

PERSPECTIVE ON WHITEWATER

A Diversion That's Costing Us All



This media-driven inquest is reminiscent of the witch hunt that distracted our top AIDS researcher for four years

By DEBORAH TANNEN

As the Whitewater teapot is whipped into a tempest, let us consider the case of Dr. Robert Gallo.

Gallo is the American virologist who co-discovered the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS. He is also the one who developed the technique for studying T-cells which made that discovery possible, and taught it to other labs, including that of Luc Montagnier, the Frenchman who then independently identified the virus. Most important, Gallo developed the test to detect HIV in blood. But, as Nicholas Wade explained recently in the *New York Times Magazine*, Gallo became the object of a four-year investigation into allegations that he had stolen the AIDS virus from Montagnier. The investigation concluded that Gallo had done nothing wrong. Nothing. But this exoneration cannot be considered a happy ending. Never mind the personal suffering of Gallo, who was reviled when he should have been praised. Never mind that, in his words, "These were the most painful years and horrible years of my life." The truly awful result is that this top-ranked researcher had to spend four years fighting accusations instead of fighting AIDS.

This diversion from the task at hand is the undiscussed scourge of Whitewater. And the victims are not only the Clintons but the country and all its citizens—and, since the United States is so prominent in global events, the world. The Whitewater investigation is taking the time and attention of the President and of Hillary Rodham Clinton, the person primarily responsible for addressing one of the most significant problems facing our country, health care. It is time necessarily taken away from what they should be doing—and what we desperately need them to be doing. As investigations and headlines proliferate, and members of the White House staff are hauled in for questioning or forced out of their jobs, it is no surprise to read in *Newsweek* that "Inside the Administration there is a looming sense that its entire domestic

This is not to say that any President or public figure should be above criticism. If wrongdoing surfaces, of course it is the responsibility of the press and the opposing party—indeed, of the party in question—to investigate the matter. But Whitewater did not come to light because it had ramifications in public affairs. It was dragged to light by reporters digging in Little Rock garbage, searching for something—any-

thing—to provide the exposure of errors that our public discourse now requires. Whitewater filled the slot.

The Gallo investigation, too, was sparked by a particular type of journalistic zeal. The hint of scientific theft originated in an article addressing the puzzle of why Gallo's and Montagnier's viruses resembled each other so closely that they had to be related. The article was written in the currently popular spirit of demonography: not to praise the person it features but to bury him—to show his weaknesses, his villainous side. Gallo's great failing—like Caesar's, according to Brutus' oratory—was ambition. (And, yet, how else to win a battle against such a virus, if not by single-minded obsession of the type ambition provides?) The journalist found colleagues willing to claim that Gallo had "hogged the credit for joint discoveries." This was presented as evidence that he was the sort of person who would steal a virus and claim to have discovered it.

In other words, the implication that Gallo had stolen the virus was created to fill a requirement of the discourse: In demonography, writers must find negative sides of their subjects for readers who enjoy seeing heroes pulled down. So the suspicion led to investigation and

the investigation became a juggernaut that acquired a life of its own, continuing for years after the two scientists solved the puzzle of their matching viruses. (A third virus had overrun both Montagnier's and Gallo's, carried by samples Montagnier sent to Gallo.)

And so with Whitewater. The investigations themselves are a graver threat to the country than any conceivable effects of the behavior they are examining.

I am sure the journalist writing his story on the puzzle of HIV did not intend to set AIDS research back by years. One would like to think that Rep. Jim Leach, Sens. Alfonse D'Amato and Bob Dole (all Republicans) and the journalists pumping up the story do not intend to prevent the government from addressing issues like crime, health care and international trade. But that is what they are doing.

Leach said he "thought initially it was a one-to-three-week issue; that you'd have a hearing and then put it behind us. Now the great challenge is how to bring the issue to resolution." Indeed. That, now, is the challenge for us all.

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