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“In the end character is destiny”

On the state of the press during the Clinton presidency..

When the histories of the Clinton administration come to be written in the next century, what Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan last summer characterized as a “crisis of the regime” will inevitably be the principal focus. Yet central to any future account of this “crisis of the regime” will be a subject which the public—and until very recently, the press—has been notoriously reluctant to confront: the role played by the character of the President himself in creating this crisis. What this public display of a refusal to render a moral judgment on the President’s character has cost this country, and what that refusal has contributed to the political crisis, will also be subjects for historians to ponder for many years to come. For the “crisis of the regime” has turned out to be a moral crisis for the nation.

What the failures of the American press have contributed to this twofold crisis must also loom large in any future account of the Clinton presidency. To what extent this failure of judgment may be attributed to liberal bias—the bias, that is, of a largely liberal press in coming to terms with the delinquencies of a liberal President—is a matter about which opinion is likely to differ along party lines. All that can be said with absolute certainty is that no conservative Republican president would have received so much sympathy and “understanding” from our liberal press under similar circumstances.

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About the role of the American press in this “crisis of the regime,” the most penetrating assessment we have seen is that recently written by Robert L. Bartley, the editor of the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*. We quote:

Among the institutions that failed in adequately discharging its watchdog role was the press. It can scarcely be said that the Clinton Presidency enjoyed a fawning press; from time to time the press would wax hot over the President's failings. But from the first Whitewater report by Jeff Gerth of *The New York Times* in 1992, what has been lacking has been follow-through. The Clinton campaign mastered the art of "spin" and carried these skills into the White House, and gradually the press became content to report merely the spin. Only a small band of reporters, themselves often under attack from the White House, roamed Arkansas and probed relentlessly into the underlying reality. The press in general—until the uniformly negative assessment of the President's August 17 speech—never stitched together the recurrent scandals with the theme that in the end character is destiny.

This is quoted from Mr. Bartley's introduction to *A Journal Briefing: Whitewater*, Volume iv, the latest of the comprehensive anthologies drawn from the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* on the subject of the Clinton presidency. These volumes are indispensable reading for anyone attempting to make sense of the impeachment process now unfolding in the House of Representatives, and Volume iv has the added merit of providing readers with a detailed chronology of the President's career from 1976, the year Bill Clinton was elected Arkansas Attorney General, to September 9, 1998, when the Independent Counsel, Kenneth Starr, sent his report to Congress. Like its predecessors, this latest anthology is a vivid lesson in the great difference that separates journalism devoted to fundamental facts and their consequences and journalism caught up in the looking-glass world of "spin" and its consequences—consequences that have now brought us to the crisis of impeachment.

Mr. Bartley writes,

In our own minds, our overriding motives have been journalistic, helping our readers comprehend their lives and times. We wrote, published and collected these articles not as a vendetta but as a statement of news judgment. From the first our conviction was that the Clinton character would prove to be the big story of his presidency. We were wrong in believing the electorate would understand this in 1996; yet even in his victory the campaign funding scandal exploded. The more we learned and the more we wrote, the more we were convinced that at some point a dam had to burst and the character story would explode in one way or another. We are proud not that we've contributed to the President's troubles, but that our news judgment has been vindicated.

And so it has, on a scale that no other American publication can match. That, too, must be part of the history of this melancholy period in our national life.

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