

Punishment for sin

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 28, 1998](#) issue

A little ideology can be just what the political strategist ordered. Ideological passion stimulates party activists, brings out the volunteers, injects ideas into the forefront of debates and, on election day, produces the voters needed to decide close elections. But too much ideology can be toxic. That fact may be dawning on Republican leaders, who decided to turn this year's congressional elections into judgment day for Bill Clinton. There are clear signs that the Religious Right may be poisoning itself; indeed, the upcoming referendum on Bill Clinton's presidency may suddenly shift in his favor.

By extending the president's impeachment investigation until at least after Christmas, the Republican leadership is gambling that continued talk about Clinton's immoral behavior will reduce the president's popularity. The Republicans have adopted this strategy, according to columnists Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, because "their most socially conservative supporters, including those of the religious right, demand forceful action against Clinton. For these voters, this is a moral question that can't be answered with political calculus." Having already utilized the Starr Report to humiliate the president in unprecedented fashion, Republicans want to "go over the whole tawdry story once again as a way of demonstrating they won't allow Clinton to escape unpunished."

This focus on Clinton's personal life helps Republican candidates in a few districts in the South and Far West, according to Germond and Witcover. But the columnists also suggest that such a strategy may reduce support for Republicans "among the economic conservatives and social moderates who deserted the party in huge numbers in the 1996 presidential election."

Apparently Republican strategists are not in tune with American cultural attitudes. We live in a restless, quickly bored culture; yesterday's sex story quickly loses its appeal, and when the story is about someone we know, what was initially titillating soon becomes embarrassing. The Congress that on the sacred Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah gave us Clinton's testimony about his sex life now wants us to spend

the Christmas season watching it take solemn testimony about the president's private life.

The entire impeachment process has little chance of doing anything other than make religious moralists happy to see a sinner pay for his sins. Barring the release of new information, which appears highly unlikely, the story is so stale that further prolongation of it can only rebound against the Republicans. Even Bill Kristol, one of the president's harshest critics, admitted to columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. that "the desire to get it over with" is widespread. It is important, Kristol feels, "that Republicans not be the party of dragging it out."

But the Religious Right has pushed Republican leaders to keep up the moralistic pounding of the president. Former *New Republic* editor and columnist Andrew Sullivan writes in the *New York Times Magazine* that while Bill Clinton was responsible for prolonging this "nine months of trauma," the president was responsible "for none of the prurient, lip-pursing moralism of the [Starr] report, nor for the subsequent, egregious outspilling of grand-jury testimony. Proof of perjury or obstruction of justice required none of this, as most Americans immediately understood. This moral obsessiveness was the creation of Kenneth Starr and something far larger than Kenneth Starr."

And this something, writes Sullivan, is "a conservatism become puritanism, a conservatism that has long lost sight of the principles of privacy and restraint, modesty and constitutionalism, which used to be its landmarks."

Sullivan, who has written a book on his experience as a gay man and who is politically conservative, feels that both the Starr Report and the Republican leadership are driven "not merely to prove perjury but to expose immorality. In this universe, privacy is immaterial, hence the gratuitous release of private telephone conversations, private correspondence and even details of the most private human feelings." At another point in the Starr Report, Sullivan finds the chilling observation that, in the matter of privacy, there is only a right to a "private family life." Sullivan draws the conclusion: "A private, nonfamily life is fair game for prosecution and exposure."

Writing recently in the *New Republic* on the growth of the Religious Right in suburbia, Peter Beinart quotes Reinhold Niebuhr: "Frantic orthodoxy is never rooted in faith but in doubt. It is when we are not sure that we are doubly sure.

Fundamentalism is, therefore, inevitable in an age which has destroyed so many certainties by which faith once expressed itself and upon which it relied."

Our culture's loss of certainty has helped create the Religious Right. The November 3 election will indicate just how effective that movement has been in shaping our politics.