal niceties.

Their unflinching support for Bill always looked like a Faustian bargain to me. In fact, there was a time when I was convinced that the party leaders would demand that he not run for reelection, out of fear that it was just a matter of time before he ended up in serious trouble and crippled the party in the process. In retrospect, it is clear that I gave Congressional Democrats too much credit for good sense.

Besides hurting the Democratic Party in the November elections, I think the scandal will limit the political mileage Bill and his fellow Democrats might have gained from his recently announced ambitious plan to spend the projected budget surplus on new government programs.

I never thought this \$40 billion package, which included a huge expansion of Medicare, had much chance of actually becoming law. But I did think it could unify Democratic congressional candidates behind a national platform in November, which as House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R., Ga.) demonstrated in 1994, can be very effective if done correctly. I now think this Democratic plan will get lost in the shuffle. In my opinion, the White House just isn't going to have time or the energy to pull it off.

I also think the scandal may put Al Gore in a difficult position. Obviously, Al's political career would get a nice boost, to say the least, if Bill were forced to resign in the next few weeks. But this is probably not going to happen. And even if it does, he will have to face the question of whether to pardon Bill and Hillary on their way out the door, which is a no win situation with voters, as Gerald Ford found out many years ago, when he pardoned Nixon and lost his race for reelection.

In any case, it is much more likely, I think, that the scandal will drag on for a while, in which case Al is going to find, as Hubert Humphrey did, that it is virtually impossible for a vice president to distance himself from a damaged president. In short, Bill's new problems reinforce my long held belief that Al will be looking for a job in January 2001.

It is important, I think, to understand while considering the political implications of this scandal that the best of all possible worlds for Republicans right now would be for Bill to hang in there against a constant stream of withering personal attacks from the mainstream media. This would be a disaster for Congressional Democrats and for Al, the party's front running successor to Bill.

There are two other groups, besides the Gore crowd, the Clinton crowd, and congressional Democrats that I believe will lose a lot of credibility as this scandal proceeds. They are the radical feminists and the members of the mainstream press.

As regards the first group, I think it is fascinating to compare the silence that envelopes the good ladies from the National Organization of Women (NOW), and their political supporters like former Colorado Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, with the cacophonous cries that spewed forth from this crowd several years ago during the public lynchings of Supreme Court Judge Clarence Thomas and former Republican Senator Bob Packwood over alleged actions that were arguably much less egregious than those with which Bill is charged.

One would think that NOW would at least demand that Bill be required to undergo one of those goofy "sensitivity courses" that the radical feminists have successfully hoisted upon corporate America, in lieu of traditional moral instruction, which they apparently believe is based on "superstition."

But they are silent. And I think this silence will have a marginalizing effect on them and their supporters. For one can't help but wonder about the character and motives of people who bill

themselves as spokespersons for women, but who are unable to grasp the fact that Bill's legal problems with Ms. Lewinsky and with Paula Jones are a cause for celebration among people who genuinely feel that women have a right to a workplace that is free from sexual discrimination and intimidation.

As for the mainstream press, I found it absolutely amazing as I watched the network and CNN coverage of the story that so many "Washington insiders," so many of these people who refer to themselves as "journalists," were, by their own admission, surprised that Bill would do such a thing.

Where, pray tell, have these "seekers of truth" been? In what sand pile have they had their heads buried? Who didn't know?

Did they really believe that every single one of the many stories about Bill's womanizing that have circulated since he came to town were fabrications? This man had a senior aide on his staff, when he ran for president the first time, who has publicly stated that she was assigned to the task of controlling "bimbo eruptions," and who told people that Bill became angry at her once when she insisted that he not go jogging alone, because she couldn't be sure he wouldn't "get in trouble" if he did.

Did any of them take the time to read any of the many books and articles that have been published by reputable publishing houses giving evidence of his proclivities? Did any of them take the time to interview the authors of these books? Or did they really know the truth, and choose to ignore it, because they were afraid of what their "peers" might think of them for speaking the truth, or afraid of upsetting their "sources?"

The answers to these questions are obvious, as is the answer to the question that these questions raise; namely, what does this say about the ability, and willingness, of these icons of the fourth estate to process and to evaluate information honestly?

This thought occurred to me Friday night as I watched Gennifer Flowers being interviewed on CNN's Larry King show. King opened by declaring that Gennifer had been "vindicated" by Bill's admission that he had indeed had an affair with her. Later, she mentioned that numerous members of the press had called to apologize to her for not believing her story when she told it five years ago.

I couldn't help but wonder if any of these "journalists" who called Gennifer to apologize, or any of those that didn't but should have, ever had an occasion to ask themselves why they did not believe her. Did any of them ever take the time to speak directly to her before they declared that she was a liar?

If they had, they would have found, as I did when I had the pleasure of meeting Gennifer, that she is a very nice human being, whose warm, kind and genuine manner made it obvious, to me at least, that she was telling the truth. But they didn't. And that doesn't speak well for them and for their dedication to the "truthful journalism." Does it?

In closing, I would make a similar point about another friend of mine, Chris Ruddy, whose recent book *The Strange Death of Vincent Foster* has been widely derided by many of the same mainstream "journalists" who didn't believe Gennifer.

As with Gennifer, they would find if they were to take the trouble to meet Chris, that he is a genuinely decent, patriotic, and very courageous man, who cares deeply about truth, about integrity, about his chosen profession, and about his country. Better yet, they would be able to tell their kids that they had met a member of a rare and rapidly disappearing breed in America, a true journalist; one who thinks for himself, and who has the courage to tell the truth as he sees it, without regard for what the "thought police" think.

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