

## ***THE BODY POLITIC***

**By Michael Ventura**

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About 10 minutes before the President's State of the Union address, CNN cut suddenly to what they called a "news conference" in Oregon. Under glaring lights a pained wife held the hand of an earnest husband while he confessed to an affair with Monica Lewinsky. Lewinsky, he said, bragged of fellatio in the White House and told him that while there she'd had an abortion. The girl was spoken of as a kind of irresistible force. She'd *forced* him to continue their affair after he wanted to end it. (Erections, as any male will testify, are notoriously hard to force. So much for *his* credibility.) Almost the next words that CNN broadcast were, "The President of the United States!" as William Jefferson Clinton entered Congress to deliver his speech. CNN had not waited to corroborate anything. They had no idea who these people were, nor why this couple chose the minutes before the State of the Union to trumpet their "news." CNN showed no concern that the public exposure of a woman's (rumored) abortion should be done only if it was *proven* necessary to the case. The most basic standards of journalism and mercy were dismissed as inapplicable. So CNN was tacitly admitting that this scandal is not news, not really. It's not being covered the way you'd cover *real* news. And if it's not news, what is it?

It is a collective screech. Psychic feedback from our public mike. When we cannot face what we are honestly, our souls find some other way to arrange the inevitable confrontation with the mirror. If we ogle the broadcasts of Jerry Springer and Oprah Winfrey; if the rantings of talk radio are music to our ears; if we answer the always-urgent question of what to do with ourselves by watching triviality and violence on TV - this will all come screeching back at us somehow, to mirror what we've become. That is a law of life that cannot be broken. The man to whom we gave so much power will show us what our power is now made of: lies and greed. The media, to whom we've surrendered the task of *seeing*, will show that their vision can't be better than ours. Feedback screech.

Our shock at Clinton, Lewinsky, and the media is a dodge. We are shocked at our own failures writ (or broadcast) large. In our economic lives - which constitute how we spend our days - most of us have gotten on our knees before power with our mouths open wide. So we'll swallow anything about a girl rumored to have done the same, both fascinated and revolted at how she mirrors us.

I'm not defending the president or the young woman, in and of themselves. I detest William Jefferson Clinton. Like Bush, Reagan, and Carter, Clinton's presidency has nothing to do with democracy. Like them, his mission is to make the world safe for corprocacy. His other ideologies and programs are a smoke screen for his corporate duties. They give the rest of us fodder to fight about, while our government smooths the way for corporatizing world economics. (Even 20 years ago, not *everything* was dictated by "the market," i.e., by who controls the money; now "the market" excuses suffering and poverty all over the world. If you need more proof than that...) When Clinton, to curry election favor, denied support to a million impoverished children, his moral level and that of his followers was established. Anyone still shocked after that isn't being shocked by a failure of morality.

As for the women connected with him... Gennifer Flowers' hooker-ish coldness is not far removed from Mrs. Clinton's lawyer-ish chill. Paula Corbin Jones seems a thwarted human being who, whatever the justice of her case, has given herself over for manipulation to as ruthless a crowd as can be found among us. And Monica Lewinsky seems a crude and spoiled child, gullible, reckless, and easy to use. If I had any personal reason to punish these people, I could think of no greater penance than that they go on being stuck in who they are, or who they seem to be, transfixed by the sight of their own images in the media-mirror, playing the roles they've assigned themselves. That's Hell enough, and more than enough.

Still... I too have been cold to others. I have been thwarted in spirit, crude, gullible, and reckless. I've allowed myself to be subsumed by beliefs that do not speak to the better angels of my nature. And I've stared into my own image in the media-mirror, with my little bit of fame, and let it trap me. I have done many a stupid destructive thing in my intimate life - so have you. And we will again. What seems manageable one day will become disastrous the next, because even the best of us lie to ourselves about some important stuff, and the accommodation we make with our lies always backfires. So...

We may dislike these people, even with good reason, but where do we come off feeling superior? And superiority *is* the air of the media's shock. "How could they do such things?" we ask. The answer is: "Same way we do." That answer is what our disapproval conceals, and is meant to conceal.

So we are treated to quotes like this: "Our President's recent troubles are dramatic proof that cultural war is not a clash over the facts, or even between philosophies. It's a clash between the principled and the unprincipled. I'm not talking about whether he 'did it' or 'didn't do it.' I am talking about people who cannot comprehend moral absolutes."

The speaker is Charlton Heston. As spokesman for the National Rifle Association, he advocates policies that put guns in the hands of the young. One of his "moral absolutes" is the right to own automatic weapons (the sole purpose of which is to kill human beings). To believe that this is more "principled" than extramarital sex or lying, is, in effect, to have no beliefs at all. And that is what we're faced with now in our manic and panicked country: a world in which any such shrill and darkly emotional response is accorded the dignity of a "belief," and can be referred to with pride - when what is really being displayed is a symptom. A symptom of total separation between one's words and one's actions, between what one allows oneself to feel and what one allows oneself to do. And that, too, is the state of the Union.

But what screeches loudest in America's reaction to this scandal is a horror of sex.

In war, soldiers rarely can forgive a coward because he's done what they long to do: run and hide. They are secretly afraid that if they are too forgiving of such longing in him, they will succumb themselves. They hate the coward in order to hate the part of themselves that they fear will weaken and endanger them. (It is, after all, very hard to be brave.) And so America is disgusted and frightened at its President giving into his lusts and endangering the body politic. For we are all the bearers of desires that threaten whatever security we've managed to achieve. How much of our energy is spent concealing or denying those desires? And at what price? Many *have to* hate him. Or at least wag fingers. It is, after all, very hard to be repressed.

We look at this blowzy, flouncy girl and this big smarmy man, and cannot credit that anything in their connection could be fruitful or beautiful. No one seems willing to concede that maybe, just maybe, in their expression of lust (*if* that's what happened) something life-giving passed between them that neither she nor he, in that moment, could

live without. For that *is* what we seek in sex. Something hidden in the seams of ambition, defiance, and love-of-power that no doubt would exist in such an affair; something searched for, needed, and perhaps, for an instant, found. Something that, however swiftly it may pass, is worth the risk. Which *is* why we do such things. But this possibility cannot be considered, cannot be broadcast, cannot be tolerated. We are willing to entertain any sleazy possibility between them, except the possibility of beauty.

This says more about us than them.

Oh yes it does.

People on every level of society, in every culture, at every moment in history, have been willing to endanger everything - *everything!* - for the possibility of that spark, that "something." Our best tales, ancient and modern, are about precisely this willingness, this hunger. This scandal is about our horror at the hunger, not in them, but in ourselves. How dare he take such risks for his hunger? Most people are satisfied (as I am certainly not) with how this president governs the country. But if a man who can govern a country can't govern *himself*, how can we govern ourselves? If he can't repress his hungers, what if our hungers become more demanding? Where, in short, can we hide?

That is the fear that has given this scandal its energy - the fuel of this frenzy. New Agers and Christian true-believers retreat to doctrines that assure them human nature can be changed. Our nation was founded on that shaky notion. Our sciences are devoted to changing our very DNA, living forever, etc., in the hopes that this will change our root dilemma: the gulf between how we live and what we want. The hunger. The necessity, at times, of risking *everything* for that spark - and our despair, deep down, whenever we reject the dare. But nothing will change that gulf, that wanting. For it is the riddle that we human beings have been given not to answer, but to bear. And every once in a while we have to go for it. Even, as a bevy of presidents have proved, in the Oval Office.

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