

## CULTURE

## Bill Clinton: A Reckoning

Feminists saved the 42nd president of the United States in the 1990s. They were on the wrong side of history; is it finally time to make things right?

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ETHAN MILLER / GETTY / ZAK BICKEL / THE ATLANTIC

The most remarkable thing about the current tide of sexual assault and harassment accusations is not their number. If every woman in America started talking about the things that happen during the course of an ordinary female life, it would never end. Nor is it the power of the men involved: History instructs us that for countless men, the ability to possess women sexually is not a spoil of power; it's the point of power. What's remarkable is that these women are being believed.

Most of them don't have police reports or witnesses or physical evidence. Many of them are recounting events that transpired years—sometimes decades—ago. In some cases, their accusations are validated by a vague, carefully couched quasi-admission of guilt; in others they are met with outright denial. It doesn't matter. We believe them. Moreover, we have finally come to some kind of national consensus about the workplace; it naturally fosters a level of romance and

flirtation, but the line between those impulses and the sexual predation of a boss is clear.

Believing women about assault—even if they lack the means to prove their accounts—as well as understanding that female employees don't constitute part of a male boss's benefits package, were the galvanizing consequences of Anita Hill's historic allegations against Clarence Thomas, in 1991. When she came forward during Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation hearing and reported that he had sexually humiliated and pressured her throughout his tenure as her boss at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, it was an event of convulsive national anxiety. Here was a black man, a Republican, about to be appointed to the Supreme Court, and here was a black woman, presumably a liberal, trying to block him with reports of repeated, squalid, and vividly recounted episodes of sexual harassment. She had little evidence to support her accusations. Many believed that since she'd been a lawyer at the EEOC, she had been uniquely qualified to have handled such harassment.

But then something that no one could have predicted happened. It was a pre-Twitter, pre-internet, highly analog version of #MeToo. To the surprise of millions of men, the nation turned out to be full of women—of all political stripes and socioeconomic backgrounds—who'd had to put up with Hell at work. Mothers, sisters, aunts, girlfriends, wives—millions of women shared the experience of having to wait tables, draw blood, argue cases, make sales, all while fending off the groping, the joking, the sexual pressuring, and the threatening of male bosses. They were liberal and conservative; white collar and pink collar; black and white and Hispanic and Asian. Their common experience was not political, economic, or racial. Their common experience was female.

For that reason, the response to those dramatic hearings constituted one of the great truly feminist events of the modern era. Even though Thomas successfully, and perhaps rightly, survived Hill's accusations, something in the country had changed about women and work and the range of things men could do to them there.

But then Bubba came along and blew up the tracks.

How vitiated Bill Clinton seemed at the 2016 Democratic convention. Some of his appetites, at least, had waned; his wandering, “Norwegian Wood” speech about his

wife struck the nostalgic notes of a husband's 50th-anniversary toast, and the crowd—for the most part—indulged it in that spirit. Clearly, he was no longer thinking about tomorrow. With a pencil neck and a sagging jacket he clambered gamely onto the stage after Hillary's acceptance speech and played happily with the red balloons that fell from the ceiling.

When the couple repeatedly reminded the crowd of their new status as grandparents it was to suggest very different associations in voters' minds. Hillary's grandmotherhood was evoked to suggest the next phase in her lifelong work on behalf of women and children—in this case forging a bond with the millions of American grandmothers who are doing the hard work of raising the next generation, while their own adult children muddle through life. But Bill's being a grandfather was intended to send a different message: Don't worry about him anymore; he's old now. He won't get into those messes again.

Yet let us not forget the sex crimes of which the younger, stronger Bill Clinton was very credibly accused in the 1990s. Juanita Broaddrick reported that when she was a volunteer on one of his gubernatorial campaigns, she had arranged to meet him in a hotel coffee shop. At the last minute, he had changed the location to her room in the hotel, where she says he very violently raped her. She said that she fought against Clinton throughout a rape that left her bloodied. At a different Arkansas hotel, he caught sight of a minor state employee named Paula Jones, and, Jones said, he sent a couple of state troopers to invite her to his suite, where he exposed his penis to her and told her to kiss it. Kathleen Willey said that she met him in the Oval Office for personal and professional advice and that he groped her, rubbed his erect penis on her, and pushed her hand to his crotch.

It was a pattern of behavior; it included an alleged violent assault; the women involved had far more credible evidence than many of the most notorious accusations that have come to light in the past five weeks. But Clinton was not left to the swift and pitiless justice that today's accused men have experienced. Rather, he was rescued by a surprising force: machine feminism. The movement had by then ossified into a partisan operation, and it was willing—eager—to let this friend of the sisterhood enjoy a little *droit de seigneur*.

The notorious 1998 *New York Times* op-ed by Gloria Steinem must surely stand as one of the most regretted public actions of her life. It slut-shamed, victim-blamed,

and age-shamed; it urged compassion for and gratitude to the man the women accused. Moreover (never write an op-ed in a hurry; you'll accidentally say what you really believe), it characterized contemporary feminism as a weaponized auxiliary of the Democratic Party.

## Feminists and the Clinton Question

By Gloria Steinem

**I**f all the sexual allegations now swirling around the White House turn out to be true, President Clinton may be a candidate for sex addiction therapy. But feminists will still have been right to resist pressure by the right wing and the media to call for his resignation or impeachment. The pressure came from another case of the double standard.

For one thing, if the President had behaved with comparable insensitivity toward environmentalists, and at the same time remained their most crucial champion and bulwark against an anti-environmental Congress, would they be expected to desert him? I don't think so. If President Clinton were as vital to preserving freedom of speech as he is to preserving reproductive freedom, would journalists be condemned as "inconsistent" for refusing to suggest he resign? Forget it.

For another, there was and is a difference between the accusations against Mr. Clinton and those against Bob Packwood and Clarence Thomas, between the experiences reported by Kathleen Willey and Anita Hill. Commentators might stop puzzling over the President's favorable poll ratings, especially among women, if they understood the common-sense guideline to sexual behavior that came out of the women's movement 30 years ago: no means no; yes means yes.

It's the basis of sexual harassment law. It also explains why the media's obsession with sex qua sex is offensive to some, titillating to many and

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beside the point to almost everybody. Like most feminists, most Americans become concerned about sexual behavior when someone's will has been violated; that is, when "no" hasn't been accepted as an answer.

Let's look at what seem to be the most damaging allegations, those made by Kathleen Willey. Not only was she Mr. Clinton's political supporter, but she is also old enough to be Monica Lewinsky's mother, a better media spokeswoman for herself than

It's not harassment  
and we're not  
hypocrites.

Paula Jones, and a survivor of family tragedy, struggling to pay her dead husband's debts.

If any of the other women had tried to sell their stories to a celebrity tell-all book publisher, as Ms. Willey did, you might be even more skeptical about their motives. But with her, you think, "Well, she needs the money."

For the sake of argument here, I'm also believing all the women, at least until we know more. I noticed that CNN polls taken right after Ms. Willey's interview on "60 Minutes" showed that more Americans believed her than President Clinton.

Nonetheless, the President's approval ratings have remained high. Why? The truth is that even if the allegations are true, the President is not guilty of sexual harassment. He is accused of having made a gross, dumb and reckless pass at a supporter during a low point in her life. She pushed him away, she said, and it

never happened again. In other words, President Clinton took "no" for an answer.

In her original story, Paula Jones essentially said the same thing. She went to then-Governor Clinton's hotel room, where she said he asked her to perform oral sex and even dropped his trousers. She refused, and even she claims that he said something like, "Well, I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do."

Her lawyers now allege that as a result of the incident Ms. Jones described, she was slighted in her job as a state clerical employee and even suffered long-lasting psychological damage. But there appears to be little evidence to support those accusations. As with the allegations in Ms. Willey's case, Mr. Clinton seems to have made a clumsy sexual pass, then accepted rejection.

This is very different from the cases of Clarence Thomas and Bob Packwood. According to Anita Hill and a number of Mr. Packwood's former employees, the offensive behavior was repeated for years, despite constant "no's." It also occurred in the regular workplace of these women, where it could not be avoided.

The women who worked for Mr. Packwood described a man who groped and lunged at them. Ms. Hill accused Clarence Thomas of regularly and graphically describing sexual practices and pornography. In both cases, the women said they had to go to work every day, never knowing what sexual humiliation would await them — just the kind of "hostile environment" that sexual harassment law was intended to reduce.

As reported, Monica Lewinsky's case illustrates the rest of the equation: "Yes means yes." Whatever it was, her relationship with President Clinton has never been called unwelcome, coerced or other than some-

thing she sought. The power imbalance between them increased the index of suspicion, but there is no evidence to suggest that Ms. Lewinsky's will was violated; quite the contrary. In fact, her subpoena in the Paula Jones case should have been quashed. Welcome sexual behavior is about as relevant to sexual harassment as borrowing a car is to stealing one.

**T**he real violators of Ms. Lewinsky's will were Linda Tripp, who taped their talks, the F.B.I. agents who questioned her without a lawyer and Kenneth Starr, the independent prosecutor who seems intent on tailoring the former intern's testimony.

What if President Clinton lied under oath about some or all of the above? According to polls, many Americans assume he did. There seems to be sympathy for keeping private sexual behavior private. Perhaps we have a responsibility to make it O.K. for politicians to tell the truth — providing they are respectful of "no means no; yes means yes" — and still be able to enter high office, including the Presidency.

Until then, we will disqualify energy and talent the country needs — as we are doing right now. □

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The New York Times published Gloria Steinem's essay defending Clinton in March 1998 (Screenshot from [Times Machine](#))

Called "[Feminists and the Clinton Question](#)," it was written in March of 1998, when Paula Jones's harassment claim was working its way through court. It was printed seven days after Kathleen Willey's [blockbuster 60 Minutes interview with Ed Bradley](#). If all the various allegations were true, wrote Steinem, Bill Clinton was "a candidate for sex addiction therapy." To her mind, the most "credible" accusations were those of Willey, who she noted was "old enough to be Monica Lewinsky's mother." And then she wrote the fatal sentences that invalidated the new understanding of workplace sexual harassment as a moral and legal wrong: "Even if the allegations are true, the President is not guilty of sexual harassment. He is accused of having made a gross, dumb, and reckless pass at a supporter

during a low point in her life. She pushed him away, she said, and it never happened again. In other words, President Clinton took 'no' for an answer.”

Steinem said the same was true of Paula Jones. These were not crimes; they were “passes.” Steinem revealed herself as a combination John and Bobby Kennedy of the feminist movement: the fair-haired girl and the bare-knuckle fixer. The widespread liberal response to the sex-crime accusations against Bill Clinton found their natural consequence 20 years later in the behavior of Harvey Weinstein: Stay loudly and publicly and extravagantly on the side of signal leftist causes and you can do what you want in the privacy of your offices and hotel rooms. But the mood of the country has changed. We are in a time when old monuments are coming down and men are losing their careers over things they did to women a long time ago.

When more than a dozen women stepped forward and accused Leon Wieseltier of a serial and decades-long pattern of workplace sexual harassment, he said, “I will not waste this reckoning.” It was textbook Wieseltier: the insincere promise and the perfectly chosen word. The Democratic Party needs to make its own reckoning of the way it protected Bill Clinton. The party needs to come to terms with the fact that it was so enraptured by their brilliant, Big Dog president and his stunning string of progressive accomplishments that it abandoned some of its central principles. The party was on the wrong side of history, and there are consequences for that. Yet expedience is not the only reason to make this public accounting. If it is possible for politics and moral behavior to coexist, then this grave wrong needs to be acknowledged. If Weinstein and Mark Halperin and Louis C. K. and all the rest can be held accountable, so can our former president and so can his party, which so many Americans so desperately need to rise again.

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