

One Democratic member said Bill Clinton and other administration officials were "stunned" by their level of success with the budget in late 1998, the Republicans' willingness to give the Democrats virtually all the spending they wanted, and the GOP's inability to agree on tax cuts before the election.

If any substantive legislation is going to be passed in this Congress it will have to be done before the presidential and congressional campaigns start in earnest.

Roemer predicts the upcoming "battle for the gavel" will be so intense that this will undoubtedly be "the most expensive and contentious House election in history."

It's also clear that the one thing unifying the Democrats is their desire to win back control of Congress. No matter how conservative he is, Taylor is still a Democrat who says he has no plans to switch parties. Democrats say their caucus is more united than it's ever been, but

whether that will stick is the big question. "There's a real strong belief that if we hold together we take back the House," said Sherrod Brown, a liberal Democrat from Ohio.

"Gephardt is less worried about policy dividing us and more worried about politics dividing us," says Roemer, adding, "Our greatest weakness going into 2000 is our disunity."

Of course, the same could be said of the Republicans. ❧



PRESSWATCH

by John Corry

It's Not About Senex

Which didn't stop another preemptive strike on Starr.

Newsweek's Conventional Wisdom Watch is always fun to read. Its little red arrows tell you who's up and who's down, and its kicky little sentences tell you why. But while fun is fun, CW, as it often refers to itself, also serves a serious purpose: It keeps you current on the media ethos. CW pronounced impeachment dead, for example, after Clinton gave the State of the Union. The little red arrow next to his name was up; so was the one next to "Bumpers," and as the kicky little explanation said: "Finally, a politician the CW can truly admire. Naturally, he's retired." Meanwhile CW's only down arrow was next to "Hyde." "Give it up, Hank" CW said. "You and your team do look like you want to win too badly."

CW seemed pleased, and you might even think it was gloating. It also said

Clinton and his "legal eagles" had made the "House managers look like Rugrats." The message was that the Senate had to end the trial as soon as possible; the Republicans had lost, and everyone knew it. Indeed the *New York Times* had reported that even Pat Robertson knew it. Ordinarily the *Times* does not pay much attention to Robertson, other than to occasionally demonize him on its op-ed page, but this time he had said something it wanted to hear. While commenting on Clinton's State of the Union on his "700 Club," Robertson had said, with his customary folksy chagrin, "From a public relations standpoint, he's won. They might as well dismiss this impeachment hearing and get on with something else, because it's over as far as I'm concerned."

Glad tidings there, the *Times* thought, and splashed the story all over page one. It also recalled what Robertson told the Christian Coalition last September. "For

nearly nine months," Robertson said then, "we have been mocked, demeaned, belittled, and lied to," and added that the office once occupied "by Washington and Jefferson and Lincoln" had become "the playpen for the sexual freedom of the poster child of the 1960's."

The *Times* said that was in "striking contrast" to what Robertson was saying now, although obviously it was not. Robertson's notions about Clinton's winning the public relations battle and his turning the Oval Office into a playpen were hardly contradictory, and the *Times* was only looking for another way to stick it to the Republican right. It knows the enemy when it sees it. Clinton may be a disaster, but the people on the other side are worse. You never know what bad thing they might do next.

Thus the lead story the *Times* ran under the headline "Starr is Weighing/Whether to Indict/Sitting President." This suggested that Starr was getting ready to extend what Dale Bumpers had called in the speech CW so admired "our national nightmare." No decent person wanted that, of course, and since

he *Times* had thoughtfully run the story on a Sunday, its awful possibility dominated that morning's talk shows. Democrats said they were distressed. The vindictive Starr was out of control, and soon. Republicans, on the defensive, looked pained.

But the *Times* story, which was attributed to unidentified "associates" of Starr, was not quite what it seemed. Starr apparently agreed with the two constitutional scholars in his office who had said a sitting president could be indicted. But, as the *Times* also reported, he had never said, or even hinted, that he would ever seek an indictment. Instead he had kept his own counsel, and not told anyone what he might do one way or the other. So if that were true, what was the point of the story? Was the *Times* launching a pre-emptive strike, and warning Starr off? It was hard to tell, and two days later the murk grew even deeper. The *Times* said in an editorial that Starr "seems determined to write himself into the history books as a narcissistic egal crank," and cited its own story to prove it. It said there had been an "apparent effort" by Starr's office to "spark a debate over criminal prosecution of the president."

But the debate had been sparked by the *Times* itself, and then conducted all over television; and what was an "apparent effort" supposed to mean, anyway? Had Starr's office planted the story, or hadn't it? Surely the *Times* had to know. It was talking about its own story. On the other hand, the so-called debate had made Starr look pretty bad. Could the White House have had a hand in this? After all, it has been known to plant stuff. Whatever the answer, the *Times* seemed to realize it was on shaky ground here, and it decided to brazen it out. "The issue of who leaked news of Mr. Starr's indictment research," it said stiffly, "was a phony one." Therefore attention should be paid to the "substance of Mr. Starr's legal mischief," and not to the *Times*'s "journalistic sources."

That wasn't very satisfying, of course, but not an awful lot about the Clinton coverage is. Perhaps this has to with our

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**Political commentary
and psychoanalysis go
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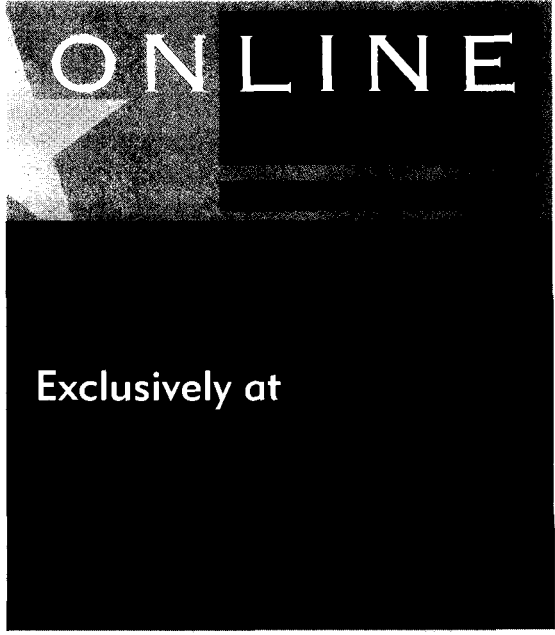
era. After reading the transcripts of the Nixon White House tapes, William Randolph Hearst, Jr., the editor in chief of the Hearst papers, and a good Republican as well, wrote that he had never come across anything before as "ruthless, deplorable and ethically indefensible as the talk on those White House tapes." Vulgar language in the Oval Office had upset him. But a couple of decades later, Clinton is pleased by a crouching intern while he talks on the phone about Bosnia, and in a new book, J. Philip Wogaman, one of his spiritual advisers, condemns the Starr Report.

We are in a therapeutic age, and it shows. The same day the *Times* was warning its readers about Starr, the *Washington Post* was trying to figure out Clinton. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, author of *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Com-*

mitment to Marriage and the Family, wrote in an essay that Clinton was our first Intimate President. He had exposed himself, and confessed his sins, and "done more than any modern president to break down the sense of psychological distance between his office and the American people." On balance, though, Ms. Dafoe did not much seem to approve. She said Clinton had also diminished respect for the presidency.

Meanwhile the *Post* also gave us Claire Douglas, a Jungian analyst. Clinton, she wrote, represented the puer—"the eternal youth who charms and inspires." The mostly Republican Senate represented the puer's opposite, the senex. They were the dried up old men of any age whose greatest sexual arousal, or maybe their only sexual arousal, came from the outrage they felt over the puer's sexuality. Apparently Ken Starr was a senex, too.

That was more like it, of course. Political commentary and psychoanalysis go hand in hand in the therapeutic age, and the puer-senex split is sure to be mentioned some day in CW. In the meantime, the *Times* has published an op-ed symposium on what the Republicans must do to shake off their "impeachment funk." One of the contributors to the symposium, Helen Fisher, an anthropologist, said they had to stop "exhibiting thinking that is characteristic of the male brain." Oh. ❧



- JOHN CORRY
- WŁADY PLESZCZYŃSKI
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Ben and Jerry

Tuesday

"Far between Sundown's finish and Midnight's broken toll, / We ducked inside the doorway as thunder went crashing...." I cannot possibly believe what is happening. Here it is, the day before the House of Representatives is to vote on the impeachment of Bill Clinton, and what is Bill Clinton doing? Suddenly, after years of near total inaction, without any particular provocation, without a United Nations command to do it at any specific time, with several big powers opposing the move, Clinton is bombing Iraq with cruise missiles and throwing thousands of tons of high explosives at various targets.

The transparency of this murderous fraud would be funny if it were not for innocent people getting killed. Now, I have no love at all for Saddam Hussein. He should be in prison for life, at the least. And I want a weakened, subdued Iraq. But Clinton is killing innocent men, women, and children in a vain attempt to delay his day of reckoning. This would not have happened to Saddam's Iraq, the ordinary Joe Mohammed in Iraq, if it were not for impeachment. Good for Trent Lott for saying the truth. The action is insupportable.

If I were a more active kind of guy, I would sue Clinton for wrongful death on the part of those Iraqis—and that poor guy in the Sudan who got blasted when Clinton bombed an aspirin factory after the Starr Report came out. How come Iraq doesn't take Clinton to the International Court of Justice? This Clinton guy is a cold-blooded murderer.

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Something Freudian is going on, as well. Clinton is symbolically murdering his critics here at home by his projected acts of killing in Iraq. I never thought I'd feel afraid of a U.S. president, but Clinton is out of control. I never really put any credence in all those stories about murders in Arkansas, and I always thought Vince Foster killed himself because of an adverse drug reaction (though it is odd that he killed himself right across the street from the CIA). But now that I see Clinton killing in cold blood in Iraq, I am not surprised at all that good people think he's a murderer.

I am convinced that if we did not have a Constitution and a citizenry who believe in law—at least a part of the citizenry that believes in law—Clinton would behave toward us about the way Saddam behaves toward his people.

Thursday

Tommy and I are at the Ritz-Carlton in Rancho Mirage, near Palm Springs. We're here because tomorrow I am going to interview Gerald Ford for a fine magazine called the *American Enterprise*. I had a car drive us down here because I felt so tired. We checked into our wonderful room. (Naturally, they originally had us in a horrible room but we switched—hotel policy generally is to put you in a bad room and then, if you holler, let you go to a better room.) Tommy discovered that the TV had video games attached, and I could not move him after that. I wandered through the hotel, stared at the immense, perfectly lit Christmas tree next to the pool overlooking the Coachella Valley, and then had room service with Tommy. Afterward, while he played intently and a maid cleaned the room, I went and had tea in the lobby overlooking that great Christmas tree. The waitress insisted

that I take it for free because she is such a fan of my show. I am not going to lie about it: LOVE BEING FAMOUS! It beats the heck out of being teased and tortured when I walked down the halls of Montgomery Hill Junior High School long ago.

Back to our lavish room. Tommy has put down his video game stick (or whatever it's called) and is now lying in bed reading one of his vast trove of cartoon books. This one is about an office worker named Dilbert who has a lot of real-life experiences in modern work land. I have to admit that Dilbert is amazingly funny. But shouldn't Tommy be reading Gibbon?

Tommy talks all the time about Dilbert. He reads to me from Dilbert. He reads them over and over again. I sure hope that when he grows up he can get a job reviewing or writing comics.

Friday

A glorious Palm Springs day. Dry, warm, clear, perfect winter desert weather. A light breeze rustling through the palms. Glorious. Fantastic. Thor, our driver, appeared in his battered old Lincoln. We chugged off to President Ford's office to interview him. It was a short ride through the desert to his digs in Rancho Mirage, then through a tiny gate, and there we are in a different time and place, a decent time and place.

To start with, the people who work for him are super polite. Lots of Secret Service at a condo and series of rooms at Thunderbird Country Club. Here in Jerry Ford's America—which is still not Clinton's America, thank heavens—there are no massive concrete barricades, no reroutes of traffic. Just a few smiling people with guns. There is a big difference between the paranoid and the normal style of living.