

Speech to the Canadian Club
March 16, 1998

by David Frum, Author and Columnist

It's a very great honor to be invited to address the Canadian club, but a rather nerve-wracking one. Nerve-wracking of course because of the eminent audiences the club's meetings attract. But nerve-wracking too because there is an iron law in the public speaking business that talks like these must begin with a few jokes. You know: a priest, a rabbi, and a minister, two Irishman (one named Pat, one named Mike), a Greek, an Armenian, and a Pole enter a bar, and the bartender says to them, "what is this: a joke?"

And at the Canadian club, you feel obliged to produce Canadian jokes. And these are in desperately short supply. Not that Canadians aren't funny people. It's that our jokes have usually been written for the export market. Comedians are patriots too, and want to add their mite to our trade surplus with the Americans.

So you end up simply repeating the old saw about the difference between a Canadian and a canoe—a canoe sometimes tips—and floundering after that.

Perhaps that's the reason the Canadian club proposed to me that I talk about Bill Clinton: there's simply no limit to the jokes about him. In fact, Bill Clinton has made all of Washington one big joke. Last week, I picked up a serious minded policy quarterly, and in its table of contents I saw an article titled "Groping Our Way to a New Liberalism."

So that's what the president was doing.

But in fact I'm not here today to regale you with smutty remarks. We've all heard more than enough of those. I want to talk to you about something serious, deadly serious: the collapse of the prestige and effectiveness of the American presidency over the past eight weeks.

With all due respect to Jay Leno and David Letterman—and we'd better respect them, since at least one survey has found that 40% of Americans under age thirty cite latenight comedy shows as

their main source of political news—the Clinton scandals are no joke.

But before talking about the effect of the Clinton scandals, it might be wise to review what those scandals are. People, especially people outside of Washington, ask: is the president really in danger of being impeached for his private sexual conduct? “Ridiculous” they say—and indeed if that’s what the Clinton scandals were about, it would be ridiculous. But they are not.

An anecdote. Two Sundays ago, a prominent Washington lawyer and Clinton critic named Joe de Genova complained on television that private investigators had been snooping into his financial and personal history and also that of his wife, another prominent lawyer, Victoria Toensig. He surmised that the P.I.s were working for the White House. Asked about this the next day, presidential spokesman Mike McCurry indignantly denied it—it was a lie, he said. On Tuesday, in a familiar Clinton White House pattern, McCurry was forced to concede that his earlier denial was inoperative. No P.I.s were working for the White House. But the

president's private lawyers, Williams & Connally, had hired a notorious Washington operative named Terry Lenzner to look into the backgrounds of Clinton critics and attorneys in the Office of Independent Counsel. McCurry stoutly insisted that he had not been lying the day before: there was a huge difference between working for the White House and working for the President personally, and an equally grand difference between snooping and what he called "legwork."

Even so, this was a remarkable admission. No president since Richard Nixon has dared to employ his own personal spies to sniff into the doings of his opponents. Cynically knowing people like to point out Clinton administration excesses and say "everybody does it," but in a city haunted still by the memory of Watergate, private spying is something that in fact nobody dares do.

And yet at the same time, the Lenzner story was not remarkable. In fact, we've all known since 1992 that Clinton employs private investigators to track down dirt on potential threats to him. You may all remember the famous phrase, "bimbo

eruptions.” That phrase was coined by Clinton aide Betsy Wright, who explained that she was in charge of containing them. And the way she contained them was by hiring yet another investigator, a man named Jack Palladino, to track down women with whom Clinton had been involved, and offer them money or threaten them with consequences if they talked. You got a sample of the Clinton method last night on CBS, when Kathleen Willey described how the president’s lawyer, Bob Bennett, told her she would need a criminal attorney if she persisted in telling her story. An even more acute example of the Clinton method was what befell Lucianne Goldberg, the New York literary agent who obtained Linda Tripp’s Monica tapes: thirty-five years ago, Goldberg became pregnant out of wedlock, and gave up her child for adoption. Nobody ever knew this—not even her children from her marriage. Three weeks ago, somebody unearthed this information and released it to (I believe) TIME. You can well imagine that a married mother of three living quietly in Little Rock might think twice about talking to the press

after Mr. Palladino comes knocking on her door to explain to her the details that he'll make public if she were to talk.

Sophisticated people—people like many of you in this room—may say that sexual conduct tells us nothing about official integrity. The Clintons, however, have never felt confident that the American public believes that, and they have always been willing to take the most extraordinary steps to conceal the president's secrets.

In the face of the president's current 60% plus approval rating, that might seem unnecessarily anxious of them. Or maybe not. You see, when the public opinion surveys find that the public does not care about the president's behavior, they find it at least in part because the public does not know what the president's behavior has been. They imagine that it's a matter of a mistress on the side, or perhaps a few women on the campaign trail. Big deal, they snort. It's no worse than JFK. The American public are broadminded people and always have been. They named a public holiday after Martin Luther King despite his flagrant and notorious

womanizing. They elected Grover Cleveland president—twice!—despite his illegitimate child, and elected James Buchanan in 1856 despite a strong public suspicion (almost certainly correct) that he was a homosexual.

What the public does not know is that we are talking, not about three or eight women, but about hundreds—as Clinton told Lewinsky, according to the Tripp tapes. And what the public has not yet absorbed; though after Kathleen Willey it may be beginning to do so; are the extreme and lawless methods a president must use if he is to protect himself from the exposure of such massive, endless personal risktaking.

He must, for example, do what he did with Monica Lewinsky. No, I don't mean the sex. I mean having somebody put into Monica's hands the famous talking points for Linda Tripp, detailing how she should perjure herself to protect the president from the Kathleen Willey story. Remember the talking points: QUOTE "You now find it completely believable that she untucked her own blouse, smeared her own lipstick, etc.?"? END QUOTE.

Monica was given the assignment of persuading Linda Tripp, who had seen Willey emerging disheveled from the Oval Office, to lie about it. How many dozens of other times has this sort of thing happened?

Defenders of the president often argue that the conduct that has gotten the president into trouble is private & personal. What happens between two consenting adults—these defenders say—is nobody's business except their spouses. And Mrs. Clinton has not objected. She's even told a few lies of her own to cover up for her husband. So how is it Ken Starr's business? It's a private matter.

And if the president fears that his political popularity might be threatened should his affairs come to light, and so boldly looks the American public in the eye on national television and lies to them, that too is a private matter. If he lies under oath about the affair, that's a private matter too. Nobody has any right to ask him about his sex life, and he's entitled to do whatever is necessary to protect himself when someone does.

It's a private matter when he sends the secretary the taxpayer provides for him out to collect incriminating evidence to evade a federal subpoena. And if he induces the woman with whom he had the affair to perjure herself by arranging a job for her out of town; if he offers similar sorts of inducements—including government jobs—to perhaps dozens of such women; it is in each and every case a private matter.

If sends agents to menace women he's known into silence, that likewise is a private matter. And if he has to give political and even public-policy favors to the friends, both American and foreign, who have put up the money to pay those agents, whose business is that but his? When the White House illegally obtained the FBI files of 900 Republicans early in 1993, misled Congress about it, and now threaten that an investigation of the president will provoke the exposure of the dirty secrets of every one of his opponents in Congress, this should not be seen as a vast system of spying, lying and blackmail. It's just a private matter.

Over the past few weeks, defenders of the president have blasted Ken Starr as a prurient prude for thinking that the laws—all of them—apply to the president. The defenders see it quite differently. So long as you're doing it for sex, perjury, coverup and obstruction of justice are really nobody's business but your own. You see, it's all a private matter.

But is it? It's worth asking ourselves this question: what will it mean if Clinton gets away with all this? Again, the president's defenders like to say that while Watergate posed fundamental constitutional questions, Zippergate is nothing but a squalid personal disaster. There is no larger issue here.

Is that really so? Certainly the motives that sparked Watergate—Nixon's paranoia, his feelings of vulnerability, his restless need for information on his opponents—are very different from the appetites that drive Clinton.

The results, however, are not so different.

Suppose for a moment that the credible allegations heard over the past few weeks turn out to be true. Suppose the president

did indeed perjure himself and, through bribes and threats, secured the perjury of others. Suppose in the Lewinsky affair—and in other scandals as well—people who worked for him or for his wife attempted to hide materials under federal subpoena. Suppose that the threats that are being made to disclose damaging information about Republicans in Congress do indeed have some connection to the Clinton administration's illegal obtaining of the FBI files of nine hundred Republicans. Suppose that when the president's lawyers, the president's friends and one of the president's lawyer's clients hired private investigators to spy on the president's enemies they were acting to serve the president's interests. Suppose—and one does not need an especially suspicious mind to suppose it—that all those things are true. If it is, then what we have here is a near-photocopy of the Watergate scandal, with this one big proviso: that the presidential character flaw that set the scandal in motion was lechery rather than paranoia.

Now suppose that, unlike Nixon, Clinton somehow escapes unpunished from the Lewinsky scandal. Ask yourself this: what

will that mean for the future of constitutional government in the United States? The answer, one would guess, is this: that the wrongfulness of presidential perjury, witness-tampering, obstruction of justice; the wrongfulness of non-cooperation with a lawful federal investigation, the creation of an off-the-books corps of personal presidential spies, and the use of information generated by those spies to attempt to harass and intimidate federal law enforcement officials—the wrongfulness of all those things will depend on the motives and personality of the president who did them. They will no longer be treated as intrinsically wrong.

If presidential lawbreaking and domestic espionage to cover up paranoiac actions is illegal, but presidential lawbreaking and domestic espionage to cover up lecherous actions is not, future presidents will encounter some fascinating legal problems.

Suppose a president's vice is avarice. Is that more like lechery? in which case perjury and witness-tampering to cover up the taking of bribes might be okay—or is it more like paranoia?—in which case they are huge constitutional offenses. What about alcoholism?

Sloth? (Yes, sloth: in the current issue of the New Yorker, Jeffrey Toobin tells the following story. Back in 1974, Bill Clinton, then a professor at the University of Arkansas law school, lost an exam paper belonging to his future judge, Susan Webber Wright.

Clinton's girlfriend, Hillary Rodham, offered the young Wright a deal: if she would keep quiet about the lost paper, Clinton would give her a B+ in the course. Even ordinary laziness can potentially spawn lying, cheating and coverups.)

America has of course survived presidential lawlessness in the past. Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson had nothing to learn from Bill Clinton about abuse of the FBI and spying on enemies. But the difference this time is that the president has been caught while still in office. If Clinton prevails, he will become the first president to flout the law openly, in sight of the whole country, and survive. It is hard to imagine a more destructive attack on the first principles of republican self-government and the rule of law than that. Which is why, despite the poll numbers,

nobody with faith in America should doubt that—in the end—the president must lose.

And not only for America's sake—for the sake of the peace of the world. The character and credibility of the American president are essential to the success of American foreign policy. A month ago, when Saddam Hussein was denying UN inspectors access to his so-called presidential sites, Secretary of Defense William Cohen warned: "An innocent man does not have to hide." That has a funny ring coming from one of Bill Clinton's men.

The Clinton administration's handling of the Iraq crisis is widely considered a fiasco. The disaster of the Ohio town meeting was the culmination of the administration's failure to persuade the public to back its policies—only 16% approved of the president's Bomb-a-Little middle way, with about 40% wanting no war and 40% wanting real war.

Normally, a president trying to sell a foreign policy (and especially a president at 60 plus percent in the polls) will take his message to the country, rallying the people to his side. It worked

for Nixon, it worked for Reagan, it worked for Bush, and for a long time it even worked for Carter. But Clinton could not do it. He could not deliver a formal address to the nation from the Oval Office. We all know what's been going on on top of that carpet. People would snicker. He could not make his case at a press conference: he does not dare face the press because he cannot answer their questions. Instead, he made a notably lame speech at the Pentagon, took no questions, and left the selling job to Albright, Secretary of Defense Cohen and National Security Adviser Sandy Berger.

So here is where the United States is: when the country hovered on the verge of war, the president could not address the nation, could not explain his policies to the press.

A historical parallel throws some clarifying light on Bill Clinton's true nature. It is the story of the American Republic's first sex scandal: the Maria Reynolds affair. In 1791, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, married and the father of four children, became involved in an adulterous love affair. The

woman's husband acquiesced in the affair—but demanded that Hamilton pay hush money to keep it quiet. The blackmailers expanded their criminal careers, next time trying to defraud the U.S. Treasury. When they were caught, they attempted to escape prosecution by offering Hamilton's political opponents proof that the Secretary was involved in their scheme—the record of the money he had given them. The only way Hamilton could exculpate himself from false charges of corruption was by confessing his illicit love affair to a congressional committee. The committee believed him, and agreed to keep his secret. But in 1797, his secret was exploded: A Jeffersonian newspaper editor published the story, and charged Hamilton in print with financial fraud. Hamilton was now faced with a stark dilemma. Congress knew the truth, so he was safe from prosecution. What was at stake was his reputation. He had to choose: which mattered more—private virtue or public probity? For Hamilton, there could never be a doubt. He immediately published a pamphlet confessing the affair in

excruciating detail and vindicating his unspotted reputation as a public official.

Skip forward two hundred years. At his deposition in the Paula Jones case, Bill Clinton faced a dilemma remarkably similar to Alexander Hamilton's. When he was asked about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, he could have told the truth—and confessed a sexual transgression. Or he could opt to perjure himself—and betray his responsibilities as the chief law enforcement officer of the United States. He chose to lie; and not only to lie, but to orchestrate an elaborate scheme of evidence-suppression, witness-tampering and obstruction of justice. The sophisticated person's defense of the president—that Clinton's private morals may be deficient but that he takes his public obligations seriously—has it all backward: in fact, Bill Clinton is willing to violate any and all of his public obligations in order to fool the public into thinking him personally a good and decent man. In 1992, Clinton's spin-doctors repeatedly compared their man to Shakespeare's Prince Hal: a youthful roisterer who put

aside his boyish vices when duty called. In fact, if he resembles any literary character, it is Tartuffe, Moliere's hypocritically pious villain. The Clintons are, it appears, people prepared to commit all manner of wrongfulness to protect their public image of righteousness.

In the end, the Clinton scandal is not a sex scandal at all. It is a scandal about hypocrisy, and about a scheme of lying, evasion of justice, domestic spying, thuggery and political blackmail to prevent that hypocrisy from being exposed.

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