

The Political Forum

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

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A PEAN TO PAULA

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As a long time conservative Republican, I never thought it would come to this, but I must admit that lately I find myself rooting for Bill Clinton in the scandal sweepstakes, and also for that portion of the public that thinks he is doing a great job.

I don't mean that I want the scandal maelstrom to subside. But I do think that the best thing that could happen to the GOP right now is for Bill to hang in there, and for the public to hang in there with him, at least until after the November elections.

The worst thing that could happen, in my opinion, would be the sudden discovery of iron-clad evidence that Bill did something so egregious that neither the public nor his fellow Democrats could ignore it, and he is either forced to resign or quickly driven out of office by a bi-partisan impeachment effort.

That would bring Al Gore into the White House, who would certainly have a "honeymoon" period with the public and the mainstream press. "We must put all of this behind us now and show the world that we support our new president," the nation's "opinion leaders" would say. The public would, I believe, buy it, and Congressional Republicans would become even more defensive and timid than they already are. This would rejuvenate Democratic fund raising, which would raise the odds in favor of them retaking control of the House in November.

In my opinion, the best thing that could happen, from the GOP standpoint, is for the scandal tide to slowly rise around Bill as the year progresses, without ever completely engulfing him. If this happens, I believe the Democrats will find it increasingly difficult to raise money, to recruit candidates for the fall elections, and to put together an effective campaign message.

They might even find themselves running for reelection in the middle of a highly publicized impeachment investigation, or at the height of some press-led feeding frenzy over some new

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scandal, or over new evidence involving one of the old ones. Under either scenario, the GOP might pick up 20 House seats, three or four Senate seats, and two or three more state houses.

Needless to say, not all Republicans agree with this viewpoint. A small group of hawks within the party believe that the GOP should start impeachment hearings immediately, and that the more partisan and acrimonious these hearings are, the better. The House GOP leadership believes this crowd is wrong. In fact, they believe that the key to a successful 1998 is keeping these hawks from diving in for the kill before the prey is winded.

They worry that a failed assault could prompt a backlash against Republicans from a public that clearly isn't in any hurry to see Bill forced from office. This could, they believe, severely hurt GOP chances of making big gains in the fall elections, a prospect that, under current circumstances, looks to them like a lay-up.

They maintain that there is no way Bill is going to escape the mess that surrounds him. They point to recent polls, which show that fewer than 30% of the public now believes that Bill has high moral standards, as a harbinger of future trouble for the White House and for the Democrats. They argue that as long as people like ABC's Sam Donaldson are assaulting Bill almost daily, there is no need for Republicans to pile on. They counsel patience.

A week or so ago, Gingrich formally proposed to establish a new ad hoc committee to handle the impeachment process, should it be necessary. Since he would have personally chosen the members of this body, this move would have given him almost complete control over whether, when and how to impeach, effectively excluding the hawks from the process. Republican members of the Judiciary Committee, which has traditionally had jurisdiction over impeachment matters, hit the ceiling, and Gingrich backed off.

Last week, however, Gingrich reportedly cut a deal with Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde (Ill.) that would give the Speaker all he really wants, which is effective control over the "when" and the "whether" of the process. Hyde and his committee would retain control over the process itself, once it started.

Under this plan, Gingrich would appoint a bi-partisan group of House members who would be the initial contact point for Starr, when he is ready to present his findings to Congress. This group would then make a recommendation to the Judiciary Committee as to whether a formal impeachment investigation should proceed.

It remains to be seen whether Gingrich is correct in keeping a relatively low GOP profile on Bill's problems for the time being. The big concern among Republican hawks appears to be that if the party doesn't strike now, while the iron is hot, Bill will miraculously skate free, as has done time and again in the past. Ironically, this means that the hawk case gets weaker as Bill's troubles mount, which is what I think is going to happen.

Now I am under no illusions regarding the power and the skills of the Clinton defense team. As I have said many times, these guys are the best. They have an inside force of over 40 government lawyers, supported by virtually unlimited taxpayer funds. They have two of the best and most expensive law firms in Washington on their team. They have virtually all of the senior positions

at the U.S. Justice Department staffed by people with strong political ties to the White House. And they have a cadre of investigators on call to do "backgrounders" on anyone that the Clinton team thinks might be threatening, including, it was recently learned, Independent Counsel Ken Starr himself and members of his staff.

As Linda Tripp, a low level Defense Department employee who is involved in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, discovered, Clinton's investigators will dig back three decades if necessary to find dirt on someone they want to discredit. She also discovered that even if what they find doesn't amount to much, they will still use it for all it's worth. In her case, they had the Secretary of Defense himself announce what he described as a "very serious" finding on national prime time news, namely that she had been involved in a minor scrape 29 years earlier while in college.

Whether the Clinton gang knew it or not, such a crude display of raw power aimed at an ordinary citizen is a textbook police state method. When considering this, it is important to understand that this tactic is not principally designed to affect the particular individual involved, but to intimidate any one else who might be thinking about coming forward with information.

It can be a highly useful tactic, especially, as in the present case, when it is known that the Clinton crowd once had over 900 confidential FBI files on Republicans, and also once had former FBI General Counsel Howard Shapiro running back and forth between the Bureau and the White House like some sort of bicycle courier.

Shapiro is now a private attorney with the high-powered, Washington law firm of Wilmer, Cutler and Pickering, where former White House counsel and "Washington fixer extraordinaire" Lloyd Cutler hangs his hat. Among other things, Shapiro represents a man named Terry Lenzner, a private investigator who works for a firm called the Investigative Group Inc. (IGI).

IGI has been employed since 1994 by two other high-powered Washington law firms, Williams & Connolly (the home of one of Bill's lawyers, David Kendall) and Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher and Flom (the home of Bill's other big shot lawyer, Robert Bennett.) According to Kendall and Bennett, Lenzner and IGI "assist in the defense of matters related to the president."

Presumably it was because of this work that Lenzner was recently called before Starr's grand jury to testify about whether he was involved in digging into the personal lives of Starr and his deputies. Hence, his need for Shapiro's services.

The irony in having Lenzner on the payroll to dig into peoples' past, and having Shapiro represent him, is that Shapiro resigned from the Bureau in May 1997 because, according to the *Washington Post*, an internal investigation found that he had exercised "poor judgment" in the White House-FBI files controversy. Lenzner worked in the anti-poverty program in the Nixon administration but, according to the best selling book *It Didn't Start With Watergate*, by Victor Lasky, "he was dismissed by Donald Rumsfeld, the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, for channeling federal anti-poverty dollars to such groups as the Black Panthers and Students for a Democratic Society in violation of OEO regulations."

More recently, the *Washington Post*, which describes Lenzner as having "strong and long standing ties to the Clinton White House," noted that his firm just happened to be awarded a no-

bid grant from the State Department shortly after it went on the payroll of Bill's lawyers. As the Disney crowd would say, "It's A Small World, Isn't It?"

What makes Republican hawks nervous is the fact that the chief official opponent of this formidable White House legal and spin-control juggernaut is Ken Starr, whose efforts to date have been mediocre at best.

Despite all the criticism from the White House about Starr being "out to get" Clinton, the fact is that he has yet to even come close to laying a glove on either Bill or Mrs. Clinton, or on any of their Washington associates, except the hapless Web Hubbell, who filched money from his law partners. Starr seems to enjoy calling people before grand juries, but, so far at least, he hasn't shown the kind of heart it takes to formally challenge in a courtroom any major member of the Clinton team. And no one I know is betting that he will do so any time soon.

Nevertheless, I think things are going to worsen for Clinton throughout the rest of this year. This isn't because I know of any big new surprises in the offing, although the Paula Jones trial is scheduled to open in Little Rock in late May, and it could be as big a media event as the OJ trial. I simply think that the tide has turned on Bill, that some of his most loyal supporters in the press and in the Democratic political establishment aren't going to be there for him as they have in the past when the next new development unfolds.

I think history will record that the turning point in Bill's fortunes came when he admitted, during his sworn deposition before Paula Jones and her attorneys, that he had lied when he and Mrs. Clinton went on national television just before the New Hampshire primary in 1993 and told the American public that Gennifer Flowers was lying about having had an affair with him.

I'm not sure why, but for some reason this admission seemed to take the wind out of the sails of some of Bill's biggest supporters, especially those in the press corps. Personally, I thought everyone knew that Bill had lied about his relationship with Gennifer on that TV show. In fact, I think that's what Bill thought, and that's why he felt it would be okay to come partially clean on that particular issue during the deposition. "What's the big deal. Who didn't know?" But apparently a lot of liberals had believed him, and felt insulted and duped. In any case, things haven't been the same for Bill since.

Members of the mainstream press now insist on answers to ugly questions like, "What exactly was your relationship with Ms. Lewinsky if not sexual?" As a result, he now scampers out, delivers a canned message, and then quickly scampers back, like a mouse coming out of his hole to steal a piece of cheese. The other day he was in such a hurry to leave a room full of reporters before they could shout questions at him that he ran into a flag on his way out. This takes away one of his best weapons, his personal charm, and I believe it's taking a toll.

Columnists who have carried Bill's water for years are laying down their buckets. The *Washington Post's* David Broder, formerly one of Bill's biggest apologists, recently began a column this way. "The chickens are coming home to roost. Not on the Monica Lewinsky story, but on something much more important; the credibility of the Clinton administration to conduct foreign and domestic policy." Abe Rosenthal, the *New York Times's* most strident liberal voice, put it this way on March 17, 1998:

The country is awash in the muck of the White House nastiness . . . The core problem of the White House scandal is about the Presidency itself. It is about the failure of President Clinton to do his Presidential duty to confront any situation that occupies Americans, talk to them and answer questions . . . Mr. Clinton is the only person who could have hosed down the spreading muck. If he is not lying, then why is he stonewalling, allowing contempt for the Presidency to grow, its power to influence Americans to wither, and America's enemies to rejoice? That needs some explanation.

The press is playing this story as a clash between liberals and conservatives, between the executive and the legislative branches, between the White House legal team and Ken Starr.

I believe it is more interesting to view it as a story about a confrontation between the most powerful man in the world and a young woman with "big hair," not much education, a low paying state job, and a stubborn belief in what she was told as a child, that every American has certain unalienable rights and that no one, no matter how powerful, can trample on them.

I believe it is more interesting to view it as a story about a young woman who told the most powerful man in the world to take his best shot, dig into her private life, trample her reputation if he wished, send his minions out to call her "trailer park trash" on national television if he chose, but just show up in court at the appointed time.

I believe it is more interesting to view it as a story about a young woman with a strong streak of that peculiar, very special brand of American grit that is never understood and always underestimated by those who don't have it.

I believe it is more interesting to view it as a story about a young woman, with few friends and no money, who took on the entire mainstream establishment of the United States of America (including those who she had every right to believe would be on her side, the so-called "feminists"), to prove that she wasn't lying when she told her husband and her friends that she did nothing immoral in that hotel room in Little Rock years earlier, despite what some Arkansas state cop told the *American Spectator*.

Paula Jones may well lose her lawsuit, as some TV pundits are predicting. But win or lose, she will have proven herself, in my opinion, to be a young woman with a tremendous amount of courage, character, and yes, class.

Win or lose, Bill will, I believe, make it through the year without facing impeachment, and most probably, without any serious problems from Ken Starr. And while some conservatives won't like it, I think it might just prove to be the best of all possible worlds for the GOP.

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