

The Clinton Affair - *vive la difference!* **A Cultural Retrospect**

by George Simons & Ineke de Raaff

While US media have feasted on the appeal of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair to American prurience from an intercultural perspective, it is an excellent case study for understanding cultural difference. How we see each other in government, work, and private life is under discussion constantly in our workplace discussions, in our Monica and Bill jokes and in our assessments of each other in terms of gender and power. It is also a good example of how differing perspectives can enrich each other.

Americans have long tended to view Europeans as being jaded when it comes to the public nonchalance that greets the amorous affairs of politicians. On the other hand, Europeans are often disgusted with the seemingly insatiable attention that Americans lavish on the sins and peccadilloes of their elected and appointed officials and with the gauntlet of intimate personal scrutiny that US candidates for public office must run.

Images of these cultural differences between Europe and the US occasionally surface for discussion. The photograph of wife and mistress, standing side-by-side at Francois Mitterrand's funeral, was one example of a serious cultural statement. In another, Americans cynically suspect that in the Italian mind, having a "bimbo" on one's arm is a good way for a tottering minister to show that he "still has what it takes" in the office as well as the bedroom. Such thinking may be closer to the truth than we suspect.

While the Clinton-Lewinsky affair became a media black hole in the US, sucking all available attention and energy into itself, it was parsimonious in much of Europe. It was generally not headline material until the Starr report was delivered to Congress. Then the European media became interested. It was news not because it appealed to sexual curiosity, but quite the opposite. I was an extraordinarily curious sociological event in some quarters. Other reporters smelled trouble in the threat that judicial curiosity posed to individual privacy and to the conduct of government.

This new concern about misuse of power is not just a matter of concern in Latin, or traditionally "catholic" countries where a certain earthiness prevails in matters sexual. With the exception of Britain, whose media frenzy and tabloid exposés often match or exceed those of the US, there is a general uneasiness in northern Europe, too, that all is not well when the private lives of politicians are too closely scrutinized. Who will be next? When one hears the line, "If you have nothing to be ashamed of, why fear an investigation?" History, from the star chamber to puppet courts of the former Yugoslavia, tells Europeans that one should be truly afraid, because the presumption of innocence can no longer be presumed.

In European eyes, Americans seemed to have been given the choice between having a working democracy and moral priggishness, and they seem to have chosen the latter. Europeans fear this not because they inherently care how Americans want to run their country, but because US culture with its media impact poses a threat to the rest of the world. In the electronic age, one does not have to share borders with the US to agree with Pierre Trudeau, former Canadian Prime Minister who saw proximity to the US as "sleeping in the same bed with an elephant." Some Europeans fear the American will set an example: the undermining of democracy by a judiciary run rampant, and a venal and hypocritical media preying on the well-intended moral values of the populace. Others see themselves dangerously implicated as when Islamic fundamentalists use Clinton as corroboration of the moral turpitude of the West and add fuel to terrorism toward Western nations.

Some Europeans are more inclined than others to take steps to protect themselves from these dangerous tendencies. The Dutch tend to look more lightly on the affair as the post-O.J. segment of the ongoing American soap opera. Germans note that their media has already taken some steps along this route of political muckraking, and fear that it might go further. In France, however, as a direct response to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the power of the judiciary is being debated with a view to making sure that its powers are well contained. There is growing insistence on protection of personal privacy, and legislation is being proposed to strengthen the presumption of innocence in judicial procedures

For Americans to appreciate this French concern, it is instructive to compare theoretically the handling of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair to the "witch hunts" of the McCarthy era, in terms of the threats posed to the liberty of the individual in democratic institutions. Playwright Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" exposed devils of fear and fanaticism that were then gnawing at the vitals of the country. In the nineties, cross-cultural perspective may provide added value by allowing us to surface and see demons hidden in excessive public righteousness.

To be fair, at least a slim majority of Americans are political realists. They enjoy an improved economy and approve of how the US president and his administration have been running the country. Things have been going surprisingly well given the fact that the executive branch has had to spend most of its time with Mr. Clinton's private affairs. The same realistic Americans don't think much of him as a role model. One suspects that this dissonance between public pieties and sober assessment of policies is a good indicator that the US will ultimately emerge from this national convulsion better for the experience. But irreparable damage will have been done to lives and careers as well as to the public trust and the public treasury. Seeing ourselves from the perspective of our European neighbors may enable us to pay attention to the dangers and excesses to which our own culture is prone.

Europe is also learning from these goings-on as well. It is looking more carefully at its institutions, its politicians, and its judiciary and will be demanding more integrity. Morals will remain private, but will be more discussed. Via the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, many feminists in the US are emerging from the adolescence of political correctness and coming of age. They now see that women are not victims by definition, but can be powerful actors on the stage of good or evil. Women are equal to men in this respect, as in any other. Feminists in Europe, inevitably drawn into this discussion, question their assumptions about the roles of women in public and private life. In particular they are reassessing how women bear power and are attached to men of power in workplaces both public and private. *Vive la difference!*



The influential French newspaper Le Monde carried this cartoon in a front-page article entitled, "Public and Private Life: the French Debate." We see Justice herself in bed with Bill Clinton, offering him a box of bonbons in the form of judges.

Americans need not see European attitudes toward privacy and personal responsibility as condoning evil, but as well-intended ways of hindering its spread. Europeans suspect that putting too much energy into rooting out the vices of society creates more problems than it solves. Accepting a flawed human nature, they see it realistic to make efforts to contain moral damage. It seems totally idealistic and arrogant to them to presume that one can root it out entirely.

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