

# There but for the grace of God

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 14, 1998](#) issue

Bill Clinton's remarks at the White House prayer breakfast more than made up for his less-than-contrite confession on the night of his grand jury appearance. I was at the breakfast, and I saw close-up a man and his wife in deep agony over the public shame and humiliation he had brought upon himself, his family and the nation. Each person at the breakfast had the opportunity for brief moments of private conversation with the president and his wife. It was a remarkable event--a leader caught in the consequences of his confessed sins was reaching out in supplication and asking for forgiveness.

As the president spoke, Kenneth Starr's report was being delivered to the Congress, making intimate details about the president's sins available for all to read. Ten days later, Clinton's grand jury testimony was broadcast to the nation, and again he and his family and Monica Lewinsky received a public pillorying. The president has been punished. Is his punishment sufficient for having deceived the nation about a series of encounters he had hoped would remain private? If you have to ask, then you don't know the meaning of shame or can't imagine the possibility that your sinful behavior could be laid bare for all to see and hear.

The Starr report contains no information sufficient to impeach President Clinton. It includes an excessive amount of embarrassing information about the president's private life, which he has already admitted was not only inappropriate but sinful. The motive for the release of this massive amount of information, which the Judiciary Committee could have examined and distilled into a few paragraphs for public distribution, is obvious: to humiliate the president in order to turn public opinion against him.

But it didn't turn out the way the Republicans in the House had hoped it would. In their rush to humiliate the president, the Republicans failed to consider that Americans' respect for privacy exceeds their prurient interests.

Seldom in history has a public body been so guilty of pious pretensions of "getting at the truth." It should be quite obvious that the release of the intimate details of the

Clinton-Lewinsky affair served no moral or legal purpose. It was a purely political act to embarrass the president.

Are we witnessing a foretaste of what would happen were the religious and political right to seize total control of government? Democracies die not through a takeover by an outside tyrant but through leaders who promise to bring happiness by eliminating evil and its practitioners.

Absolute certainty as to what constitutes good and bad moral behavior is a guiding principle of the Religious Right, a principle which has led several columnists to point out that the Starr report evokes disturbing reminders of witch-hunts in New England back when the government was in the hand of religious absolutists. In those days, evil was embodied in Satan and in "witches." In their battle against Satan, religious authorities brought suspects to trial, determined whether they were minions of Satan, and hanged those judged to be guilty according to the impeachment procedures of the day.

Ann Hibbens, one of the "witches" put to death at Salem, had, according to history scholar Carol Karlsen, initially been "excommunicated from the Boston church sixteen years before her witchcraft trial, not for witchcraft *per se*, but (among other sins) for her obstinate challenge to religious, secular and familial authority, and for her evil influence over other church members" (*The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*). Then as now, it is not just what you do, but what you cause others to do, that could put you in jeopardy.

We are more sophisticated than our Puritan forebears, but there remains a smell of sulfur in the air. There has been a violation of human decency that far exceeds the level of sinfulness in the president's sexual encounters with Monica Lewinsky. And the moralistic language voiced by Clinton's enemies has a distinctly puritanical tone to it. As Karlsen puts it: "Hibbens was executed because these two fears--that witches threatened their neighbors' well-being, and that they were Satan's minions--converged in her trial, creating together what one early historian called a 'popular clamour . . . against her.'"

The religious and secular right is trying to create a clamour of moralistic judgment against Clinton, claiming their concern is over perjury before a grand jury, when, it is clear, their main case rests on their preoccupation with immoral behavior. I do not see this effort as part of a planned conspiracy, as Hillary Clinton once suggested, but

it certainly is part of a remarkable pattern of events. The witch-hunt started with the Paula Jones case--an allegation of sexual harassment that grew out of a reference to a "Paula" in a conservative magazine article about Clinton as a governor. Just before the statute of limitations ran out, and with the help of conservative political forces--Jones is still funded by the conservative Rutherford Institute--the Paula Jones case entered the legal system. It has since been dismissed for having no legal merit.

The Jones case was allowed to go forward by a wrongheaded Supreme Court decision that allowed a civil suit to be brought against a sitting president. Enter Kenneth Starr, former federal judge, whose Christian fundamentalist background gives him the single-minded passion of a zealot determined to eradicate evil and punish wrongdoers.

Starr's report seeks the removal of Bill Clinton from office for reasons he claims relate to perjury and obstruction of justice. But even those allegations, which are questionable on their face, relate not to public acts but to a series of sexual encounters and an attempt by both Lewinsky and Clinton to keep those encounters secret. The relationship, which the president had ended several months earlier, was thrust into public view through illegally taped conversations by Monica Lewinsky's then friend, Linda Tripp.

For those who have wondered why the American people have been so lenient in their judgment against Clinton's personal behavior, the answer is not to be found in a national tolerance for wrongdoing, but rather in a sense of identification and understanding: there but for the grace of God go I. We are not a people who can identify with a president who lies to Congress in order to send arms to the contras. But we do understand how passion can overrule good judgment, and how one is afterwards tempted to lie about it.

There is no mystery as to why the African-American community so strongly supports Clinton. Anyone who has been frightened at the prospect of being arrested for arbitrary or trivial reasons--a common African-American experience--can identify with a president caught in Starr's cross hairs. One New York construction worker who watched part of Clinton's grand jury testimony summed it up: "If they can do that to him, imagine what they can do to me."

Punishment should fit the crime. A five-year-old of my acquaintance suggests that a proper punishment for Bill Clinton would be to take television away from him for a

whole month. Of course, how would a five-year-old know that this president would be more than glad to avoid the cries of "he broke the law" from Sam and Cokie and George on Sunday morning, and he would be quite happy not to have to listen to any of the other media martinets who have decided he must go and are frustrated that he has not already resigned as they said he would. Its not nice to disappoint the talking heads.

Bill Clinton has been sufficiently punished--or did you miss the four hours of grand jury torture with intimate questions no one should have to answer? His punishment is obvious in the intrusive questioning of Starr's 500-page report, written in solemn, pious prose that resembles nothing less than the narrative of an old pornographic movie, the kind that warns viewers that they are about to witness evil deeds which are being shown for their own good.

The Congress does not have, and will not have, the support of the American people for impeachment. If it goes forward with impeachment hearings, it will be in the tradition of those divines who sent witches to the gallows for their own puritanical purposes.