

Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

The Ford Impeachment

On April 15, 1970, House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford coined a lasting truism when he told his colleagues and a packed press gallery that “an impeachable offense is whatever a majority of the House of Representatives considers [it] to be at a given moment in history.”

Ford was proposing that the House appoint a select committee to investigate whether grounds existed for the Great-1970s-Impeachment-Trial-That-Wasn't: that of the seemingly eternal Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

Historians have penalized Ford several demerits for going after Douglas. For his part, the President maintains that his action was “politically ill advised, but it was not irresponsible.”

The case against Douglas was not frivolous. A year earlier Justice Abe Fortas had resigned from the Supreme Court after it was revealed that while on the bench he had pocketed a \$20,000 retainer from the foundation of jailed financier Louis Wolfson. Justice Douglas was moonlighting in the same crooked fields. Newspaper reports had established that over the years Douglas had received \$101,000 from the foundation of Albert Parvin. Parvin was the former co-owner of the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas and a business associate of Meyer Lansky, “Ice Pick Willie” Alderman, and others not usually placed within the category of “nice Jewish boys.”

“I can't for the life of me see what is the difference between what Fortas was doing and what Douglas did for a whole lot longer, except that Abe gave the money back when he got caught,” Ford told aide Robert L. Hartmann.

(A weaker secondary charge against Douglas was that he had failed to recuse himself from a libel case involving pub-

lisher Ralph Ginzburg even though *Avant Garde*, a Ginzburg magazine, had paid the justice \$350 for an article about folk-singing. Douglas protested he was unaware that Ginzburg owned *Avant Garde*.)

Ford's attack on Douglas was widely regarded as GOP payback for the Senate's rejection of Nixon Supreme Court nominees Haynsworth and Carswell, but longtime Ford lieutenant Hartmann insisted otherwise. In his memoir *Palace Politics*, Hartmann wrote, “Ford disapproved of Douglas the way a Grand Rapids housewife would deplore the behavior of certain movie stars.” The conflict was “not so much liberal vs. conservative as swinger vs. square.” With his four wives and a widely rumored sexual athleticism that belied his advanced years, Douglas's lechery made him a tempting target.

Luckily for Douglas, that diverted his pursuers from the Parvin trail. Minority Leader Ford fatally wounded his case by dwelling on the fact that *Evergreen*, a hybrid hippie-nudie magazine, had published an excerpt from a Douglas book. This was said to violate the “good behavior” requirement that the Constitution places upon judges. Yet Random House had sold *Evergreen* the reprint rights without Douglas's knowledge; moreover, the justice's article consisted largely of a sensible attack on the taxpayer-funded depredations of the Forest Service and “the powerful Highway Lobby.”

The *Evergreen* charge was a disastrous red herring that allowed Ford's foes to paint him as a bluenose. It did, however, provide comic relief, in the improbable person of Ohio Democrat Wayne Hays (who soon would meet disgrace when his buxom employee Elizabeth Ray disclosed to the world that typing was not among her talents). Hays wryly—or should we say rye-



Gerald Ford holds up a copy of *Evergreen*.

ly, for it was cocktail hour—noted that Republicans were passing around the disputed issue of *Evergreen*, and he wondered if it was “available only to Republicans—or can some of us Democrats get it?” He brought down the House when he asked the rabid Representative Louis Wyman, “Has anybody read the article—or is everybody over there who has a magazine just looking at the pictures?”

Justice Douglas's many admirers piled on Congressman Ford, who suffered the worst press of his career. How dare he impugn the integrity of one of the nine robed archons! Though Ford's resolution attracted 59 Republican and 52 Democratic co-sponsors, the Judiciary Committee conducted a desultory investigation, sweeping the disturbing Parvin connection under the rug. The lesson of the Ford-Douglas debate: An impeachable offense is indeed whatever the House of Representatives says it is.

The affair did have a postscript. On November 12, 1975, an enfeebled Justice William O. Douglas tendered his letter of resignation from the court to President Gerald R. Ford. The President thanked him for his “firm devotion to the fundamental rights of individual freedom and privacy.”

—Bill Kauffman

AP Photo/Charles Garry

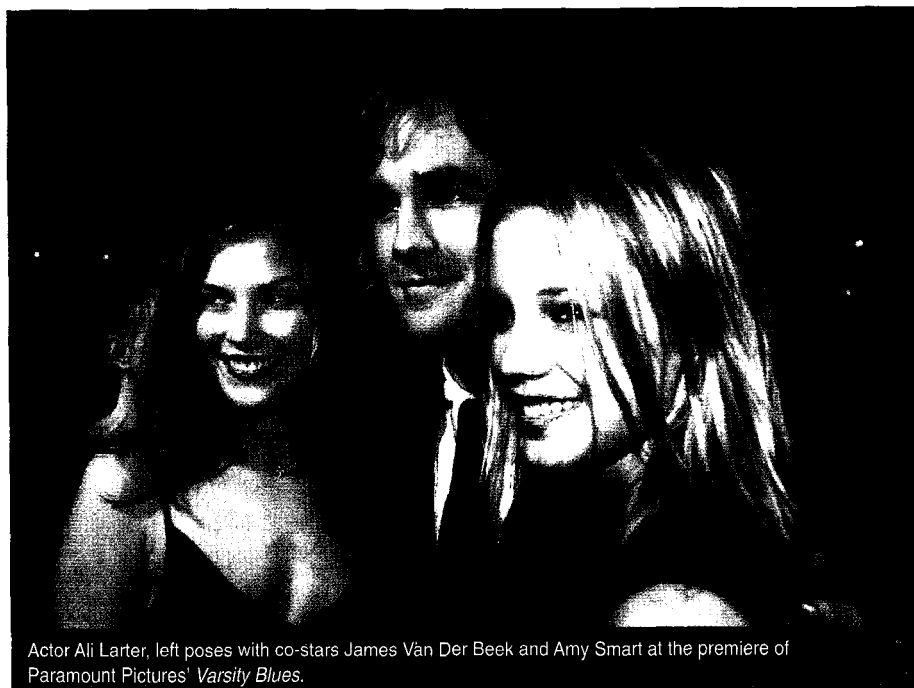
Mixed Messages for Generation Y

What was it like at the movies these past few months? A blast if you were a 14-year-old boy. Not since the early 1980s—the last time teen flicks ruled Hollywood's roost—has there been such a crop of high school comedies and hormone-driven dramas.

Teenagers have flocked to films such as *Varsity Blues* and *Cruel Intentions*. While these new pictures owe much to their cinematic predecessors of 15 years ago, they're of a different breed. These days, the titillation comes in a tidy moral package, as if producers were responding in a Clinton-like cop-out to recent demands for cleaner entertainment. "I know what I'm doing is wrong," a movie like *Cruel Intentions* seems to be reassuring us, "even though I continue to do it."

Teen movies weren't always this duplicitous; back in the '80s, they reveled in their ribald excesses with what can only be called honesty in comparison. In *Risky Business* (1983) a teenaged Tom Cruise befriended a hooker and turned his parents' house into a brothel. *Porky's*, a 1981 comedy propelled by its hero's quest to lose his virginity, was as brazen and unapologetic as the neon sign blazing over the strip club of the movie's title: "Get it at Porky's." *Sixteen Candles*, released in 1984, reaches its happy ending when Molly Ringwald's birthday girl gets her wish by finally rendezvousing with the school stud.

Teenagers seeking similar thrills at the movies today are getting a phony helping of morals on the side. The year's first box-office bang came courtesy of *Varsity Blues*, in which TV heartthrob James Van Der Beek's high school football star is pursued by whipped cream-wearing cheerleaders and strip club-dancing teachers when he starts chalking up wins for his small-town



Actor Ali Larter, left poses with co-stars James Van Der Beek and Amy Smart at the premiere of Paramount Pictures' *Varsity Blues*.

team. Because he's a "good" boy he doesn't touch, but the script lets him (and thus moviegoers) ogle the cheerleader and the teacher all they want.

Jawbreaker, a would-be black comedy about a clique of high school hotties who try to cover up the accidental murder of one of their friends, is even more dissembling. It pits Julie, an eager-to-confess good girl, against Courtney, the unrepentant leader of the group. The movie makes sure to include lascivious scenes of Courtney misbehaving (she has sex on her murdered friend's bed to make the death look like a rape) before Julie reveals her to be a killer in front of everyone at the prom. As Courtney tries to escape, her classmates hurl corsages at her in disgust. The scene unfolds in dramatic slow motion, so the audience can feel we too are pelting Courtney with flowers; that way, we get to watch her dirty deeds and still go home guilt-free.

There is also a false "responsibility" to *Cruel Intentions*, a laughable teen version of *Dangerous Liaisons*. The film follows teenage playboy Sebastian, who is

inspired to curb his promiscuous ways by the love of a self-proclaimed virgin. Sebastian's reformation doesn't mean he'll wait with her, however, just that he'll sleep *only* with her—see how much he's changed!

Sebastian's stepsister Kathryn, meanwhile, played by Sarah Michelle Gellar, tries to "sleep with as many people as possible." Yet in today's movies, such action can only be lingered over visually, not entirely condoned; so Kathryn gets her comeuppance at the film's end. Her stepbrother is also punished for fooling around: He gets squashed by a car.

A handful of more laudable teen movies also came out in the last few months: the innocently derivative *She's All That*, the artfully wholesome *October Sky*, and above all, *Rushmore*, a sharp-tongued fairy tale about what it means to mature. But by and large, it's sexploitation hypocritically wrapped in morality that movie makers are using to lure kids into theaters these days.

—Josh Larsen