

Wild children

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 27, 1999](#) issue

Hard to believe that a year has passed since first we heard about Monica. It feels more like a decade that we've been in this Slough of Despond. That was John Bunyan's term for one of the stops on Pilgrim's journey, which included a visit to the valley of Humiliation, a location all too familiar to many of the players in this yearlong national nightmare. How did it happen, this national plunge into despondency?

In his book on violence, *Power and Innocence*, Rollo May recalls the case of a child in the 19th century who spent his earliest years living among animals in the forest. French authorities turned the boy over to a doctor who brought him into his home to see if "he could be brought back to the human condition." François Truffaut's movie *The Wild Child* retells this story of the boy, who was given the name Victor and who slowly learned to speak and count in a rudimentary fashion. The doctor decided that there was one unambiguous test to determine whether Victor was human: would he fight back if unjustly punished?

May writes: "Knowing that Victor accepts punishment--being shut in a closet--when he has made a mistake, [the doctor] tries to shut him in the closet when he has correctly done the task he was assigned. Victor puts up a great fight. With a glad sign of recognition, the doctor states that there is present in the boy the central element which constitutes the human being," which is "the capacity to sense injustice and take a stand against it in the form of I-will-be-destroyed-rather-than-submit."

An appreciation of the basic human response of retaliating against injustice might illuminate the Clinton impeachment story. Consider the case of Congressman Henry Hyde (R., Ill.). After the first Monica stories appeared a year ago, Hyde, chair of the House Judiciary Committee, tried to discourage talk of impeachment. "You don't impeach him for a peccadillo," he said at the time. According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, a year ago Hyde also said that the president would not be impeached without bipartisan support and wide public approval for the action. "If we

fall into partisan bickering, we will disgrace this institution."

Hyde has since reversed his views. The *Times* explains that Hyde was angry over Clinton's "cavalier attitude toward the law, the investigation and the committee." And the congressman's determination to proceed aggressively against Clinton was not deterred by "disclosure in the fall of an extramarital affair he had decades ago." When that story was leaked to the media, Hyde spoke of his "great shame" over the relationship, but maintained that there is a major difference between "a sin and a crime." Still, the disclosure of his affair, which he described as a "youthful indiscretion" (but which took place over five years, when he was in his 40s), must have been a humiliating experience for the 74-year-old widower.

It was unfair for that story to surface at any time, especially 30 years after the fact. In the hostile climate of Washington, it is understandable that Hyde might think Clinton supporters were behind the story. And such an assumption could easily have spurred Hyde to pursue impeachment over what he had previously dismissed as a "peccadillo." Hyde was unfairly treated, and it would be understandable if his response was to toughen his stand against the president.

The entire saga, starting with the initial legal circumstances that linked Paula Jones to Monica Lewinsky, has been a series of violent verbal and legal acts exchanged across partisan and personal lines. James Carville was unkind when he flippantly referred to Paula Jones as "trailer park trash"; whatever her motives for bringing charges against the president, that name-calling must have struck Jones as unfair. Hillary Clinton was understandably angry over the unfairness of the Jones allegations, so much so that she is believed to have persuaded her husband and his attorneys not to settle the case out of court.

All the president's current legal problems stem from his decision to manipulate the truth--in effect, do violence to it--rather than give in to what to him was the unfairness of the sex-related charges brought by Kenneth Starr after Starr's four-year investigation into Whitewater and other matters had failed to find anything indictable.

A continuation of this cycle of seeking vengeance for an earlier injustice--especially if the result is Clinton's removal from office or a particularly punitive and humiliating censure--can only lead to further disintegration of civil discourse. On the school playground, where everyone first discovers that unfairness leads to retaliatory violence, there is always the hope that some higher authority will step in and bring a

halt to the fighting. Unfortunately, this current fight is between the higher authorities themselves; there are no teachers around to step in and halt the carnage. And that just isn't fair.