

# 'Argument culture' fuels Clinton scandal

By Deborah Tannen

Ask not the nature of the president's relationship with the former White House aide. Ask what brought us to a situation where Yasser Arafat sits idly by while reporters question the president about his private life, where the FBI raids a young woman's apartment in search of a dirty dress, where an independent counsel (appointed nearly four years and \$30 million ago to investigate an Arkansas land deal) wires a woman to surreptitiously record a 24-year-old friend talking about her sex life, then has agents trap the friend in a hotel and threaten her with jail unless she participates in a sting operation.

What brought us to this is "the argument culture" — a pervasive, warlike atmosphere that makes us turn everything in public life into a fight. It drives our three great public institutions — politics, law and the press — and binds them together in glorification of attack, conflict and exaggerated opposition.

Amid allegations of scandal involving the president, questionable comparisons to Watergate abound. But Watergate came to light because a security guard discovered a criminal break-in by chance. The current scandal — like all the mini-scandals that have preceded it — came to light because of a giant industry bent on creating scandals. Watergate snuck up on reporters. Today reporters pounce on any hint of scandal.

But journalists don't create scandals alone. The vicious attacking of opponents by politicians has a long history, but it used to be confined to campaigns. Now it's a round-the-

clock business, fueled by well-funded organizations that uncover or invent damaging information to feed the media.

Then there's the law. Lawyers are allowed to question potential witnesses before a case goes to trial. But the procedure is now used to harass and intimidate opponents. So attorneys for Paula Jones used their client's sexual-harassment suit as a pretext to hunt down rumors about the president's private life and to grill unwilling witnesses with humiliating questions.

And where do Jones' lawyers get the names of the women they subpoena? The media: *Newsweek*, for example, which named Kathleen Willey. And how did Paula Jones find — or get found by — the right-wing supporters who funded her belated lawsuit? In an *American Spectator* article full of rumors about Bill Clinton's tenure as governor of Arkansas.

Jones' lawyers, and The Rutherford Institute that funds them, are not unique in having caught on that legal cases provide dirt that is useful in creating scandals. According to Larry Sabato and Glenn Simpson in *Dirty Little Secrets*, when Bruce Benson was running for governor of Colorado, a local TV station sued for access to divorce documents alleging that Benson had threatened to kill his former wife — a false allegation used as a legal tactic by the wife's attorney.

Judge Susan Webber Wright ruled that the Monica Lewinsky allegations are irrelevant to Jones' case. But independent counsel Kenneth Starr had the bit in his teeth and was not about to let it go. Ah, the independent counsel, the roiling center of this storm. The first special prosecutor was appointed in 1972 to investigate the Watergate cover-up. This unusual step was necessary because members of the Justice Department, including the attorney general himself, were involved in events to be investigated. But the practice has gone out of control in sorcerer's apprentice fashion. Starr has moved far afield from Whitewater, and most Americans believe his investigations are partisan attempts to get Clinton.

Why was Starr appointed to investigate events that took place before Clinton was elected? From the media drumbeat of stories fed by an operation headed by a former official of the 1988 and 1992 Republican presidential campaigns.

So goes the back-and-forth among politics, law and the press. The umbilical cord binding and feeding these institutions is the leak. Daily news reports detail supposedly secret proceedings from both the Jones case and the independent counsel investigation. And sometimes leaks turn out to be plants: misinformation deliberately "leaked."

Revulsion against the "argument culture" explains why Clinton's approval ratings are at an all-time high and there is a ferocious backlash against Starr and the press. People don't want dirt thrown in their faces that is dug up for the sake of it, especially when it intrudes into the private lives of public figures. The "argument culture" corrodes our spirits and undermines our great institutions. It's time to stop the special prosecutor madness. It's time for the media to back off from the attack-dog mode and take up their role as watchdogs. It's time to limit campaign tactics to campaigns, so our legislators can legislate and our leaders can lead. It's time to stop the "argument culture" from poisoning our public discourse and threatening our institutions of politics, law and the press.

This is the lesson of the latest scandal. If the scandal gives us this, it will have brought some benefit after all.

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## How players rate

<b>Clinton<sup>1</sup>:</b>	
Favorable	65%
Unfavorable	34%
<b>Starr<sup>1</sup>:</b>	
Favorable	25%
Unfavorable	42%
<b>Press<sup>2</sup>:</b>	
Acts responsibly	37%
Irresponsibly	55%

Sources: <sup>1</sup> CNN/USA TODAY/ Gallup Poll Jan. 30-Feb. 1; <sup>2</sup> poll Jan. 28