

On The Clinton Scandal

"The White House had vertigo last week", was how the Newsweek described the mood at the White House after the news of the alleged Clinton-Lewinsky affair was made public. My wife, a medical doctor, tells me vertigo is a medical term for an ear disorder which makes the patient or his surroundings seem "whirl dizzily".

It was not only the surroundings of President Clinton that "whirled dizzily" last week. His whole political career did. But then, such dizzy spell is not new to the White House, nor to the First family. However, of all the numerous 'gates' in their lives, none seem to compare with the avalanche of bad press and political suicide that the alleged Monica Lewinsky indiscretion brought in its wake.

Of all the riddles in the alleged scandal, none is more compelling than the question: Why? If true, why would President Clinton risk it all? Why would he betray his indulgent supporters and the dignity of the office he had sought since childhood? More importantly, why would 48-year old Linda Tripp choose; to record, day after day, night after night, the most intimate details, real or imagined, of a "friend's" life? And finally, why must the Middle East Peace talks; the threat of a third World war; the historic visit of the Pope to Cuba; the Killings in Bosnia and Algeria; and indeed, the financial crisis in Asia, all be eclipsed and melt into insignificance due to an attention-seeking, celebrity-chasing 24 year-old intellectual lightweight and her record-button happy 48 year-old spy?

The answer, as see it, is quite absurd: Entertainment and the Press. It is Americans themselves who are unwittingly responsible because of their love for a good show. Show-business in America is big business and everyone, and no less the President, simply loves the celebrity status and its trappings. Americans love, adore and repeatedly overlook the transgressions of President Clinton not just because the economy is good but more because he represents and personifies the present-day President that Americans desire. As one political strategist put it during the 1996 campaign, "President Clinton represents where America is heading, while Senator Dole represents where America is coming from and, Americans have no intention of going back there". He is dashing, made-for- television and youthful. He is the dream-client of every political strategist - a skillful negotiator, a natural communicator with great intellect and a master of gestures. "He is cunning, crafty and quick to the draw", Reuben Abati stated. For example, exactly a week after the sex scandal broke, Clinton achieved the highest approval ratings of his five-year presidency. That may have been a miracle, but it was no accident.

Americans are less puritanical and more forgiving than the cartoon version suggests, and President Clinton is never better than in his worst moments. Thus, when he stood up on Tuesday February 3, in front of both houses of Congress, the innumerable American living rooms and millions of viewers all over the world, he gave the speech of his life in his State of the Union address. As he told his aides in days previous, "if we make this about their lives and not mine, we'll be fine". Knowing full well that with all the negative press of the previous week his entire career and possible place in history was dependent on the address, it was vintage Bill, when he walked into the House of Chamber armed with the good luck silver dollar given him by his mother. His achievements spoke for themselves; his vision unblurred, and

his rendition unparalleled. That is the kind of President Americans want. Indeed, the Russians say they wish they had such a virile figure for President.

The most obvious culprits of the Clinton scandal are the judiciary and the media, where enormous competitive pressures have arisen to expose the misdeeds of the powerful, no matter how picayune. Every time a prominent politician is caught misbehaving, some "institute" or publisher is there to issue releases, pay for negative ads or offer staggering amounts to have a full-story. When these groups, especially the media are accused of making Greek tragedy out of trivia, they all respond, piously, that even slight misconduct, left unchecked, will breed uncontrollably, and that public figures must set good examples. In a world of 30-second sound bites, the point is difficult to refute.

But, should the truth be told, the hysteria of the media over the Clinton scandal is not for love of country but insatiable thirst for news at all cost. For the media and indeed, the average American, Washington D.C. had been boring for too long. For the average American, Middle East is no news while all the hoopla over Iraq is of little interest. Their major interest lies not in the office of the President but rather on issues such as the members of the Schools Board, their representative in the House, assured employment and of course a good show. In the 1960's, President John Kennedy, without any danger of scandal, indulged in sexual escapades that made Bill Clinton's worst alleged shenanigans pale in comparison. Even if Kennedy had been caught lying, or advising someone else to lie, about a relationship, it is hard to imagine him facing possible impeachment or resignation as a result.

The hysteria, Affaire Lewinsky, has its roots, less in the Puritan past, than in the transformation of American society. Starting in the 1960s, a succession of civil rights movement challenged the informality of power its exclusive preservation by white, protestant, wealthy men. They used the courts, congress and administrative agencies to impose sweeping new orders of ethics. Even though these changes have had the effect of cutting down on everything from discrimination to the sexual exploitation of employees, it has also made it much harder for well-meaning and well-intentioned people to avoid breaking rules. Indeed, isn't it absurd that in America today, "inappropriate" words spoken in the workplace, classroom or even bedroom can lead to ostracism, dismissal, a lawsuit or even criminal prosecution?

Little wonder therefore that the pace of the Middle East peace talks and the resolution of all other world affairs, including June 12 are being determined, not by the United States President or its Secretary of State, but rather, by Paula Jones and spoilt-kid Monica Lewinsky. That should not be. Any talk of impeaching the embattled President Clinton should be limited to the waist down. Let him get back to work.