

Truth becomes a glittering generality

Dennis McDaniel | Sep. 1, 2010

THE DEATH OF AMERICAN VIRTUE: CLINTON VS. STARR

By Ken Gormley

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In the beginning was Watergate.

Those hearings ignited a sequence of contemporary scandals through which the judicial system would be used to further the political aims of a major party. Watergate begat the Iran-contra hearings, where bloodthirsty congressional Democrats found themselves beguiled by charismatic felons in uniform.

Iran-contra begat the Robert Bork hearings, in which congressional Democrats blocked a qualified judge from taking a seat on the Supreme Court due to his personal philosophy. The Bork hearings begat House Speaker Jim Wright's ethics investigations, which were initiated by and, ultimately, propelled the political career of Newt Gingrich.

The Wright hearings begat the Clarence Thomas confirmation proceedings, in which Anita Hill's charges of sexual harassment would lead to what Thomas would call a "high-tech lynching."

Sex now having been introduced into the mix, America was ready for the Foster/Whitewater/Jones/Lewinsky investigations of the Clinton era. Investigations were spearheaded by another Watergate legacy, the Office of the Independent Counsel. This office was created as a way of holding public officials accountable by christening an investigator who would rise above the political crosswinds. However, as Ken Gormley's book shows, by the mid-1990s the Office of the Independent Counsel had become just another victim of accelerating political partisanship.

Gormley's extensive narrative begins and ends with the McDougals of Arkansas. It opens in the late 1970s with the complicated and shadowy real estate dealings of Jim McDougal and closes in the late 1990s with the vindication and release from prison of Susan McDougal. Between these points are numerous instances of individuals hoping to avenge themselves on the Clintons and further the conservative cause via one lawsuit or another. Many in Arkansas detested or distrusted the Clintons, and would therefore provide any assistance necessary to topple the Clintons via the legal system.

What was mostly personal in Little Rock became hotly political as Bill Clinton moved into the White House in 1992. Gormley's investigation establishes that conservative Republicans, amply funded by billionaire publisher Richard Mellon Scaife and others, provided legal counsel to plaintiffs (Bork himself offered to assist in the Jones lawsuit), dug up evidence for prosecutors, and continually goaded the Office of the Independent Counsel to act more aggressively.



Gormley suggests that even the selection of Kenneth Starr as chief independent

counsel was the result of a careful process that would assure the naming of a Christian conservative to the office. And Rep. Henry Hyde, a lead House manager during the impeachment proceedings, expresses pride in the positive effect that Clinton's impeachment may have had in electing George W. Bush.

In the course of the narrative, we become reacquainted with an assortment of characters: some, like Paula Jones' former husband, Steve, comic lowlifes, and others, like Vincent Foster, tragic victims. All the characters are immersed in a riddle-bound moral ambiguity. Though Paula Jones has insisted that she sought only to establish that she was not "that kind of girl," her settlement demands consistently rose, and she ultimately posed nude for Penthouse magazine.

Though Gormley's characterization of Susan McDougal does not undermine the prevailing image of her as the self-righteous martyr, she refused to cooperate only out of a deep-seated hatred for Starr. Jim McDougal, once a warm and generous smalltime politician with shaky ethics, ends up as a drug-addled tool in the hand of the independent prosecutors, who leave him for dead in solitary confinement. Linda Tripp claims only patriotic motives for her apparent betrayal of her "friend" Monica Lewinsky, though Tripp failed to profit from her participation only because she couldn't cut a sufficiently lucrative book deal.

Lewinsky is probably the most victimized of all the characters, having been used primarily for sex, and then being used by the Office of the Independent Counsel to prosecute Clinton. Left without profit or apology, Lewinsky remains a sad reminder of the prevailing sexism that pervades American politics.

Finally, we have the paired protagonists, Bill Clinton and Kenneth Starr. Gormley strives to provide an objective, balanced view of each, but the reader fails to reconcile Starr's claims of disinterest and lack of personal animus with the borderline unethical practices of his investigation. And even Clinton's strongest supporters may be taken aback at the bitterness and lack of remorse in Clinton's recent conversations with the author.

In Gormley's exhaustive account, no true moral center emerges.

Any future study of this subject will certainly be in Gormley's debt. Though he eclectically draws from reliable published sources, much of Gormley's information is derived from personal interviews, and these accounts inform and contextualize. Along with his firsthand research, Gormley's legal expertise and scholarly interest in the Office of the Independent Counsel (he has also published a study of Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox) give him a keen eye for complicated legal maneuvers. Though this book, with its length (about 700 pages) and abundance of detail, would be of greatest interest to lawyers and legal historians, even casual readers will be fascinated by Gormley's insights and characterizations, and awestruck at the energy with which he clearly engaged in this project. Most interesting is the manner in which Gormley links the careers and fortunes of Clinton and Starr, born only months and miles apart.

However, one wonders at the book's title, for which Gormley does not provide explanation. What, exactly, is "American virtue," and how and when did it die? Was it murdered by Clinton's infidelities and subsequent

dishonesty? Was 'American virtue' killed by the overtly political effort to link the Lewinsky case to the other investigations, marring, in many people's eyes, the Office of the Independent Counsel's image of neutrality, and thereby engendering distrust of any government-led effort at providing objective and unvarnished facts? Or is this now-deceased 'American virtue' the truth itself, once the aim of justice and journalism, but now a glittering generality in the hands of political propagandists? To its credit, Gormley's excellent study engages the mourning reader in a thoughtful reflection on the truth's once predominant power.

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