

Unrepentant, unforgiven: Clinton's missed opportunity

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [August 26, 1998](#) issue

Bill Clinton has served as our national pastor on many occasions, empathizing with those who suffer, comforting those who grieve, and deftly articulating people's sentiments. He is at his best when he speaks to us in times of crisis. In his speech on August 17 the president had another opportunity to speak at a time of crisis. It was an opportunity to speak of his own personal failure. The public was largely prepared to forgive him. But instead of dealing with the personal agony he had brought on himself and others, the president focused on defending himself legally and politically. His speech was defiant and self-protective.

The speech was masterfully crafted and well delivered. Clinton correctly noted that the questions put to him before the Paula Jones grand jury were "being asked in a politically inspired lawsuit, which has since been dismissed." The Jones lawsuit has always been about politics: a young woman was used by the political right to attack the president over an incident that he still insists did not take place. There may not be, in Hillary Rodham Clinton's words, a "right-wing conspiracy" to bring Clinton down, but the Jones case certainly has all the earmarks of such an effort.

Privacy was the right chord to strike in his speech. "Now this matter is between me, the two people I love most--my wife and our daughter--and our God. I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so." Exactly the right thing to say to a public that realizes no family is without its tensions and every family deserves privacy in which to work through its difficulties and conflicts.

The president also challenged a highly unpopular special prosecutor to bring this entire matter to a close. Here again he was on solid ground with public opinion. Most people are tired of Kenneth Starr's investigation into the Monica Lewinsky affair and want to let the president and the country move on. "It is time to stop the pursuit of personal destruction and the prying into private lives and get on with our national life."

Clinton tried to address the major legal question haunting him--whether he lied to the Paula Jones grand jury--by asserting: "While my answers were legally accurate, I did not volunteer information." In his mind, the legal definition of "sexual relations" given to him for his earlier grand jury appearance allowed him to claim that what happened in his meetings with Monica Lewinsky was not a sexual relationship. Or, to put it in the vernacular, as long as the couple did not do "it," there was no sexual relationship. One-directional oral sex does not fit the category. But this is a very shaky argument.

The theme of privacy plays well with the public. The president expects and deserves the same privacy in this area that the rest of us expect for ourselves. But he then went on to say, "It's nobody's business but ours [his family]." This comment deliberately overlooks the fact that the speaker is the president of the United States who has spent seven months telling a version of a series of events that he knew to be untrue. The deception of the past seven months has made this everybody's business--not the graphic details, but the behavior and the consequences of that behavior.

It is everyone's business because our government virtually ground to a halt as the White House conducted an all-out campaign to maintain a false cover story. One of the sadder images from the past few months was that of Yasir Arafat and Benjamin Netanyahu sitting glumly in the Oval Office as the press badgered the president with questions about sex, not about the Middle East.

Another sad moment, all the more disturbing in retrospect, occurred at a White House press conference at which CNN's Wolf Blitzer asked Clinton about the effect of this matter on Monica Lewinsky's future. The president paused and then, recognizing a trap, smiled and said, "That's good, that's very good." Clinton is too empathic not to recognize the truth behind Blitzer's question. It must have caused him considerable pain to hear it, but he stuck to script and refused to respond.

The script called for Clinton's speech to make only a passing reference to Lewinsky. There was most likely a poll-driven reason why she was not more prominent. Her popularity is not high, and the image the public has of her is that of a hapless, promiscuous, even predatory woman. But who was the predator? Lewinsky was a 21-year-old intern. If she had been in an academic or church setting and had had an affair with a professor or a pastor, news of the matter would have led to instant dismissal or at least censure of the authority figure involved.

The president owes Lewinsky and her family a public apology and a request for forgiveness. The issue is not whether Lewinsky was a predatory young woman; the issue is not even sexual harassment, since she has made no such charge. It is, rather, the case of a man in power taking advantage of a young woman technically in his employ and doing so not once or twice but continually over a period of 18 months. It remains a puzzle why feminists have given Clinton such consistent approval, in spite of his behavior with Lewinsky, after they pulled out all the stops to oppose Clarence Thomas.

Clinton described his relationship with Lewinsky as one that was "not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure on my part for which I am solely and completely responsible." All of which is true. But these are the words not of a repentant sinner but of a lawyer providing the best possible reading of his case. His words are too self-serving. A confession does not argue; it admits wrongdoing in a spirit of honest contrition.

If Jimmy Swaggart had not already spoiled the line with his sobbing televised confession, the president might have said, "I have asked myself a thousand times, 'Why did I do this?'" Such an admission of personal guilt could have preceded his confession to the nation and his request for forgiveness, along these lines: "I am sorry for what I did. I acknowledge my behavior as a personal weakness which I intend to overcome. I apologize and ask forgiveness from all those who have been hurt in this matter. I ask forgiveness for my behavior and for my act of deceit from my supporters, my staff, and those of you in the public who have stood by me in these last months. With the help of my family and God, I am determined that there will be no further repetitions of this behavior. I am ready now to serve you; I need your forgiveness to help me in that task."

That is a confession, and that is what was missing from the speech. But it is not Bill Clinton's style to confess. He is a politician who is at his best when he is on the attack, fighting back against his adversaries as the "comeback kid."

What the president has done is not indictable, and it is certainly not grounds for impeachment. It does not compare in degree to either Watergate or Irangate. But both his original deceit and the cover-up are reprehensible.

Bill Clinton has two years left in office. We want him back as our activist president. But he must first acknowledge to the American people that he knows the enormity of what he has put us through and recognize his need for forgiveness. He has not yet

done so.