

Viewer

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Washington, DC 20001-1511

Programming

Dear Brian Lamb:

After years of activism, I have never been so bitter about politics. From my perspective, it seems that something new and ugly is happening to the political process. It started with the politics of abortion and has now moved on to the politics of politics. Put simply, groups who lose politically in America are no longer content to work to persuade the voters in the next election, they simply seek to destroy whoever defeated them and sadly, they have a willing media to help them.

When the pro-life movement felt it had a friend in the White House, the mainstream anti-abortionists remained relatively peaceful. They assumed they would move closer to their goals by means of presidential orders (such as the gag rule and the banning of RU 486) and Republican nominees to the Supreme Court. When Bill Clinton became President, they saw further restrictions on abortion slipping away. Many pro-lifers refused to accept their loss. They became more militant, more violent, even going so far as to condone (or, at least, only mildly condemn) radicals who believed abortion doctors should be killed. The Clintons, the most publicly religious of modern first families, had the legitimacy of their faith dismissed by influential religious leaders more interested in politics than theology.

I am primarily a Democrat. I disagreed with most of what Presidents Reagan and Bush stood for. I wrote a syndicated column for King Features for nine years. I was often critical of the Reagan/Bush policies but I never, ever wrote about them with anything like the viciousness expressed by conservatives for President Clinton. I often felt hopeless about ever seeing another Democrat (preferably liberal) in the White House but I accepted that the Republicans had won fair and square and I had no choice but to bow to the voters' will until my side could convince enough people to prevail.

And then we did win but, like the pro-life movement, the conservative Republicans have discovered how to go around the process if they can't win by going through it.

This is true locally as well as nationally. A Democrat sheriff won in my county for the first time in 70 years. A few months after he took office, several department employees, supporters of the Republican candidate, filed impeachment proceedings against him. He was investigated by the Prosecutor, the State Police and the State Board of Accounts. None found any evidence of malfeasance but it didn't really matter. He was so tarnished by the allegations that filled the papers for many months that he has virtually no chance of winning re-election. People here say - "where there was so much smoke, there must be some fire" or "I just don't think we can trust him" or "We'd better just clean house and start over with someone who

wasn't involved in all this scandal". The Republicans accomplished their mission of ruining this man with unfounded charges.

Much the same thing is happening to President Clinton. The Whitewater hearings were sickening to watch, particularly the 12-hour savaging of Roger Altman. And what do we know the White House staff did now that this phase of the hearings are over? They talked among themselves, they were furious when a political enemy was hired to investigate the president, Roger Altman dithered about recusing himself. This is not the stuff of Watergate or even Iran-Contra.

But, strangely, senators who were horrified by what they claimed were "attempts to influence an ongoing investigation", "unwillingness to recuse" and "the appearance of impropriety" have no such problems with senators influencing the decision of the three-judge panel or with Kenneth Starr's assertion of objectivity despite being active in partisan Republican politics and taking a stand on the opposite side in the Paula Jones case. They see no "appearance of impropriety" when Judge Santelle meets with Jesse Helms and Loach Faircloth, the senator most critical of Robert Fiske.

I wouldn't be quite so upset about the conservative attacks on the President if the mainstream media didn't abet them so gleefully. One night I watched the ABC News after the Whitewater hearings. They featured Al D'Amato and Phil Gramm. Both were given complete credibility with no hint that they were anything but impartial statesmen nobly searching for truth. C-Span featured a 10 minute collage on Whitewater. Of seven Senators shown, five were Republicans. The two Democrats included were in their attack mode though there were often Democratic colloquies in support of the President. In fact, on no station did I ever see any of the "positive" statements about the White House.

When members of the media are asked, they always deny that they have anything to do with creating the news but of course, that is sheer nonsense. How they choose to present any given story influences opinion about it. Recently Time Magazine headlined one article about Whitewater "Culture of Deceit" and another "Slippery Hillary". One Time cover showed Clinton and George Stephanopolous and insinuated obstruction of justice. I could go on and on but the point is that this president is never given a break by a media that seems intent on bringing down his presidency (in fact, they may already have).

For months, I have read and heard nothing except how Clinton waffles (to waffle is negative in this context, meaning too willing to compromise). It is said he has no core, nothing he is willing to fight for. But now on the crime bill and health care, we hear that Clinton is too rigid, too unwilling to compromise. (Suddenly, when the President won't do it, compromise is a good thing and not a waffle at all. If he does now accept changes to get a crime bill passed, the tables will undoubtedly turn again, and he'll be charged with spinelessness by the same people who criticized him for inflexibility). If he goes out on the hustings, he is criticized for being political instead of presidential. If he stays in the White House, he is ripped apart for not making his case to the people. He takes it from both sides, being too liberal for some and too conservative for others. Tonight Nightline is featuring a talk show about the president. The preview says - "they give him credit for

good intentions but they're beginning to think he's a wimp and these are his supporters!" Why wouldn't they think he's a wimp since they've heard nothing else for months.

What is so bad about all of this is that there is already a well-established network of Clinton bashers. Below the mainstream media, are the Rush Limbaugh's, the G. Gordon Liddy's, the Jerry Falwell's, the Pat Robertson's who are more than ready to do their share in undermining this president. (There used to be one liberal on Talk Net Radio but they recently replaced him with a baseball program. Now the entire day is filled with conservative Clinton-hating.) The things they say are so terrible and they have created such a climate of malevolence that I really would not be at all surprised if someone attempted to assassinate Clinton, spurred by the same sick obsessions as the abortion doctor murderers.

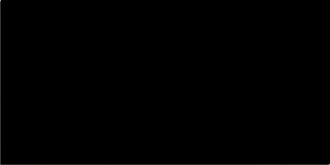
Even on your call-in shows, the anti-Clinton forces seem to be the ones who have the determination to do what it takes to get a call through (have you ever taken a survey?) I believe the disrespect feeds on itself. Sophisticated journalists tear Clinton down because it is the hip thing to do (God knows, they would never want to be accused of being naive!) They, in turn, make Americans feel they must be suckers or fools to still believe in this president when all of the "in people" declare him incompetent and/or dishonest.

All of this leaves me wondering what will happen to the next occupant of the White House? Is this just the way we treat presidents now? Will the media ever again allow us to trust our leader? Could any recent president have survived the onslaught of attack Clinton has received with his popularity intact?

Or will the media belatedly realize what it has done and suffer spasms of remorse for sacrificing a president and give our next leader a pass (much as they did Reagan).

I am heartsick about what is being done to President Clinton and the American people. Where do I go next? My son, who is 26, has decided on his strategy - he will simply despise "their" next president whoever he is as they have despised "ours". I feel almost as resentful but from the perspective of almost half a century, I think - "how much more of this can the country stand?"

Sincerely



p.s. 1) I would like to suggest that you trade the times of the call-in programs and the Soviet News. I work days and miss most of the call-in. I can't imagine that more people are interested in the Soviet News than the call-in programs.

2) Both politicians and pundits talk freely about what "the real people outside the Beltway" think. Why don't you occasionally include some real people to see what they actually do think? I would, of course, love the opportunity to be one of them. I work at a small town City Hall in Indiana where the "people" do not hesitate to make their thoughts very well known.

Latest hearings are a travesty

I don't remember much about the Watergate hearings. Back then I lived on a farm, worked, had a small child — there wasn't nearly as much time to indulge in my passion for politics as there is now. I also didn't follow the Iran-Contra hearings as closely as I might have because they took place during [redacted] illness. I mostly saw snatches of the hearings in hospital rooms while waiting nervously for doctors to arrive with test results.

So this time I've made up for the others by obsessing over Whitewater. My conclusion so far is that the hearings are a travesty. In the beginning, Rep. Leach claimed that these hearings were about the "arrogance of power" and he was exactly right. Only his target was wrong. It isn't the arrogance of the White House that is on display here but the arrogance of the Congress itself. (White House inhabitants come and go but the old bulls in the Congress go on forever, especially if they are from one of the Carolinas).

What hearing watchers are treated to is a very elaborate game of hypocrisy — a kind of extremely stylized kabuki dance of pretense. Everyone knows what is going on while pretending that they don't. No one is allowed to be honest, including the witnesses. Giving in to the understandable urge to reveal that the emperor has no clothes would be considered a breach of hearing etiquette that would not be tolerated by congress people who may hate each other behind the cameras but flatter, fawn and all but caress one another while in front of it.

Senators (I say senators because it has mostly been the senate hearings that have been televised) posture, pontificate and pander to one another. There are no safeguards here for witnesses. Being crucified by self-righteous senators (some of whom have themselves failed ethics tests including Republican co-chairman Al D'Amato, the most sanctimonious and

indignant of them all) is considered standard operating procedure.

The senators can keep a witness before them for 10 hours, as they did Roger Altman, who was there until 2 a.m. with only short bathroom breaks despite knowing he had to report to the House hearing early the next morning. There are no defense attorneys to safeguard the rights of witnesses (in this as in all things, the Congress exempts itself from following the rules they set for everyone else). No defense attorney objects that the witness is being badgered. Senators are allowed to badger as much as they like. For some of them, badgering is the entire point of this exercise.

Senators are allowed to accuse witnesses of lying. They are allowed to call names. They are allowed to pose questions and then not give the witness an opportunity to answer. They are allowed to ask the same questions over and over and over again if the answer they get isn't the answer they want. Many ask no questions at all but simply use the hearings as a televised excuse to go off into flights of political rhetoric (there being nothing a congress person loves more than hearing the sound of his or his own voice).

And, of course, no one is allowed to ever answer back. A senator demands total respect. A senator may harass, hound and insult at will but a witness must at all costs accord committee members the reverence they believe is their due no matter how far out of the bounds of decency the senators themselves may stray.

I think what it would be like to be a witness. If this were an investigation involving City Hall and I was brought before the committee to be grilled about a meeting in Dallas' office that took place a year ago. Could I remember who called the meeting, who all was there, exactly what each attendee said? If each of us gave a deposition, would all our recollections (hearing witnesses never do anything as

common as "remembering," they only "recollect") match exactly? I doubt it.

But in the context of these hearings, the smallest discrepancy would be tortured for significance. We would be accused of lying, of deliberately trying to "mislead Congress" — to these people it is a charge much, much worse than murder. It is, in fact, the killer charge. Roger Altman, who has done nothing illegal or unethical that I can see, stands accused of not being fully forthcoming with Congress. This will most likely be the fatal mistake that ruins his political career. This is usually so unless you can do it in such spectacular fashion as Ollie North, then you may wind up in Congress yourself and Oliver North is exactly what the senators deserve in my opinion.

I know I would not be able to retain my false humility under 10 hours of posturing by the senators. I know if I were in Roger Altman's position, I would not be able to resist the death wish of telling them all I thought they were a bunch of pious, sanctimonious hypocrites and that their hearings were a farce and that I didn't intend to stick around to be given lectures on integrity by the likes of Al D'Amato. And then I would leave. Why not? They are going to get Altman fired anyway, having obviously decided to declare him the fall guy they need to lend legitimacy to their hearings, so he may as well go out with a bang.

But, unlike me, these people are trained to dance the Washington dance. No one cracks and the charade goes on.

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