



“THIS WILL BE OVER IN SIX MONTHS”:
BILL CLINTON, “CRONYISM” AND THE
MANAGEMENT OF SCANDAL



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Abstract

Political scandal has long been a rich area for examination among historians, political scientist and cultural analysts, including for scholars focused on Bill Clinton. A political scandal is an act of misconduct that the media frames as an urgent problem for the voting public that must be investigated and remedied. Brendan Nyhan defines scandal as a socially constructed event that occurs when a public figure's actions are widely interpreted as contravening established ethical, moral, political, or procedural norms. In the case of Clinton, scandals revealed acts of misconduct that raised questions of his fitness for the presidency and became major sites of political contestation in the 1990s, an era of growing political partisanship in the USA due the end of the Cold War and an increased focus on domestic issues. Scholars have consistently focused on the Clinton Affair when discussing the scandals of the Clinton presidency. By focusing on one scandal scholars have ignored the previous six years that created the atmosphere of intense press and political coverage during the Affair scandal. This thesis seeks to realign the focus of scholars of the Clinton era. This thesis examines three scandals: Travelgate, Whitewater and the Lincoln Bedroom scandal. By examining the effect that these three scandals had on the President, the First Lady, the White House and their legitimacy scholars can better understand the Clinton administration. Furthermore, by understanding how the press and Clinton's political opponents framed these scandals scholars can further understand the intense partisan period of the 1990s.

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Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| ABSTRACT | I |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | II |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| BACKGROUND | 3 |
| METHODOLOGY | 6 |
| PRESS CONCEPTIONS OF CLINTON | 10 |
| HISTORIOGRAPHY | 14 |
| CHAPTER ONE: TRAVELGATE | 18 |
| INTRODUCTION | 18 |
| CORRUPTION | 19 |
| COVER-UP..... | 27 |
| CRONYISM..... | 34 |
| CONCLUSION | 40 |
| CHAPTER TWO: WHITEWATER | 43 |
| INTRODUCTION | 43 |
| CORRUPTION | 44 |
| COVER-UP..... | 55 |
| CRONYISM..... | 62 |
| CONCLUSION | 69 |
| CHAPTER THREE: LINCOLN BEDROOM SCANDAL | 71 |
| INTRODUCTION | 71 |
| CORRUPTION | 72 |
| COVER-UP..... | 78 |
| CRONYISM..... | 85 |
| CONCLUSION | 93 |
| CONCLUSION | 95 |
| CORRUPTION, DISPARITY AND HYPOCRISY..... | 96 |
| COVER-UPS AND OBSCURING THE TRUTH..... | 98 |
| CRONYISM AND THE “RELATIONSHIP OF FAVOURS” | 101 |
| CULTURAL CLASH | 103 |
| CONCLUSION | 104 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 106 |
| PRIMARY SOURCES | 106 |
| Newspaper Articles | 106 |
| Archival Sources | 110 |
| Memoirs | 111 |
| Visual Sources..... | 111 |
| SECONDARY SOURCES | 111 |
| Books..... | 111 |
| Journal Articles | 112 |

Introduction

“This will be over in six months”.¹

George Stephanopoulos, the young and charismatic unofficial spokesman for the White House in 1993 and 1994, told President Clinton this bold prediction when he and his White House Counsel were trying to decide if they should give in to the bipartisan call for an Independent Counsel to investigate Whitewater. The investigation which started in late 1993 would become a consistent feature of the headlines until early 1998 when the President’s affair with a young intern became the focus of all investigative journalism and Republican efforts. This thesis does not examine the Clinton affair or the Clinton impeachment or 1998, rather it focuses on three scandals that laid the groundwork for the press’ reporting of those events: Travelgate (1993-1996), Whitewater (1992-1998), and the Lincoln Bedroom scandal (1995-1996). The three scandals this thesis examines involved corruption, cover-up, and cronyism, however, not all scandals have these three components in equal measure.

Corruption means an action of dishonest or fraudulent conduct, usually undertaken by a person entrusted with authority. For the purposes of this thesis those entrusted with authority were the White House, the President and the First Lady. Most of these scandals started as a corrupt action by the Clinton administration, usually followed by more years later. Corrupt acts usually draw the attention of the media and Republicans to the scandal, or years later a new act of corruption helps to reinvigorate a stale scandal. While Clinton’s scandals usually start with an act of corruption most of the scandal is the back and forth between the White House and the media as both attempts to control the narrative. The White House’s actions to try and control the scandal often involved selectively releasing information or telling only

¹ Bob Woodward, *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate*, New York, 1999, p.237.

small parts of the whole story. The media and Clinton's Republican opponents framed these various acts as the White House's attempts to cover-up the truth behind the various scandals. However, the thread that unites all these scandals is cronyism. Cronyism is a difficult topic to discuss, in part because the word has become a slur in politics. The term "cronyism" is frequently levelled against democratic leaders because it erodes their legitimacy since they are not representing the people who elected them, rather they are representing personal interests. It has become a buzzword that people level against any political opponent they wish to discredit.

Cronyism is a complex concept with limited scholarship addressing the matter. Cronyism is the networks of connection between government and special interest groups. These interest groups can be individuals, collectives, or multimillion-dollar businesses.² The scholarship on cronyism is also highly political since most of the people writing about it are not just academic scholars but often critics or politically partisan. For example, Jay Cost a conservative historian and author of *What's So Bad About Cronyism?* (2015), states that cronyism became a major issue for modern Americans with the resurgence of the Democratic Party in 2008. It is therefore not surprising to learn that among Cost's other works is a book titled *A Republic No More: Big Government and the Rise of American Political Corruption* (2015) which dates the increasing corruption in the American system with the rise of a larger and more expansive government. Cost argues that "Democrats most controlled Congress from the 1930s until 1994, and they brought modern cronyism into being."³ Cost earned his Masters degree and PhD from the conservative University of Chicago, known for producing anti-big government and pro-free market scholars such as Milton Friedman, Cost was also a registered Republican until 2016. Therefore, the scholar's outlook on the origin or cronyism

² Jay Cost, "What's So Bad About Cronyism?", *Broadside*, New York, 44, p.1.

³ *Ibid.*, p.20.

must be taken with a grain of salt as it is clearly informed by his personal politics. However, this is not to say that Cost's work is without merit. *What's So Bad About Cronyism?* (2015) is a highly detailed piece that tracks the rise of cronyism in the American system from the foundation of the republic until modern times. It addresses an important characteristic of the American system which acts as a consistent theme throughout Clinton's presidency. When restrictions are placed on politicians, for example when raising money for financing their campaign, inevitably loopholes will be sought that favour cronyism.⁴ Clinton did exactly what Cost stated would happen in the lead up to the 1996 election when he faced limits on how much money individuals could donate to this campaign and limit on the aggregate total that could be raised. However, Clinton skirted this limit by allowing donors to send money straight to the Democratic National Committee.

Background

President Bill Clinton (whose Presidency ran from 1993-2001) had a long history in politics before he rose to prominence in the 1992 election as the Democratic Presidential nominee. Clinton came from Little Rock, Arkansas, a state in the central South of the United States. Little Rock is a major site of historical interest. Little Rock was the site of major racial contestation after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1955) ruling that abolished racial segregation in public schools. In 1957 the "Little Rock Nine" brought Arkansas to the forefront of national news when the nine African American students tried to attend Little Rock Central High School but were stopped from entering due to pro-segregationists. President Eisenhower had no choice but to bring in the National Guard to allow the students to successfully integrate into the school. In 1987 while Governor of Arkansas, Clinton invited the Little Rock Nine to the Governor's Mansion. Clinton held a reception for them and invited them to see the room where the Governor in 1957 had orchestrated the attempt to

⁴ Cost, *What's So Bad About Cronyism?*, p.37.

keep them out of public schools.⁵ For Clinton who was born in 1946 many of his formative years were spent during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which would inform his later political views. Clinton was a firm believer in equality and helping ordinary or disadvantaged Americans. Proof of Clinton's belief in justice and the desire to improve people's lives came during his 1993 inaugural speech. A motif of this speech was the call to help ordinary people so they could live the lives that America was calling them to lead.⁶ He believed in the progressive message of the Little Rock Nine and later wrote that their bravery freed the nation of the "dark shackles of segregation and discrimination."⁷ Clinton summarised his understanding of the Little Rock Nine and the 1957 school integration crisis by stating in his memoirs that "they did more for me than I could ever do to them."⁸ The 1957 crisis in Little Rock established strong beliefs for Clinton to stand up for what he believed to be right. This led to his later political involvements such as refusing to serve in Vietnam by dodging the draft and his support for the Civil Rights movement during the 1960's.

Clinton got further involved in Arkansas politics in 1977 when he was elected as Arkansas Attorney General. However, his political career began in earnest when he ran for Governor of Arkansas in 1978, and successfully gained election. At just 31 years old, Clinton was one of the youngest governors in the state's history. Clinton served from 1979-1981 when he was voted out in favour of Frank White, a Republican former banker, who was only the second ever Republican to be elected Governor of Arkansas. However, Clinton ran again two years later in 1982 where he successfully took back the office from White. His unlikely success in the 1982 election would mirror his later unlikely success in the 1992 election

⁵ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, London, 2004, p.37.

⁶ "1993 Clinton Inaugural Address", *CBS News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qszv668rN20>, (accessed:18/03/20).

⁷ Clinton, *My Life*, pp. 37-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.38.

where he dubbed himself during his New Hampshire Primary speech “The Comeback Kid.”⁹ Clinton would then maintain the office of Governor until 1992 when he decided to run for President. During his time as Governor, Clinton made connections that would later become the source of controversy in Washington such as Webster Hubbell and his business associate in the Whitewater controversy James McDougal. Clinton’s 1992 campaign drew considerable media attention. His decision to dodge the draft for the Vietnam War in the late 1960s stood in contrast to President George H. W. Bush’s (1989-1993) service during the Second World War where he served as a pilot in the Pacific theatre. Furthermore, the media discovered that Clinton allegedly had a twelve-year long relationship with a nightclub singer called Gennifer Flowers.¹⁰ Clinton appeared on CBS’s *60 Minutes* where he admitted that he had caused “pain in my marriage”, however he denied all accusations of infidelity with Ms. Flowers.¹¹ John F. Harris, author of *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House* (2005), stated that Clinton was the subject of one of the most personally intrusive media campaigns ever run in United States politics.¹²

Clinton arrived in Washington with considerable baggage. He had several contacts from Arkansas whom he brought along with him, as well as a targeted media campaign focused on his personal life. During the campaign his personal life and decisions had been probed, however, the media discovered a scandal that would become a feature of media and political discourse for the first six years of Clinton’s presidency: Whitewater. Along with established scandals Clinton reached Washington with contacts he made during his political life in Arkansas. They were all close friends who had grown close due to the nature of small state politics, something that the White House acknowledged when they prepared rebuttals to

⁹ “New Hampshire Primary Speech 1992”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ena_loPnvHA, (accessed: 22.03.20).

¹⁰ John F. Harris, *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House*, New York, 2005, p. xxvii.

¹¹ Harris, *The Survivor*, p. xxvii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

accusations of cronyism in private memos.¹³ Clinton also brought along with him understanding of Government that classed with the Washington meritocratic culture. His partner in the defunct Whitewater deal, James McDougal, described his relationship with then-Governor Clinton as a relationship in 1985 as one of favours.¹⁴ When Clinton moved to Washington to take up office he brought with him a series of Arkansas associates that would take up major positions of power within Washington, something that did not sit well with the Washington establishment. In Washington the elite functioned in a specific way. They worked within the Washington culture to rise steadily through the ranks. Washington had a long history of meritocratic professional bureaucracy. In 1883 the Pendleton Act was pushed into legislation. The Pendleton Act led to a gradual expanse of “merit-based civil service”, this act helped to create the culture that Clinton and his friends started to clash with. Clinton’s personable politics that looked after his friends did not mesh well with this meritocratic culture.

Methodology

Brendan Nyhan defines scandal as a socially constructed event that occurs when a public figure’s actions are widely interpreted as contravening established ethical, moral, political or procedural norms; or a combination of these.¹⁵ Importantly, scandals are an event which the elite label as an urgent problem for the voting public that must be investigated and remedied at once.¹⁶ Furthermore, scandal is a “self-reinforcing process” where an official commits a transgression which leads to news coverage and in turn prompts response from the officials involved, which then begets a response of its own.¹⁷ These various actions and reactions have

¹³ Paul Begala to Lisa Caputo, “Some Thoughts on an Interview”, Mar. 11, 1994. FOIA: 2006-0320-F-Whitewater [Part 6].

¹⁴ Jeff Gerth and Stephen Engelberg, “U.S. Investigating Clinton’s Links to Arkansas S&L”, *The New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1993.

¹⁵ Brendan Nyhan cited in Robert Entman, *Scandal and Silence: Media Responses to Presidential Misconduct*, Cambridge, 2012, p.6.

¹⁶ Entman, *Scandal and Silence*, p.4.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.3.

a purpose. Both sides are trying to control the narrative of events and are pushing for the dominant interpretation of events. The various ways in which the news media frames an event and how the transgressor responds create a dialogue.

“Framing” is essential to the making of a scandal. Scholars identify two forms of framing: Substantive and Procedural. Substantive framing, according to Robert Entman, performs at least two of the following functions when covering political events, issues, or actors. It will define the effects or conditions as problematic, identify a cause for this scandal, convey a moral judgement, and/or endorse a remedy or improvement.¹⁸ I will use this form of framing to analyse how news organisations covered the possibility of corruption, cover-up and cronyism in Bill Clinton’s White House. The second form of framing is procedural, which has a much narrower focus. Procedural framing provides evaluations of a political actor’s legitimacy based on the techniques they use to tackle a problem, their success in solving the problem, and their representativeness (does this represent what public opinion thinks is the right solution to the problem).¹⁹ This form of framing will be used to examine character issues facing the President, Hillary Clinton and the various members of the White House administration who were embroiled in the scandals that faced them. Important to note is that news reports can look at three different classes of object – political events, actors, or issues – there can be overlap and often a story will frame multiple objects in the same story.²⁰ By examining the various frames we can see how the media presented the actions of the Clinton administration, especially Bill and Hillary, in a way that cast them as corrupt and untrustworthy.

¹⁸ Robert Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Chicago, 2004, p.5.

¹⁹ Entman, *Projections of Power*, p.6.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.23.

Nyhan further identifies three factors that can affect political scandal coverage: the President's approval rating, media congestion, and opposition control of political institutions.²¹ During Clinton's Presidency he achieved moderate levels of approval, averaging around 55 percent with a low of 37 percent just after the Travelgate controversy in mid-1993. These ratings made him vulnerable to attack from elites as he did not have the popular backing that would have made it harder for opponents to criticize him. Research suggests that as "chief executives become unpopular, public demand for negative news should increase."²² Nyhan further elaborates to say that when a President is popular journalists may hesitate to pursue potential scandal. Similarly, opposition politicians grow weary of raising the scandal alarm as it may backfire and hurt their political standing.²³ Media congestion could also affect how the media reports on events. A scandal may be side-lined in favour of one that is more likely to draw readers to the paper repeatedly.²⁴ During the Clinton presidency America faced an unexpected era of peace. When Clinton took office, he did not inherit any major international issues like the Presidents before him who took office during the intense political struggle of the Cold War. This situation gave the press plenty of breathing room and resources to cover the President and all his actions.²⁵ The press did not have an external political influence that presidents could be compared against. Because of this the press in particular became far more critical of their politician's actions. This is not to say that Clinton and his administration was the first to face criticism. Rather the type of criticism and what the media analysed was uniquely personal. All the scandals analysed in this thesis had ties to Clinton's personal life. Similarly, when the Clinton Affair reached the news in 1998 it became a sensation in part because it was so deeply personal to the Clintons'

²¹ Brendan Nyhan, "Media Scandals Are Political Events: How Contextual Factors Affect Public Controversies Over Alleged Misconduct by U.S. Governors", *Political Research Quarterly*, 70, 1, pp.223-4.

²² Nyhan, *Media Scandals Are Political Events*, p.226.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Entman, *Projections of Power*, p.95.

lives. The media reports covering the affair are like tabloid journalism, delighting in the various twists and turns in the narrative. While it is not impossible that this could have happened earlier in U.S. history, the sustained personal nature of media reports on the President's scandal is exceptional. Lastly, during this period the Republicans controlled major U.S. institutions. In the 1994 mid-term elections Republicans successfully defended all their seats in the Senate and gained eight from the Democrats. Furthermore, the Republicans gained the House of Representatives from the Democrats, winning by a margin of 6.8% and gained fifty-four seats. Avid Clinton opponent and Republican Newt Gingrich became the Speaker of the House and promised a wave of new investigations into Clinton and the White House. The opposition's control of the Senate and the House created an atmosphere where criticism of Clinton and the White House became a standard fixture of Washington. This allowed the media to level intensifying criticisms against the President and question his administration.

What is evident is how the media and the opposition party worked together to create scandal. As Nyhan says:

“In contemporary American politics, the opposition party and the elite political media (the national print and television outlets that often set the agenda for the rest of the press) are the two crucial institutional players in creating and sustaining presidential and executive branch scandals.”²⁶

Furthermore, the two need each other to successfully generate a scandal. The opposition needs the media to keep raising the issue to keep it in the public conscious. The media need politicians to speak on these issues as it legitimizes their coverage.²⁷ The two are dependent on each other, they have a “symbiotic relationship; neither can generate a scandal alone.”²⁸

This relationship can be seen in how *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* reported

²⁶ Brendan Nyhan, “Scandal Potential: How Political Context and News Congestion Affect the President’s Vulnerability to Scandal”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 45, 2, p.438.

²⁷ Nyhan, *Scandal Potential*, p.439.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.441.

on various aspects of the scandals I analyse. Consistently *The Washington Post* references the words of Republican Senator Jim Leach when he called for an Independent Counsel to investigate Whitewater. When reading these stories, the *Post* creates a legitimacy that the paper lacks without it. Allegations gain an aura of importance that would be decidedly lacking otherwise. This thesis utilizes these two papers as they tend to set the narrative for other papers and came to dominate the reporting of major scandals. Researching in other newspapers confirms the same reporting. In fact stories in other newspapers usually stemmed from both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. This thesis focuses primarily on how the media constructed a narrative concerning each scandal, specifically how each was either illegal or unethical. This thesis does not follow a chronological structure, rather it follows a thematic one. Each chapter will discuss media framing of corruption, cover-up and cronyism. Often, I will move back to earlier events to discuss the various aspects of the media's attempt to frame an event. Each chapter starts with a brief introduction of the scandal and the problems involved before examining the three themes. I have done my best to provide a narrative of the scandals, however there is some overlap between themes.

Press Conceptions of Clinton

By the time that Bill Clinton took office in 1993 he had already received plenty of press coverage, enough for media insiders to develop an opinion and an image of him. In late December 1993, columnist E. J. Dionne published an article titled "Why They Can't Stand Clinton". Dionne suggests that Clinton's political opponents, conservatives and Republican supporters, saw a threat in Clinton that was not present with 1988 Democratic Presidential Nominee Michael Dukakis or President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). Clinton was trying to change the landscape of the country and their assumptions about the role government could play in their life.²⁹ The political opponents of the young President did not like Clinton's threat

²⁹ Quoted in John F. Harris, *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House*, New York, 2005, p.144.

to the status quo, they did not want a bigger and more imposing government that they believed would infringe on their ability to enact policies in the Senate since the Republicans controlled it. However, John F. Harris, a former reporter for *The Washington Post* published the book *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House* (2005) doubted this interpretation of Clinton, stating that the Right hated Clinton because of his “outward normality.”³⁰ Clinton lived a conventional life. Clinton went to church, loved and cared for his daughter Chelsea, and sought success like many others in his generation.³¹ However, Clinton’s opponents and critics thought that this was a sham that hid the real Clinton.³² The press often shared this view of the President, and no example is better than the 1998 film *Primary Colors*. The film is based on a book of the same name from 1996. The *Primary Colors* novel was written by an anonymous author who was later revealed to be Joe Klein a writer for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* among others. This film is a snapshot of the media’s worst conceptions of Clinton since the main character, Jack Stanton, is a stand-in for the President, copying not only his outward appearance, but his mannerisms, voice and movements.

The film follows Stanton on the campaign trail as he heads into the 1992 election. One scene that hits at the heart of the media’s perception comes at the tail-end of the film. Stanton is at the house of his competitor for the Democratic nomination with his advisor Henry Burton. Stanton has just talked his opponent into dropping out of the race after he threatens to reveal the candidate’s former drug addiction and a homosexual relationship, he engaged in with his drug supplier. As Stanton and Burton walk down the long path to the road Burton tells Stanton that he cannot work for him anymore, as he is disillusioned with the political process. Stanton then tries to convince Burton to stay on, claiming they can make history together. It is a classic Clintonian speech, it allows the future President’s charisma to

³⁰ Harris, *The Survivor*, p.145.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

shine through, rather than relying on a written text, something scholars later identified as one of Clinton's strengths.³³ Travolta's remarkable performance in this scene relies in part on his ability to make it appear that Stanton is using all his charm to try win Burton over to his cause. The scene also reveals how Washington elites conceptualized Clinton. Whenever Burton is looking at Stanton, his face is very animated and friendly. The acting by Travolta (who plays Stanton) draws you in and you cannot help but be convinced by what he is saying. But when Burton turns away to consider what Stanton is telling him, Stanton's face changes. His expression takes on a cold and calculating appearance. Stanton is analysing Burton to see if he is convincing him. However, his voice stays filled with emotion. The political animal is revealed to the audience, showing those watching that emotion and animation can be faked if it is required and will help Stanton to achieve his goals. Stanton does not care about doing the right thing. He only cares about winning and knows that Burton is essential to this effort. As Burton turns to look Stanton in the eye, we see the politician spring back into life. His face takes on the smiling and homely look that endears him to the polity throughout the film. It is a brilliantly acted scene that shows the audience the real Stanton/Clinton and hints that he is covering who he really is; it is all a sham.

Upon release in 1998 *Primary Colors* did not perform well commercially, only making \$39 million domestically and \$13 million internationally. It failed to make back its budget of \$65 million. While *Primary Colors* did not perform well financially, it did do well critically. *Variety* reviewer Todd McCarthy wrote in his March 1998, review that:

“Although the filmmakers have taken every precaution to label their work fiction, what they have, in fact, wrought would seem to represent a rare instance of a major feature film so closely mirroring the behaviour of contemporary players on the national scene that audiences will more or less accept it as the truth, even if cosmetic details have been altered.”³⁴

³³ Harris, *The Survivor*, pp.10-11.

³⁴ Todd McCarthy, “Primary Colors Review”, *Variety*, Mar. 18, 1998.

McCarthy's article continued, stating that while Stanton is a crook, he is also "simultaneously empathetic, sincere, inspirational, cynical and mendacious" at a moment's notice.³⁵ The article also highlights that despite Stanton's endearing qualities he is also "a supremely persuasive manipulator of everyone who enters his sphere of influence."³⁶ Roger Ebert, the famous and well respected film critic said that *Primary Colors* was "a superb film – funny, insightful and very wise about the realities of political life."³⁷ Ebert concluded his review of the film by stating that *Primary Colors* will neither hurt or help the Clinton presidency.³⁸ However, Ebert does add that the film does not give a "softened" portrayal of its "Clintonesque hero".³⁹ Rather it exposes the rumours surrounding Clinton with "brutal candour."⁴⁰ While this movie did not do well financially, the recognition from critics of major renown, such as Ebert, or in major publications such as *Variety* that the film reflected some reality is interesting. *Primary Colors* and its critical reception shows how the media understood President Clinton. The character of Stanton in the film is deemed so alike Clinton that *Variety* claimed that audiences would "more or less accept it as the truth." The view of Clinton as this charismatic person with deep character faults bled into the film not only from the realities of the Clinton presidency but also from the book it was based on. Klein's book was informed by his experiences and understanding of President Clinton as a journalist. It follows that other reviewers and journalists would see the same characteristics present in Stanton and deem them to be an accurate representation of President Clinton. Furthermore, the release of *Primary Colors* in 1998 marks the end of the period examined within this thesis. By the time of this film's release Clinton had faced three major scandals and walked

³⁵ McCarthy, "Primary Colors Review", Mar. 18, 1998.

³⁶ McCarthy, "Primary Colors Review", Mar. 18, 1998.

³⁷ Roger Ebert, "Primary Colors Review", Mar. 20, 1998, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/primary-colors-1998>, (accessed: 22.03.20).

³⁸ Ebert, "Primary Colors Review", Mar. 20, 1998,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

away from them. This film is based on the cumulative experiences of the media during the previous six years where President Clinton and his administration continually survived one accusation after another.

Historiography

Bill Clinton has received considerable scholarly attention from historians, cultural analysts, and media experts. During Clinton's two terms Bob Woodward, the award-winning journalist who helped to break the Watergate scandal in 1972, the scandal that focused President Nixon to resign in 1974, wrote three books focusing on the President and his actions. Woodward's book *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House* (1994) follows the first year of the Clinton presidency, using interviews conducted by Woodward to establish how the White House works under the charismatic new president. *The Agenda* is a remarkable piece of journalism that helps to portray life inside the White House. It is useful for those seeking to understand the first tumultuous year when Clinton faced the beginning of the Travelgate scandal and the increasing prominence of the Whitewater scandal. However, *The Agenda* has a narrow focus, it seeks to explain how the White House works and misses some of the developments of major scandals that would put pressure on the White House for years to come. Woodward published another work just after Clinton was successfully re-elected titled *The Choice: How Bill Clinton Won* (1996). *The Choice* analyses how Clinton was able to successfully win the election despite the previous four scandal ridden years. This book is remarkable for analysing the various methods used by the President and his administration to overcome limitations that stopped them from raising record breaking amounts of money. *The Choice* seeks to provide a clear story that allows historians to understand the various decisions made by Clinton, his allies, and his opponents that led to the President's re-election. However, this book is limited by how quickly it was released to the public. Woodward stated in the afterword released with the 1997 version of the book that a few months into Clinton's second term Woodward

realised he underestimated the role money played in the President's re-election.⁴¹ He had published the book before the emerging donations scandal explained how President Clinton was able to raise incredible amounts of money. *The Agenda* and *The Choice* culminated in *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate* (1999). *Shadow* examines the effects of the Watergate scandal on the executive office but focuses especially on Clinton; over half the book is dedicated solely to his presidency. *Shadow* examines the various effects the Watergate scandal had on the Presidents who took office after. This book provides an examination of the Clinton White House in incredible detail, drawing on interviews Woodward conducted with White House staff. While his scholarship is remarkable, *Shadow* follows a narrative that hinders the analysis. The narrative of the book leads steadily towards the Clinton Affair. While Woodward does analyse the other scandals that Clinton faced, his focus is to explain the relationship between President Clinton and his intern that led to an attempted impeachment in 1998.

Other scholars have analysed the Clinton presidency such as journalist John F. Harris, who worked at *The Washington Post* during the Clinton presidency and covered many of Clinton's scandals. Harris' book *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House* (2005) provides a narrative of the Clinton presidency from the 1992 campaign to his final days in office. Harris provides some excellent insight into how the Clinton White House worked but also how journalists evaluated and reported on the Clinton presidency. His work covering the Clinton presidency is invaluable as a source of insight into how the press understood the Clinton era. However, like Woodward, Harris is limited in his focus. Harris' portrayal of the Clinton White House is focused on Clinton's character faults, in particular, regarding extramarital sexual behaviour. *The Survivor* provides adequate analysis of the major scandals and political decisions of the Clinton era, but really focuses on the Clinton Affair. This focus

⁴¹ Bob Woodward, *The Choice: How Bill Clinton Won*, New York, 2005, p.435.

limits the analysis he can provide of Clinton's scandals as Harris is too focused on Clinton's inappropriate relationships with women. This is a pitfall of recent historians as well. David Greenberg's book *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency* (2016) examines the various ways that Presidents have "spun" a story to avoid political damage or change the narrative of a scandal. Greenberg does not mention the Travelgate scandal, the Whitewater scandal, or the Lincoln Bedroom scandal when discussing the Clinton presidency. He mentions that Clinton faced various scandals but does not list them or provide any analysis of these scandals. However, he does focus intently on the Clinton Affair, analysing how Clinton successfully changed the narrative through careful selection of his words.⁴² There are countless scholarly works analysing the Clinton Affair, however there are very few that provide an examination of Travelgate, Whitewater, and the Lincoln Bedroom scandal. There are none that seek to analyse how or why the media and Clinton's opponents framed these three scandals to control the narrative.

The focus of my thesis is to turn the narrative of the Clinton administration away from the Clinton Affair to analyse the various ways that the media framed these three earlier scandals. The Travelgate scandal, Whitewater scandal, and Lincoln Bedroom scandals are treated as footnotes of the Clinton administration. This treatment needs to be rectified. These three scandals created the image of Bill and Hillary Clinton that was presented to the public in *Primary Colors* (1998), which was filmed before the Clinton Affair. The version of Clinton shown in *Primary Colors* was a culmination of all the scandals that President Clinton and the First Lady faced during the previous six years. The film even refers to a mysterious deal that the Stantons want to keep hidden called Clearwater. An obvious nod to the Clinton's Ozark deal called Whitewater. The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the media

⁴² David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency*, New York, 2016, pp.423-6.

framing of the scandals, and the various responses from the White House, created the man that was caricatured in *Primary Colors*. Furthermore, it is important to state that this thesis examines the media's framing of events and therefore presents their version of events. This thesis is not meant to provide a definitive evaluation of whether the criticisms levelled at Clinton are valid, or if the President committed any misdemeanours. Rather, this thesis seeks to provide an analysis of the media's understanding and presentation of scandals they considered essential for the polity to understand.

Chapter One: Travelgate

Introduction

“Travelgate” is the first scandal that the newly elected Bill Clinton faced in office. While Clinton was no stranger to scandal during his 1992 election, Travelgate is a new kind of scandal for Clinton. In early May 1993, all seven members of the White House Travel Office staff were dismissed for reasons of gross financial mismanagement. The White House claimed that thousands of dollars could not be accounted for due to the head of the office Billy Dale’s actions. The media quickly seized on the issue and questioned the President’s right to dismiss an office on claims that seemingly had no basis in facts. The questioning of the President’s decision to dismiss the office is the first time that Clinton faced major criticism from the media while in office. The Travelgate scandal also tested the President and his White House full of young and energetic staff to deal with criticisms and accusations of ethical misconduct. This scandal set the tone for the President and the media in how they would address each other. It helped to establish the animosity that fuelled the relationship between two of the most powerful groups in Washington, the executive office and the press. Clinton, his family, and the administration faced the scandal with indignance for the most part. They consistently felt they could explain their way out of many of the accusations they faced. Clinton was a master of spin and one of the most charismatic leaders the world has seen, however, his craft faced its limits when trying to convince the nation that despite the claims of ethical transgressions he did the right thing when he dismissed the office.

The Travelgate scandal lasted for four years, from 1993 to 1996, and came to be a consistent reoccurring feature of the news reports for all of Clinton’s first term and would not truly be resolved until the end of Clinton’s presidency. However, after 1996 the scandal started to die away as various players in the scandal were acquitted of all wrongdoing or other incidents arose that distracted the media from Travelgate. The rise of the Lincoln Bedroom scandal in

late 1995 and early 1996 and the President's re-election in 1996 distracted the press until Clinton's affair with a young intern came to dominate the news from 1997 until the end of Clinton's presidency in 2001. The media and political response to Travelgate raised issues of ethical transgressions that challenged the legitimacy of the president and would challenge the White House in new and interesting ways, forcing them to create new teams specifically to combat scandal accusations. The scandal encompassed areas of corruption, cover-up and cronyism. Damning accusations were levelled against Clinton that he resisted with all his might. The first point of media framing that I will analyse is corruption.

Corruption

The first announcement of corruption from the media came when staff denied that Clinton himself had any role in the dismissal of the office staff. The staff were dismissed after being accused by the White House of "gross financial mismanagement", but what made scandal explode is the nature of the dismissals.⁴³ The circumstances that opened the White House to accusations of corruption was discussed by Ann Devroy in a May 21st, 1993 article. Devroy was an experienced journalist who worked at the Washington post from 1989 to 1997, and previously worked as a White House correspondent from 1979 to 1985. In her long career Devroy covered four presidents, from Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton. Devroy framed the Travelgate scandal as one of corruption by highlighting that the President replaced the staff members with close associates rather than another travel agency and legitimized her position by quoting Senior Republican Senator Christopher S. Bond.⁴⁴ Bond stated, "I am concerned that these dismissals, occurring without any opportunity to defend themselves, do not seem fair."⁴⁵ Accusations of corruption in combination with acts of cronyism, made the White House appear arrogant. The White House dismissed all seven members of the office without

⁴³ Ann Devroy, "Staff Denies Clinton Ally had Role in Firings", *The Washington Post*, May. 21, 1993.

⁴⁴ Devroy, "Staff Denies Clinton Ally had Role in Firings", May. 21, 1993.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

giving them any chance to say their piece, which countered the idea of fair process that the American justice system is based on. While other Presidents have dismissed departments in favour of their own employees, what drew the media to the scandal was the target of the dismissals and the way they were dismissed. As John F. Harris, a reporter during the Clinton era and publisher of *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House* (2005), notes the President had chosen a poor first target.⁴⁶ While the office itself was small and rather obscure, the head of the office Billy Dale was well liked by the Washington press corp. The Travel Office is responsible for handling all of the Washington Press Corps travel arrangements and in turn Dale and the press grew close over the many years they worked together.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Dale and his team were career White House staffers, regardless of who was President they worked within the White House to secure travel arrangements for the staff and the Washington press corp. By dismissing them Clinton sent a message that the White House would adopt a new way of functioning, a message that the press did not receive well. The press would frame the Travelgate scandal as the President's attempt to control the movement of the press and their ability to perform their job. Then allegations levelled against the entire travel office were dropped, and instead the White House focused on Billy Dale.

On May 25th, 1993, Mary McGrory published "A Week of Clintonian Lapses" which criticized the President's actions in the last week. Mary McGrory is a remarkable figure who worked in Washington from 1947 until her death in 2004. During these years she covered American politics but became a prominent reporter during the McCarthy hearings, and became such a prominent critic of American politics that she was added to Richard Nixon's enemies list. McGrory's journalist skills was even recognized with a Pulitzer prize in 1975 for commentary. McGrory describes how Clinton tied up an airport so he could get a haircut

⁴⁶ Harris, *The Survivor*, p.38.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

and further discusses the Travelgate scandal.⁴⁸ McGrory's article was a damning condemnation of Clinton's character, stating that "He has to learn that being president doesn't mean you're Louis XVI and can tie up an airport if you feel like it."⁴⁹ The article continues to state that Clinton should learn to say no after the airport event and the "travel office massacre."⁵⁰ The language used here is intentional. The terms of Louis XVI and massacre frame the scandal so that Clinton appears corrupt and inept, such as the French King that the peasantry removed during the French Revolution. These accusations were driven further and pushed in a less dramatic way by Thomas L. Friedman in a May 29th article. Friedman is a political commentator and author who writes weekly articles for *The New York Times*. From 1992 he worked as the White House correspondent for *The New York Times* until he transferred to the op-ed page in 1994. During his career Friedman has earned three Pulitzer prizes for reporting. However, Friedman has recently faced criticism due to his fervent support for the Iraq war in the early 2000's as well as his support for Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2001 who he described as a modernizing reformer and told Americans to "keep rootin' for Putin."⁵¹ Friedman's article states that the dismissal of the Travel Office and the airport matters were trivial events that were seized upon by the press and were blown out of proportion.⁵² However, Friedman continues on to state that these events were seized upon because "they demonstrated a gap between who he said he was and how he was actually behaving. The gap is a matter of real public interest."⁵³ Friedman framed the Travelgate scandal as one of disparity. President Clinton said one thing and acted differently. This raised questions regarding the President's character and his ability to lead as the disparity that

⁴⁸ Mary McGrory, "A Week of Clintonian Lapses", *The Washington Post*, May. 25, 1993.

⁴⁹ McGrory, "A Week of Clintonian Lapses", May. 25, 1993.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Thomas L. Friedman, "Russia's Last Line", *The New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2001.

⁵² Thomas L. Friedman, "Time to Regroup: Clinton's Future Is Hostage to Here and Now", *The New York Times*, May. 29, 1993.

⁵³ Friedman, "Time to Regroup", May. 29, 1993.

Friedman displays is of public interest since this alleged character defect has effects on the rest of the White House and America. Friedman successfully frames the disparity between words and action as a character problem that the public must consider if they wish to understand the Travelgate scandal in full.

On May 28th, 1993, *The Washington Post* published an article titled “Travel Office (Cont’d)” which further framed the accusation of corruption when it described the various odd circumstances surrounding the dismissals and how the White House was handling the unfolding scandal. It shows that the FBI discovered “sufficient information... to determine that additional criminal investigation is warranted.”⁵⁴ The article continued to say:

“We don’t know what the ousted employees of the travel office may or may not have done over the years, but an awful lot of fire power seems to have been brought to bear for what was mainly a management problem in so obscure a corner of the White House”.⁵⁵

The Travel Office dismissals became a major problem for the White House and represented more than just the dismissal of an office. According to the same article the Travelgate came to represent the principles of law enforcement procedures and political manipulation.⁵⁶ The White House’s dismissal of the office without providing them with the ability to defend themselves struck a discordant note with the media. While other presidents have dismissed staff, what made this different is the sheer amount of force used to accomplish the goal. Rather than dismiss the leader of the office who had, allegedly, committed these misdeeds, the White House sacked the entire office swiftly and without compromise. The press framed the accusation as one of corruption because of these two reasons: the force used and the staff’s inability to defend themselves. The media focused on the alleged corrupt acts of the White House as proof of the overall corrupt nature since they did not follow normal

⁵⁴ “Travel Office (Cont’d)”, *The Washington Post*, May. 28, 1993.

⁵⁵ “Travel Office (Cont’d)”, May. 28, 1993.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

procedures of dismissal. This accusation of corruption came to the fore when the President gave some information on why he sacked the office when he stated that he did not see why seven people are required in an office that could be worked by three.⁵⁷ Clinton did not back down from this justification of his actions, stating in his memoirs, *My Life* (2004), that “the reconstituted Travel Office provided the same services with fewer federal employees at lower costs to the press.”⁵⁸ However, that is not the sole reason that the White House dismissed the office. For President Clinton the motivation was not only that three should work the office, it was which three were going to work there.

The White House did not let the press control the narrative and they actively pushed back against the press’ narrative. The White House announced the publication of an internal report that would investigate the dismissal of the office and determine if there was any wrongdoing.⁵⁹ The White House released the review to the public on July 1st, 1993, to mixed reception; while it defended his decisions with one hand it also sharply criticized him with the other. While the report confirmed that the Travel Office had committed acts of “gross financial mismanagement”, the report did not recommend any dismissals or job transfers.⁶⁰ To make matters worse, on the same day as the report was released the FBI said that their own investigation into the sackings turned up no evidence of criminal behaviour by the seven members of the Travel Office. Moreover, it became apparent that the President dismissed the office after a friend said that it would be beneficial for the office to be “less sympathetic to the press.”⁶¹ The article paints a damaging picture of the President and the dismissal of the entire office. By highlighting at the beginning of the article that both the internal review and the FBI’s concluded that no dismissals were necessary the media framed the President as

⁵⁷ “Travel Office (Cont’d)”, May. 28, 1993.

⁵⁸ Clinton, *My Life*, p.520.

⁵⁹ *Travel Office (Cont’d)*, May. 28, 1993.

⁶⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, “White House Errors Cited in Travel Office Review”, *The New York Times*, Jul. 1, 1993.

⁶¹ Friedman, “White House Errors Cited”, Jul. 1, 1993.

acted rashly. By further mentioning that Clinton had been told to get staff that were “less sympathetic to the press” the media framed the White House as acting purely for selfish reasons, not for cost reasons as Clinton stated. The White House’s dismissal of the staff combined with the “less sympathetic” statement did not endear the new president to the press or the public, and only helped to further strain their relationship.

The next major issue with corruption was the David Watkins memo, former chief of communication for the White House. The memo was discovered in January 1996 in the files of Patsy Thomason and showed a direct contradiction between First Lady’s word and her actual deeds. Throughout the scandal the White House maintained that neither the President nor the First Lady had any role in the sackings. They claimed the Clintons only found out after the dismissals, something that Bill Clinton maintains to this day.⁶² The Watkins memo portrayed the First Lady as having an active role in the dismissals and displayed that she pressured White House staff to dismiss the office.⁶³ The Whitewater Response Team struggled to decide what to do with the document. The Whitewater Response Team was a team of specialists established to combat the increasing scrutiny the White House faced from the press. The White House assembled the Response Team is reminiscent of the “War Room” that Clinton created during his campaign, their sole job was to tackle the press and mitigate any damage from elite attacks on the White House and create counter narratives. Clinton created the team to “free the rest of the staff, and me, to do the public work we came to Washington to do.”⁶⁴ Ultimately the Team decided to release the files to the public and to Kenneth Starr, the Independent Counsel investigating the Clinton’s Whitewater investment along with a variety of other misdemeanours. Starr became Independent Counsel after replacing Robert Fiske Jr. in August 1994. Starr was a hotly contested choice for Independent

⁶² Clinton, *My Life*, p.519.

⁶³ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.295.

⁶⁴ Clinton, *My Life*, p. 584.

Counsel. Starr was a leading conservative legal figure with a background that many within the White House thought made him unsuitable for the job. The new Independent Counsel had the support of mainstream conservatives and some conflicts of interest. He represented several clients with ties to the tobacco industry that were openly hostile towards Clinton and the President's attempts to introduce anti-smoking legislation.⁶⁵ As Clinton pushed harder for legislation that could damage the tobacco industry, Starr's investigation became more fierce and critical of the Clintons. Starr also had a Republican speaking and travel schedule, so he was closely tied to the Republican party and their interests.⁶⁶ Clinton later said in his memoirs that Starr had something that Fiske did not, "he was much more conservative and partisan than Fiske."⁶⁷ James Carville, a former member of the War Room and a member of Clinton's White House Counsel, believed that the Republicans were politicizing the various scandals facing the White House. Carville thought that the Republicans would use Starr to attack the White House.⁶⁸ Mark Fabiani the team's spokesperson, said regarding the Watkins memo "we have got to get this out."⁶⁹ The Watkins memo was sent to Starr on January 4th, 1996.

However, Watkins was not a reliable witness as the White House fired him in 1994 after they discovered he used a government helicopter for a golf outing. Furthermore, his statements to the 1993 internal review, General Accounting Office, and FBI are all contradictory.⁷⁰ This did not stop the press from framing the memo as confirmation that the First Family lied about the Clintons' involvement in the Travelgate scandal. The memo portrays the First Lady as furious with Watkins and Mike McCurry, the White House press secretary, for their inaction. A fury fuelled by an article where two secret service agents claimed she had thrown a lamp, briefing book or bible at the President one night during a

⁶⁵ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.289.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Clinton, *My Life*, p.613.

⁶⁸ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.267.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.295.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.296.

heated argument.⁷¹ As Alison Mitchell, a *New York Times* reporter during the Clinton era, stated the memo placed Mrs. Clinton as the central figure in the “politically damaging Travel Office dismissals, an account at variance with the White House description of her as simply a concerned observer.”⁷² While finding documents that shed new light on sensitive topics is not uncommon, nor is politicians contradicting prior statements, what made this damaging to the Clintons is the nature of the document. It contradicted the First Family’s earlier statements and framed the Travelgate incident as being enacted because Mrs. Clinton desired it. It challenged the legitimacy of the White House as it also attacked the image of the First Lady. Mrs. Clinton emerged from the Watkins memo debacle as a woman who pushed the staff in the Travel Office out in favour of her own people. Those as mentioned before that should be “less sympathetic to the press.” The attack on the press now came not from the White House, but from the First Family itself and any chances of healing the division between these two important wings of Washington political life had been all snuffed out. The Watkins memo compounded the issues raised earlier and helped to demonstrate to the press, and the voting public, that the Clintons were not telling the truth and viewed the press as the enemy. The press framed the scandal’s corruption component in an interesting way, revealing the behind-the-scenes moves that resulted in the dismissal of all seven staff members of the Travel Office. For the press the problem that the Travel Office displayed is the willingness of the President to bring legal and public scrutiny upon a small group of unknown staff members in order to displace them and replace them with his own agents. Implicit in the framing of this scandal is the idea of justice. The various press articles discussing the Travelgate scandal when news broke show a barely restrained anger towards the White House. Devroy uses a Republican Senator to legitimize her view that the dismissal does “not seem fair.”⁷³ McGrory

⁷¹ David Johnston, “Subpoena Issued in Travel Office Inquiry”, *The New York Times*, Jan. 5, 1996.

⁷² Alison Mitchell, “Issue-Oriented First Lady is the Issue”, *The New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1996.

⁷³ Devroy, “Staff Denies Clinton Ally had Role in Firings”, May. 21, 1993.

also evokes notions of fairness and corruption by labelling the events “embarrassing” and further comparing Clinton to Louis XIV.⁷⁴ By framing the scandal as one of fairness versus corruption the media pitted themselves against the White House and further entrenched the animosity between the two.

Cover-up

Like most other scandals in the Clinton administration Travelgate became largely about cover-ups rather than the dismissal of the Travel Office staff. The handling and mishandling of the situation by Clinton and the administration only helped to fuel the scandal as the press questioned what they were hiding by attempting to smooth things over. A couple of weeks after the May 13th dismissals *The Washington Post* published an article titled “Travel Office (Cont’d)” with the leading line “President Clinton played word games with both the point and the truth in discussing the affair of the White House Travel Office yesterday.”⁷⁵ The President was asked why he had called in the FBI for the dismissals, and he stated that they were called in to examine an auditor’s report on the office.⁷⁶ However, this is not the truth. It quickly became known that the FBI were called in to meet with three Clinton aides who requested “press guidance”, and they asked the FBI to specifically mention possible criminal activity in the Travel Office in their report.⁷⁷ The press seized on this detail as proof that the President intentionally misled the public about the nature of the dismissals and that the White House maintained a different motive for the dismissals. An opinion only furthered by the President’s comments about downsizing the office to three people. The press framed the dismissals as dangerous for the polity as the President dismissed an office in favour of people that would look after him before the press. The press further implied through their coverage

⁷⁴ McGrory, “A Week of Clintonian Lapses”, May. 25, 1993.

⁷⁵ “Travel Office (Cont’d)”, May. 28, 1993.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

that the President chose the staff because they would ensure his interests were the priority, rather than those of the Washington press corps.

The appearance of a cover-up was cemented when the White House published an independent report on the Travel Office debacle. The review contained a heavy criticism of the White House as they, among other errors, went to the FBI before the Department of Justice.⁷⁸ This was a break in the normal procedure. Normally the White House would contact the Justice Department first who then determines if the FBI are needed. On July 1st, 1993, Friedman published an article titled “White House Errors Cited in Travel Office Review”. Friedman’s article highlights the various White House mistakes that led to the explosive Travelgate scandal. One of these mistakes was the White House’s decision to seek FBI assistance without going through the Department of Justice.⁷⁹ By going to the FBI before the Justice Department the White House circumvented the normal procedure and attempted to achieve their goals without due process for those being accused. Combined with the knowledge that a friend suggested bringing in a “less sympathetic” crew, Friedman is framing the scandal as being unfair to the staff as they did not receive due process. Framing the original dismissals as occurring due to the White House’s reluctance to seek due process, and to employ less sympathetic staff, also creates the idea of a cover-up. The Justice Department would have published a report on the issue that could later be disclosed. Furthermore, the White House faced consistent leaks from within various government departments. Which is why they started to subpoena their own documents. This is an important tactic for the White House and one they would employ consistently through each of the scandals the White House faced. The leaking of a subpoenaed document is a federal crime since the document contains information pertinent to an ongoing case. By subpoenaing their own documents, the White

⁷⁸ Friedman, “White House Errors Cited”, Jul. 1, 1993.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

House eliminated the chance that the information contained within the documents would reach the press or the Republicans and cause more damage. The press framed the subpoenaing of documents as further proof of a cover-up. By circumventing the normal procedure, the White House created an event that the Washington elite could seize upon as proof of a cover-up. The White House drew attention to themselves by subpoenaing the documents. The pressure from the press intensified as they started to consider what the documents contained that required such severe action from the White House.

The press coverage of the Watkins memo also encompassed accusations of an attempt to obscure the truth from the public. When the memo was discovered on January 3rd, 1996, the Response Team briefly considered hiding the memo in a box full of documents to “bury the diamond.”⁸⁰ They realised that the Watkins memo contained information that had the potential to bring intense scrutiny on the White House at an inopportune time. Clinton had just been re-elected, and while he won a landslide in the electoral college with more than double his opponents total, he only achieved 49.2% of the popular vote. Much like in 1992, Clinton was assisted by Ross Perot’s decision to run for President. Perot was a conservative billionaire who gained his money through clever investments. These investments include buying controlling shares in General Motors in 1984 and investing in NeXT, the company started by Steve Jobs after he left apple. Perot ran for President as an independent in 1992 and in 1996 he ran as a third-party after establishing the Reform Party. Despite winning no electoral college seats in either election he gained remarkable support. In 1992 he won 18.9% of the popular vote and in 1996 he took 8.4% of the popular vote. Perot’s decision to run in both elections split the conservative vote and allowed Clinton to win the election. Furthermore, Clinton’s approval ratings sat at only 51% at the end of December 1995.⁸¹ The

⁸⁰ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.295.

⁸¹ “Bill Clinton’s Approval Ratings”, *Gallup*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116584/presidential-approval-ratings-bill-clinton.aspx> (accessed: 17/03/20).

White House and the Response Team recognized that the release of the Watkins memo could have a major impact on the President and his ability to push his agenda in the wake of his successful re-election. With the release of the Watkins memo it quickly became apparent that the White House had not disclosed all the information regarding the dismissals.

The Watkins memo contradicted Mrs. Clinton's statement that she had been a passive observer and called into question how accurate and representative the earlier investigation conducted by the White House was. The media framed the memo in two ways, the memo received commentary in *The Washington Post* and the *The New York Times* published excerpts of the memo, both of which presented damning evidence against the First Lady. One of the most damning excerpts stated Vincent Foster (a member of Clinton's White House Counsel and worked closely with Mrs. Clinton back in Arkansas. Foster committed suicide in July 1993) "regularly informed me [David Watkins] that the First Lady was concerned and desired action – the action desired was the firing of the Travel Office staff."⁸² This clearly contradicts what the First Lady said earlier. The White House affirmed the appearance of a cover-up when the press asked the White House spokesman how the President thought of his wife's involvement in the scandal, he stated "she wasn't, so he doesn't think about it."⁸³ The press framed the Watkins memo in such a way that the statement from the White House spokesman appeared as further attempts to obscure the truth. Mrs. Clinton did not sit idly by and allow herself to be attacked by the press who seized on the Watkins memo as proof of her transgressions. She attempted to push back by conducting an interview where she explained the Watkins memo and provided her opinion and viewpoint. She further pushed the White House spokesman Mack McCurry's line that Watkins mischaracterized her and added her

⁸² David Watkins following on from 1993 draft memo, "Excerpt From a Memo on the White House Travel Office", *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 1996.

⁸³ Johnston, "Subpoena Issued", Jan. 5, 1996.

own explanation for why the memo displayed her in the worst light.⁸⁴ She stated that in the Washington atmosphere everything they said and did carried weight, even innocent and seemingly unimportant things, and provided an example by saying:

“But I also think it’s fair to say that there is something about being in the White House that does magnify people’s words, so that, if my husband says, for example, he likes bananas, all of a sudden, everywhere he goes, there are bunches of bananas.”⁸⁵

However, despite her best explanations the press saw her interview as a cover-up of the motivations behind the dismissal of the Travel Office staff. The First Lady desired the dismissals and they had been enacted at her behest. The Watkins memo became headline news because of the time it hit the newspapers. The revelation of the motivations behind the original dismissals came two and a half years after the staff were fired, and only a month after President Clinton was re-elected. Furthermore, the Justice system deemed that Billy Dale, the former Travel Office head, committed no transgression worthy of punishment and cleared Dale of all charges in November 1995, only two months before Hillary Clinton’s assistant discovered the memo.⁸⁶ Everyone else in the office was also cleared of all wrongdoing. At the end of the scandal seven people lost their jobs or endured a length legal process that cost them tens of thousands in legal fees. The impact on the White House was more severe. Gallup polls show that Clinton’s approval rating dropped from 51% in a December 15-18, 1995 poll to 42% in a January 5-7, 1996 poll.⁸⁷ It is important to state that the Watkins memo is not the sole reason that Clinton’s approval ratings could have dropped as he was embroiled at the same time in a burgeoning election fraud scandal in late 1995 and early 1996.

⁸⁴ Johnston, “Subpoena Issued”, Jan. 5, 1996.

⁸⁵ “Interview of the First Lady Conducted by Jane Fullerton”, *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, Jan. 15, 1996. FOIA: Press Office Interview Transcripts Volume V 10/19/94 – 04/10/97 [Binder]: [01/15/96 Fullerton, Jane Arkansas Democrat Gazette]

⁸⁶ David Johnston, “Outsourced White House Travel Chief Is Cleared of Embezzlement” *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1995.

⁸⁷ “Clinton’s Approval Ratings”, *Gallup*, (accessed: 17/03/20).

With the revelation that the White House had withheld information from the public a series of congressional inquiries were launched. The media and Republicans seized on the news that those involved did not have any recollection of the Travel Office issue, with multiple aides and friends of Mrs. Clinton claiming memory lapses, as proof of a cover-up.⁸⁸ The First Lady herself appeared before a congressional committee on January 26th, 1996, to testify under oath and these statements became her first public response to the allegations against her. By testifying she became the first spouse of a U.S. President to testify before a federal grand jury. During her appearance Mrs. Clinton answered twenty-six questions written by House Republicans.⁸⁹ These questions directly accused the First Lady and the White House of covering up the First Lady's role in the sackings.⁹⁰ Mrs. Clinton provided the most detailed account of events that led to the dismissals but crucially the account contained little to no fresh information.⁹¹ There is a chance that this was a tactical decision made by the First Lady. White House counsellors stated in 1993 that any fresh information would be framed as proof of a cover-up.⁹² Mrs. Clinton may have decided in agreement with other White House staff to keep to the official report of the incident and reveal no new information. The First Lady repeatedly stated that she did not remember specific events, saying she was notified by Thomason and Foster of the issues in the office and that "I do not recall even knowing of the existence of the office until sometime in the first two weeks of May."⁹³ To the media and House Republicans, Mrs. Clinton had provided proof of a White House cover-up. Despite specific accusations in the Watkins memo that countered the narrative the First Lady provided; Mrs. Clinton maintained that she did not have an active role in the dismissals. After the First Lady provided her testimony in January 1996, the White House claimed executive

⁸⁸ Mitchell, "Issue-Oriented First Lady", Jan. 6, 1996.

⁸⁹ David Johnston, "Mrs. Clinton Responds to Travel Office Inquiry", *The New York Times*, Mar. 21, 1996.

⁹⁰ Johnston, "Mrs. Clinton Responds", Mar. 21, 1996.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Clinton, *My Life*, p.573.

⁹³ Johnston, "Mrs. Clinton Responds", Mar. 21, 1996.

privilege on documents relating to the Travel Office sackings in May 1996.⁹⁴ The decision to claim executive privilege on these documents led to a criminal contempt hearing against three presidential aides; two former and one current at the time of proceedings.⁹⁵ These three actions, the lapses in memory, the First Lady's testimony, and the claim of executive privilege confirmed to the media and Republicans that the White House intentionally misled the public, media and the government to hide the true nature of the dismissals.

This scandal established the media and the Clintons as antagonists to each other as the Clintons. At the beginning of the Travelgate scandal the press said they did not understand why the President "has not come out and said that what was done was overdone and dead wrong."⁹⁶ With the Watkins memo the First Lady made the same mistake that her husband made. She did not admit to any wrongdoing and frantically denied the accusations, downplaying them with statements like the banana anecdote mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the memo confirmed to the press that the First Family acted against the press by dismissing the department that looked after them in favour of one that was more Clinton friendly. The notion that the president would attack the press drove the cover-up angle into a higher gear. The White House's desire to replace the staff with employees more friendly to the administration ensured that the press would push the scandal with intensity. This is only furthered when the media discovered that the order to dismiss the staff came from the First Lady herself. While the dismissal of the office was problematic since the White House refused to allow the staff within the Travel Office to plead their case, the decision to cover-up the First Lady's role made it appear that the White House was engaging in activity that they did not want the public to know about. While the dismissal of the staff was not strictly illegal, the way they enacted their plan was unnecessary. Mrs. Clinton's fury was directed towards

⁹⁴ David Johnston, "Panel Acts to Gain Travel Office Papers", *The New York Times*, May. 9, 1996.

⁹⁵ Johnston, "Panel Acts", May. 9, 1996.

⁹⁶ "Travel Office (Cont'd)", May. 28, 1993.

the Travel Office as she sought to control more of the world around her since her family and the White House faced increasing criticism of their actions. The White House's attempts to maintain their image by controlling the narrative was framed as a desperate attempt to hide the truth. Ultimately the cover-up issue dominated the narrative. In part this arose due to the Clinton-media animosity. The way the media decided to frame Travelgate is telling as it laid the blame for the cover-up aspect of the scandal at the feet of the First Lady and pulled the President into the limelight as well. However, President Clinton faced more criticism when the media discovered the various connections between agents active in the motivation for the dismissals.

Cronyism

Cronyism was present throughout the entire Travelgate saga and was the initial cause of the scandal. On May 21st, 1993, *The New York Times* published an article that directly raised the issue of cronyism. Peter Applebome, a reporter with *The New York Times* since 1987 who rarely covered the Clinton's presidency, stated that "After being selected as the temporary replacement for the dismissed White House travel staff, the company immediately ran into accusations of cronyism."⁹⁷ To make matters worse for the White House the article states that the person brought into to temporarily provide travel was Betty Carney. Carney was a friend of the Clinton's from Arkansas. Back in her home state she owned an Arkansas based travel company that ran the Clinton's campaign travel, she also helped to pay off the President's gubernatorial campaign debts in the late 1980s.⁹⁸ Seemingly Clinton provided Carney with an opportunity to make a lot of money running the office temporarily, and would fit into the "relationship of favours" that James McDougal described when discussing his relationship to

⁹⁷ Peter Applebome, "Unwelcome Limelight for a Little Rock Travel Agency", *The New York Times*, May. 21, 1993.

⁹⁸ Applebome, "Unwelcome Limelight for a Little Rock Travel Agency", May. 21, 1993.

then-Governor Clinton.⁹⁹ This was one of the rare times where the accusation of cronyism is levelled so directly against the White House. However, the accusation never truly disappeared and is a consistent thread throughout this scandal.

The accusation of cronyism became more pressing when two more ties to the Clintons became apparent in the dismissals. On May 21st, 1993, Devroy published an article in *The Washington Post* that stated Clinton denied that his friend Harry Thomason raised the issue of “gross financial mismanagement” in the Travel Office.¹⁰⁰ Thomason was a close friend of Bill Clinton and worked intimately with Clinton during the 1992 presidential campaign, producing the short film *The Man From Hope* (1992) that became the centrepiece of the 1992 Democratic National Committee. The short film is a glowing appraisal of Clinton that tracks his life from his childhood in Hope, Arkansas, with an alcoholic father, his activism in the 1960’s, and finally his early political career. The film is remarkable for humanising both Mr. and Mrs. Clinton, displaying their virtues and some of their vices. Including the problems that the Clinton’s marriage has faced such as the future-President’s infidelity. Despite showing some of Clinton’s faults it is undoubtably a highly favourable view of the future-President. However, Clinton did not deny talking to him and acknowledged that Thomason had complained about the staff of the Travel Office.¹⁰¹ Thomason maintained an interest in an airline leasing company and had complained to the President that the office was refusing to consider business from him and his business associates.¹⁰² Furthermore, Clinton would be bringing in Catherine Cornelius, a 25-year-old distant cousin of the President, who would head the office.¹⁰³ A few days later the story became more complicated when McGrory

⁹⁹ Jeff Gerth and Stephen Engelberg, “U.S Investigating Links to Arkansas S&L”, *The New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1993.

¹⁰⁰ Devroy, “Staff Denies Clinton Ally had Role in Firings”, May. 21, 1993.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Friedman, “White House Errors Cited”, Jul. 1, 1993.

¹⁰³ Devroy, “Staff Denies Clinton Ally had Role in Firings”, May. 21, 1993.

published in *The Washington Post* after she discovered that the official chronology of events didn't add up. McGrory's article states:

“The White House Claims that gross corruption forced Clinton aides to prompt, stern action. But the chronology suggests the “discovery” followed, rather than preceded, a decision to replace long time travel staff with friends of Hollywood Producer and Clinton intimate Harry Thomason and distant cousin Catherine Cornelius.”¹⁰⁴

It shows that the President likely acted on the advice of his friends, rather than talking to them after he knew of management problems in the Travel Office. Furthermore, Clinton wanted to staff the office with people with friends of Thomason, and therefore allies with him and his family. Clinton's choice to give his distant cousin the Travel Office job is a minor transgression and not unprecedented in American government. However, what made Clinton's decision relevant to the press is the President went after one of their own. Clinton said in his memoirs that “many in the press felt that the Travel Office staff virtually worked for them, not the White House, and felt they should have at least been notified, if not full consulted, as the investigation [into the office's financial mismanagement] proceeded.”¹⁰⁵ Not only did the President dismiss staff the press considered their own, he replaced them with his people. The media received confirmation of the President's motives when it became apparent that Cornelius long suggested the White House replace the office with “a staff less sympathetic to the press.”¹⁰⁶

The media viewed cronyism as the cause of this scandal. Almost a year after the dismissals on May 3rd, 1994, *The Washington Post* published an article specifically targeting Clinton's allies, stating that “government auditors said yesterday that White House officials and outside advisors with personal or “potential business interests” in the matter prompted the firing of White House travel office employees last year.”¹⁰⁷ The article elaborated to say

¹⁰⁴ McGrory, “A Week of Clintonian Lapses”, May. 25, 1993.

¹⁰⁵ Clinton, *My Life*, p.520.

¹⁰⁶ Friedman, “White House Errors Cited”, Jul. 1, 1993.

¹⁰⁷ Ruth Marcus, “Clinton Allies Criticized in Travel Office Firings”, *The Washington Post*, May. 3, 1994.

that Thomason and Darnell Martens, Thomason's partner in an aviation consultation firm, exerted "inappropriate influence" over the dismissals, and levels the same criticism at Cornelius.¹⁰⁸ While the article concludes by agreeing with the White House's conclusions, it spent eight previous paragraphs criticising the role of Clinton's allies and family in the dismissals.¹⁰⁹ By structuring the article in this way the conclusion was undercut. The Clintons and their allies are firmly established as guilty parties in the dismissals. The centrality of cronyism is repeatedly mentioned in the coverage of the Travelgate scandal, even when the articles agreed that the White House was correct to suspect financial mismanagement. The White House and the press discovered that between 1988 and 1991 Billy Dale had deposited \$55,000 into his account. Dale claimed that he used the cash for tips to ease the travel of the White House press corps.¹¹⁰ While much of the article focuses on Dale's inappropriate use of funds, the article concludes by stating:

"The dismissals created a furore after White House aides acknowledged that they came only after complaints about the operation by Catherine A. Cornelius, a distant cousin of Mr. Clinton who wanted to run the travel operation, and Harry Thomason, a Hollywood friend of the President and part owner of an aviation consulting company that wanted a share of the White House air charter business."¹¹¹

Despite proof at the time that the White House was correct in their assumptions the press continued to frame the Travelgate scandal as deeply intertwined with accusations of cronyism. It became clear at this point that Travelgate was not going to go away despite evidence that supported the conclusions of the White House.

The Watkins memo served as proof that cronyism was rife within the White House. Furthermore, Travelgate was a direct result of undue influence and interference by the

¹⁰⁸ Marcus, "Clinton Allies Criticized", May. 3, 1994.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ David Johnston, "Focus on White House Inquiry Sharpens", *The New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1994.

¹¹¹ David Johnston, "Focus on White House", Sept. 7, 1994.

Clintons allies. The excerpt provided in *The New York Times* linked the dismissals clearly to Thomason and his business interests, quoting the memo which said:

“The First Lady took interest in having the Travel Office situation resolved quickly, following Harry Thomason’s bringing it to her attention. Thomason briefed the First Lady on his suspicion that the Travel Office was improperly funnelling business to a single charter company, and told her that the functions of the office could easily be replaced and allocated.”¹¹²

Further in the memo Watkins wrote that “She mentioned that Thomason had explained how the Travel Office could be run after the removal of the current staff...”¹¹³ Thomason’s suggestion served as the White House’s statement explaining their motivation to dismiss the staff, they wanted to “reorganize and pare down its operation.”¹¹⁴ However, the memo revealed to the press that the General Accounting Office’s conclusion is correct, the Clintons friends exerted an inappropriate level of influence over decision making in the White House. The revelation that the Clintons allies had exerted their influence over the executive office to have the Travel Office dismissed eliminated the White House’s opportunity to provide a counter narrative. The Watkins memo resulted in a subpoena on White House documents which named the Clintons friends in the requested documents, Cornelius, Thomason and Watkins documents were requested by the Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.¹¹⁵ The fact that the First Family’s allies are included in the subpoena shows their importance to the unfolding of the Travelgate scandal.

The press framed Travelgate in such a way that the President, Mrs. Clinton and their allies were solely responsible for the dismissal of the White House staff. Furthermore, Devroy and other members of the press framed those involved in the dismissals as acting for purely selfish reasons. The supported these conclusions by connecting the First Family to

¹¹² Watkins, “Excerpt From a Memo”, Jan. 4, 1996.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Devroy, “Staff Denies Clinton Ally had Role in Firings”, May. 21, 1993.

¹¹⁵ FOIA: Additional Materials – Folder 6, *Memorandum for: Margaret A. Williams, February 8, 1996*, pp.2-4

various friends from Arkansas who convinced them to dismiss the staff and the Watkins memo which seemed to confirm the press' earlier statements. What makes this scandal relevant to the public is that it follows the relationship of favours, a form of quid pro quo, mentioned by McDougal but also fits a classic definition of cronyism. Clinton used his power to benefit his associates and help them gain wealth, power or status.¹¹⁶ The implication that the President may be acting out of obligation to his associates raises major ethical issues for the polity. The accusation of cronyism from the media is also highly damaging to the White House as it erodes the President, and the White House's, legitimacy by critiquing their character. With Betty Carney it is easy to understand why she was brought in as a replacement travel agency, after all she had run the Clinton's campaign travel, but more importantly she had paid off the President's gubernatorial debt. If the relationship is one of favours, then that favour could be considered fulfilled. The possibility that Clinton dismissed seven people in order to help one is concerning, since it would be a clear indication that the President could be forced to act due to past obligations. Thomason fits a similar model. He was a friend of the Clintons who helped with the 1992 campaign that won Mr. Clinton the White House. The accusation from the media that Thomason exerted his influence over the President to gain wealth through a lucrative travel contract is damaging to the image of the President and the White House. Provided that Thomason was acting on the favour that Clinton hypothetically owed him, the President's claims of high ethical standing could be brought under new criticism. In turn his character could be questioned since it could be argued that the President acted out of obligation to allies that helped win him the White House. Catherine Cornelius offers a new perspective on the "relationship of favours" dynamic. Clinton gave her a job in the White House, a coveted position, and in return he could ask her to help him manage the press. After all it was her who said they needed

¹¹⁶ Cost, *What's So Bad About Cronyism?*, p.5.

someone “less sympathetic” in the office. These three examples of cronyism and the possible favours they could give or were owed represent something threatening not just to Clinton’s administration, but to the heart of democracy. The press likely viewed the Clintons various job offers to close friends and family in exchange for action as an attack on the fundamental nature of representative government and a clear example of quid pro quo. But on a more personal note, the travel office staff were close friends with people in the press and had known them for years. The dismissal would never have gone down well, regardless of who replaced the Travel Office staff. The close relationship between the Washington press corp and the original Travel Office staff drew attention to the dismissals and to alleged acts of cronyism.

Conclusion

Travelgate is the earliest scandal for the Clintons that did not emerge from their campaign and encompassed areas of corruption, cover-up and cronyism. The President, First Lady and the White House administration worked hard to try and provide a counter narrative against the accusations levelled against them. However, these counter narratives did not stick, and the press framed every attempt as a desperate effort to hide the truth. Travelgate was first and foremost a scandal about the role that a President’s family and friends should have in representative government, but also the clash between Washington and Arkansas culture. In Arkansas the political culture is so small that people had to work together and developed bonds that united them along party and personal lines. They worked together and mingled with each other because that is how small state politics works. In Washington this way of operating did not work. It became quickly apparent that the President could not bring his family and friends into office at the expense of Washington mainstays. Furthermore, the target of the dismissals only added fuel to the fire. The media took the dismissals as a direct

attack since Clinton dismissed Billy Dale, a close friend of every major news syndicate in Washington.

Travelgate reveals the various ways that the media framed the ethical transgressions of the President. The media framing of Clinton's actions displayed a disparity between Clinton, Mrs. Clinton, and the White House's words and their actions. Furthermore, the President's explanations of innocence only came across as clever attempts to hide the truth and further displayed the gap between his actions and reality. Clinton claimed to have dismissed the office solely because the job could be done with fewer people and at less expense. However, when the press discovered his cousin said the office needed people "less sympathetic" to the press, it revealed a new motivation behind the decision. The media also criticized Clinton's decision to transport his close Arkansas group to Washington. Furthermore, Clinton placed his associates in major positions such as giving his cousin the head position in the Travel Office and his friend Cornelius the contracts for making travel arrangements. The culture clash between Washington where people work within departments for years clashed with the Arkansas culture of looking after associates. The decision by Clinton to bring his close-knit group of associates from Arkansas acted against the 1883 Pendleton Act.¹¹⁷ The act led to a gradual expansion of "merit-based national civil service" and by 1930 around 75% of all positions in the American federal executive civil service were subject to examination.¹¹⁸ Washington operated within this system. The elites in Washington understood their government as being a merit-based system where someone could work their way up to the job. While the belief in a merit-based bureaucracy is partly a myth, since connections have always mattered in Washington, the elite believed in the system. Hence why the Washington elite consistently protested the President's desire to bring close friends

¹¹⁷ Kimberley S. Johnson, "The "First New Federalism" and the Development of the Administrative State, 1883-1929", Robert F. Durant ed. *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, Oxford, 2011, p.57.

¹¹⁸ Johnson, "The "First New Federalism"", p.57.

into Washington. Billy Dale and the rest of the original Travel Office staff had worked their way into their positions. Clinton's subversion of their expectations by placing members of his Arkansas circle into bureaucratic jobs did not mix well with the media's understanding of the Washington system. The press framed the President's decision to place allies in bureaucratic positions as clear proof of a quid pro quo relationship between Clinton and his friends. They could not accept the new way of operating that Clinton brought to Washington as not only did it contradict their understanding of the Washington system, but it also eroded their power as people they trusted such as Billy Dale were replaced. These actions in combination with reporting on Whitewater created a storm of negative media that eroded the legitimacy of the President and his White House.

Chapter Two: Whitewater

Introduction

On October 15th, 1982, Ronald Reagan stood in the Rose Garden and declared in front of the press, members of Congress, bankers and savings and loans executives that one of his major deregulation promises would be delivered.¹¹⁹ Reagan was about to sign the Garn-St Germain Act which would free Savings and Loan businesses from federal regulations. The deregulation of the thrift industry seemed to be successful for a few years, with the industry growing by \$300 billion between 1980 and 1983.¹²⁰ As scholars of the period have noted, these changes attracted the wrong kind of “entrepreneur.”¹²¹ Stephen Pizzo, Mary Fricker, and Paul Muolo summarized the deregulation process when they stated that regulators failed to account for “almost everything mankind has learned about human nature since the dawn of recorded history. Greed, avarice, ambition, and ego dictate that some things in the social order just can’t be left on the honour system, and at the top of that list is the care and feeding of other people’s money.”¹²² It wasn’t long before the industry started to collapse. People attracted to this industry knew they could get access to unprecedented amounts of money by buying into this new area that had just been freed from all government control. Over a series of years, the system collapsed, and millions of people lost money as the system they used to purchase houses or finance weddings went under, and the taxpayer bore the brunt of the bailout fee. One borrower convicted of fraud, Charles Bazarian, is quoted in Pizzo, Fricker, and Muolo’s book *Inside Job: The Looting of America’s Savings and Loans* stated:

“This didn’t all happen just yesterday. This happened over a period of years. So where were the regulators, huh? They like to run around now, acting like they just discovered

¹¹⁹ Stephen Pizzo, Mary Fricker, and Paul Muolo, *Inside Job: The Looting of America’s Savings and Loans*, New York, 1991, p.11.

¹²⁰ Pizzo, Fricker, and Muolo, *Inside Job*, p.26.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.27.

¹²² *Ibid.*

all this. Where were they when it was going on? Where were the goddamn regulators then?”¹²³

It is into this world of complete financial instability and corrupt thrift owners that James McDougal steps in.

James McDougal operated a small thrift called Madison Guarantee Savings and Loan in the 1980's. During this period Clinton was Governor of Arkansas and came into close contact with McDougal. The two went into a shared investment in a piece of undeveloped land that they hoped to build several vacation homes on, the property had the potential to make millions if managed correctly. The land was situated along the White River near Flippin, Arkansas and would be developed under the name Whitewater Development Corporation. However, this did not turn out to be the case. The business quickly went bankrupt due to McDougal's poor management of the business, and cost the Clintons and McDougals tens of thousands of dollars and ultimately sunk Madison in the late 1980's. Whitewater became a scandal originally due to the Clintons' reluctance to provide any documentation regarding the investment during the 1992 campaign. The Clinton's reluctance to provide information triggered questions from the press regarding the documents and what they contained. The scandal then exploded to encompass corruption, the cover-up of various deeds, and the crony politics of Arkansas.

Corruption

Corruption is a consistent factor of the media's framing of Whitewater from the beginning of the saga. Jeff Gerth and Stephen Engelberg first discussed the Clinton's defunct Ozark deal during the 1992 presidential campaign. Jeff Gerth was an investigative reporter for *The New York Times*, who broke several major stories during his career, including Whitewater. Earlier in his career Gerth worked with George McGovern and helped to investigate aspects of the

¹²³ Pizzo, Fricker, and Muolo, *Inside Job*, p.28.

1972 Watergate scandal that led to the impeachment of Richard Nixon. To say Gerth was an expert in scandals is an understatement. Stephen Engelberg worked at *The New York Times* and created the investigative unit at the paper, working as a reporter in Washington as well as Warsaw. During his career Engelberg won two George Polk awards for his outstanding journalistic skills. Both Gerth and Engelberg were major reporters on scandal and Washington, their combined efforts revealed Whitewater to the polity, and their continued efforts would bring more startling revelations. Gerth and Engelberg's article accused the Clintons of claiming a \$5,133 reduction in income tax from the investments with McDougal, making interest payments themselves so they could take the tax deduction on their personal returns.¹²⁴ The two reporters used the opinion of tax expert Donald C. Alexander, the commissioner of the IRS during the Reagan administration, to legitimize their framing of the Whitewater problem. Alexander said it would take the release of the original mortgage note and the corporate tax returns, among other documents, to determine whether the investment received the proper tax treatment.¹²⁵ Gerth and Engelberg legitimize their position by using a member of the opposition and makes both reporters appear objective in their assessment of Clinton's transactions, therefore making their frame appear more trustworthy.¹²⁶ Already the media was starting to frame the Whitewater scandal as one of corruption and suspicion due to the money the Clintons made and the odd circumstances surrounding the deal. The future president and his business partner appeared to be using their position to make questionable tax decisions that would benefit them.

This was not uncommon, however the press seized on this revelation because it pointed out a disparity between the Clintons' words and their actions. The First Family spent the 1980's describing how the wealthy used their influence and connections to gain wealth

¹²⁴ Gerth and Engelberg, "U.S. Investigating Clinton's Links", Nov. 2, 1993.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Nyhan, *Scandal Potential*, p.439.

and status. A fact so well documented that when evidence came to light that the President had done the same he faced ridicule by his opponents. Jim Leach was a Republican member of the House of Representatives who served 15 terms from 1977 until 2007. During his tenure he was known for leading a group of moderate Republicans and generally pushed for fiscal domestic policy. While Leach was by no means the “attack dog” of the Republican Party, he nevertheless had scathing criticisms for Clinton when it came to the matter of Whitewater. Leach stated in August, 1995, that “Time after time in the 1980s, politicians posturing in public as defenders of the little guy found themselves in private advancing the interests of a small number of owners who ran their financial institutions...”¹²⁷. The conflict between the media and the Clinton family starts with Gerth and Engelberg’s article discussing the President’s investment.

The reporters framed Whitewater as the Clinton’s corrupt decision to abuse the federal system to make money. Importantly, Gerth and Engelberg consider Whitewater to be scandal from the beginning. The two never consider that the First Family may have simply been trying to mitigate the damage of a disastrous investment. Before President Clinton even took office he was facing accusations of corruption from the press. John F. Harris later wrote that Clinton was not afforded the customary clean slate afforded to new President’s because of his lofty promises of sweeping reform, not by scandal.¹²⁸ However, I disagree. Harris himself stated that Clinton faced the most intensely personal and intrusive media campaign in U.S. politics, and that was because of his scandals.¹²⁹ Before Clinton took office the media revealed that Clinton had dodged the draft for the Vietnam War during the 1960’s and consistently changed his story regarding why he did not serve. The press also unveiled an

¹²⁷ Jim Leach, “Leach: Whitewater Is ‘Case Model In How Not to Handle Scandal’, excerpts from prepared statement by Jim Leach (R-Iowa)”, *The Washington Post*, Aug. 8, 1995.

¹²⁸ Harris, *The Survivor*, p.4.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.xxvi.

alleged sex scandal between Clinton and a hairdresser called Gennifer Flowers. The press were fascinated with the young democratic candidate and his personal life, Whitewater served as an extension of this fascination. The media was already framing the difference between Arkansas culture and the Washington system, framing the Clintons as failing to uphold the ideals they professed. The Whitewater scandal is first and foremost a press led scandal in the beginning. The media obsession with the Clintons and their actions came to dominate media coverage of the administration. However, over time Clinton's opponents would adopt the cry of Whitewater as a symbol for all things "wrong" with the First Family and their administration.

Allegations of corruption followed the President into his first term, further proof that the media did not give him a clean slate to start his presidency. In November 1993, *The New York Times* published an article by Jeff Gerth and Stephen Engelberg. Their article details how after McDougal brought the President and his family into the land deal, it quickly soured. They also detail components of corruption, with then-Governor Clinton using his political power to achieve his ends. In late 1985 a Democratic municipal judge in Little Rock named David Hale met with McDougal to make several loans that would help the "political family" of Arkansas in McDougal's words.¹³⁰ Hale approved the loan and in interviews in 1986 Hale stated that Madison S&L financed a land deal with the loan he provided and that he gave McDougal hundreds of thousands, more than the value of the property.¹³¹ McDougal never repaid the loan and it ultimately resulted in a \$672,000 bill for the taxpayers.¹³² Hale also stated that he met with McDougal again and was asked to make a \$300,000 loan to Susan McDougal, James McDougal's wife and partner in Madison S&L.¹³³ Hale claims that

¹³⁰ Gerth and Engelberg, "U.S. Investigating Clinton's Links", Nov. 2, 1993.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

McDougal told him the money would be used to conceal questionable financial transactions by Madison and would indirectly benefit the Clintons interests.¹³⁴ Hale further said then-Governor Clinton pressured him twice to approve the loan; Clinton fervently denied this allegation and said he had “no recollection” of this conversation.¹³⁵ Gerth and Engelberg developed their story of corruption with this article and framed the Whitewater scandal with a series of accusations against the Clintons. If these allegations were true, then the future President used his political power and influence to pressure those in crucial positions in Arkansas politics and government administration to directly benefit himself. What set this transgression apart was that the Governor used his power to benefit himself without care for those that would be affected, in effect, the taxpayers and Jim Leach’s “little guy” that Clinton sought to defend through middle-class tax cuts and hints at Welfare and Health Care Welfare Reform.¹³⁶ Gerth and Engelberg frames the corruption of President Clinton when they state that McDougal never repaid the \$672,000 loan and that the taxpayers of Arkansas had to foot the bill. The message Gerth and Engelberg sent out was clear. Clinton is not looking out for ordinary Americans, but rather looking after only his own desires. The two reporters tried to show the public the discrepancy between Clinton’s statements that and his actions. Bill Clinton said in his inaugural speech:

“But when most people are working harder for less; when others cannot work at all; when the cost of health care devastates families and threatens to bankrupt our enterprises, great and small; when the fear of crime robs law-abiding citizens of their freedom; and when millions of poor children cannot even imagine the lives we are calling them to lead, we have not made change our friend.”¹³⁷

By contrasting this speech of optimism and the desire to help ordinary Americans with Clinton’s Arkansas actions, Gerth and Engelberg framed the President’s actions as corrupt.

¹³⁴ Gerth and Engelberg, “U.S. Investigating Clinton’s Links”, Nov. 2, 1993.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Raymond Tatalovich and John Fren dreis, “Clinton, Class, and Economic Policy”, in *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton’s Legacy in U.S. Politics*, ed. Steven E. Schier, Pittsburgh, 2000, p.41.

¹³⁷ “1993 Clinton Inaugural Address”, *CBS News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qszv668rN20>, (accessed:18/03/20).

The next accusation of corruption came after the tragic suicide of Vincent Foster in July 1993 and the restricted search of his office became public knowledge in late December 1993. A bipartisan coalition of Senators called for an Independent Counsel investigation into the Whitewater matter. On December 31, 1993, Republican Senator Jim Leach published a piece in *The Washington Post* that argued in favour of a special investigation into the Clintons Arkansas past. Leach detailed the various issues of corruption that the scandal entailed. He starts his article by saying the subject politicians need to examine is the role that then-Governor Clinton had in allowing a state-chartered S&L which was declared insolvent by federal regulators, to continue to accept insured deposits and grow exponentially for half a decade in the 1980s.¹³⁸ Leach describes how Madison received “favoured inattention” from state regulators and cost the federal taxpayer \$50 million when the doors finally closed, a sum that represented almost one half of the institutions depositor base.¹³⁹ Leach also highlights much like Gerth and Engelberg did, the \$300,000 loan given to James McDougal’s wife Susan McDougal by Hale after pressure from Clinton, however he expands on the accusation by describing what happened to the money.¹⁴⁰ Leach says that \$190,000 was unaccounted for at the time of his speech while it is known that the other \$110,000 went directly into Whitewater, benefitting the Clinton’s interests by minimizing the loss they would suffer when the company finally went bust.¹⁴¹ Leach concludes by stating that “the dilemma we now confront is how society pursues and what society does about how possible wrong doing committed by a president prior to his taking office.”¹⁴² Leach’s article frames Whitewater in much the same way that Gerth and Engelberg did. While working as Governor of Arkansas Clinton abused government agencies in an attempt to mitigate the damage of a failing

¹³⁸ Leach, “A Special Counsel for Whitewater”, Dec. 31, 1993.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

investment. By highlighting that the federal taxpayer paid for the future President's ambitions he is shining a light on the contradictions of the Clinton's image and the reality. Leach framed the President as looking after his own interests before those he was responsible for. Clinton allegedly abused the government system to save hundreds of thousands, but at the same time cost the taxpayer millions of dollars. Leach's involvement in the burgeoning Whitewater scandal also shows that politicians and the media were supporting one another. *The Washington Post* published Leach's piece because it gave them legitimacy since they were voicing the opinion of an experienced and respected politician. Meanwhile, by publishing his article in *The Washington Post* Leach reached a larger audience than those who listened to televised political speeches, allowing his allegations to disseminate among a larger group of people. This is an example of Nyhan's theory that news outlets and politicians need to reinforce and promote one another, therefore accelerating the rise of the scandal to the headlines.¹⁴³

The White House would ultimately concede to these calls for an Independent Counsel. They could not allow the President to be consistently beaten down by Whitewater news. They needed to do what Lloyd Bentsen, Clinton's Treasury Secretary, suggested and "lance the boil."¹⁴⁴ White House staff members argued for and against the appointment of an Independent Counsel with White House lawyers arguing that if they were unlucky the investigation could last for years.¹⁴⁵ Instead, the lawyers argued, they should hand over all Whitewater documents to *The Washington Post* this would allow them to clear their name without the pressure of an investigation.¹⁴⁶ George Stephanopoulos, a young and charismatic member of the Clinton campaigns "War Room" and *de facto* White House press secretary,

¹⁴³ Nyhan, *Scandal Potential*, p.439.

¹⁴⁴ Clinton, *My Life*, p. 572.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 572-3.

¹⁴⁶ Clinton, *My Life* p. 573.

and Harold Ickes, who chaired Clinton's 1992 campaign and served as Deputy Chief-of-Staff, argued that they should bring in an Independent Counsel and move on with the business they came to Washington to achieve.¹⁴⁷ Stephanopoulos stated that it was a safe move for the President as most investigations did not result in indictments, saying "this will be over in 6 months."¹⁴⁸ Clinton agreed with Stephanopoulos and Ickes' argument and decided to accept an Independent Counsel, later saying in his memoirs that he felt he had nothing to hide.¹⁴⁹ Robert Fiske Jr. was brought on as Independent Counsel to investigate the Whitewater matter. Fiske was a moderate Republican who served for four years as President Carter's Attorney General and worked for thirty-two years at Davis & Polk, a prominent New York law firm.¹⁵⁰ Fiske stated the investigation would focus on the Clinton's relationship with the Whitewater Development Company.¹⁵¹ But he added sections that empowered him to look into any possible criminal or civil law violations that may arise, specifically those relating to obstruction of justice, perjury and conspiracy.¹⁵² This was incredibly important as later it would empower Kenneth Starr to delve into every facet of the Clintons' lives. This provision allowed Fiske to investigate anyone or any witness for any crime relating to tax, drug charges, or unrelated financial matters.¹⁵³ Celebrated journalist Bob Woodward claims that it was the broadest jurisdiction granted to any Independent Counsel to date.¹⁵⁴

The White House faced more allegations of corruption when it came to light that staff contacted various members of the Treasury Department. The Treasury Department was overseen by the Resolution Trust Fund, an organization charged with liquidizing assets related to real-estate, such as mortgages, that had been assets to Savings and Loans declared

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.237.

¹⁴⁹ Clinton, *My Life*, p. 572, 574.

¹⁵⁰ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.240.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., pp.240-1.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p.240.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p.241.

insolvent during the S&L crisis of the 1980's. The RTC was investigating Madison S&L since the thrift was declared insolvent in 1989, and the RTC could produce criminal referrals against those that had a hand in the businesses illegal transactions. In short, they could bring forward criminal referrals against the Clintons and the White House. Bernie Nussbaum, White House counsel to the President and senior member of staff on the House of Representatives investigation into Watergate, gently pressured the Justice Department for information about the Whitewater investigation.¹⁵⁵ Nussbaum attempted to gain an advantage on the media and Clinton's political opponents by contacting the Treasury Department since the White House faced consistent leaks surrounding the investigation. Every leak to the press regarding Madison S&L or Whitewater gave the press' accusations legitimacy since it appeared that the Clintons had performed some corrupt action. Every new revelation became headline news as it allowed the media to further frame the Whitewater scandal as the corrupt actions of the Clintons and their associates. Nussbaum told White House staff that the leaks cannot be allowed to drive them mad saying "It's the seeds of Watergate", the 1972 scandal that led to President Nixon resignation in 1974.¹⁵⁶ Nussbaum worked as a senior staff member on the House of Representatives investigation into Watergate, for him to recognize the same paranoia sweeping Clinton's White House as Nixon shows how staff within the White House considered the scandal. When news of these contacts reached the press the White House prepared to rebut these claims, creating an argument that neither Nussbaum, nor any other White House staff member, violated ethical norms by contacting the Treasury Department.¹⁵⁷ The White House argued in a few memos dated July 25, 1994, that they only used information they received from the Treasury Department contacts to respond to the press queries and accusations, a standard practice in

¹⁵⁵ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.244.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Memorandum Analysing Treasury-White House Contacts Under the Standards of Conduct for Executive Branch Employees, Draft #2, July 25, 1994, p.1. FOIA: 2006-0320-F- Whitewater [Part 1]

Washington and the White House.¹⁵⁸ But most importantly, the President never used the information he received from these contacts to influence the handling of the Madison Investigation.¹⁵⁹ These arguments did not matter to the press, who framed the contacts as the White House probing the Treasury Department in an attempt to influence the investigation into Clinton's association with Madison S&L. The White House maintained in public that the contacts between the White House staff and Treasury Department officials presented no ethical issues, stating what they would later expanding upon in private memos. White House press secretary Dee Dee Myers stated that "There is nothing improper about" the meetings, further elaborating to say that "It was a strictly procedural briefing. There was nothing available that was not available to members of the press or Congress."¹⁶⁰ The press were not convinced by this argument and framed the contacts as further proof of corruption. An anonymously written article in *The Washington Post* states that the White House's attempts to mitigate the damage has only "added to the impression that there is something not quite right about the Clintons' Arkansas political and business dealings..."¹⁶¹ Furthermore, two Clinton appointees were potentially involved.¹⁶² While it is not uncommon for politicians to apply pressure to others in order to achieve, what set this apart is the deeply personal nature of the information involved. Furthermore, the two Clinton appointees potentially involved were Webster Hubbell, a Rose Law Firm associate of Hillary Clinton, and Paula Casey, a Little Rock attorney who had denied the RTCs first request for a criminal investigation into Madison S&L.¹⁶³ In a July 9th article, Susan Schmidt stated that Fiske indicated that his investigation was forced to expand to investigate the contacts between the White House and

¹⁵⁸ "Memorandum Analysing Treasury-White House Contacts, Draft #2", p.7.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p.8.

¹⁶⁰ Susan Schmidt and Charles R. Babcock, "Senior Official Steps Aside Amidst Probe Of S&L Linked To Clintons' Venture", *The Washington Post*, Feb. 26, 1994.

¹⁶¹ "Mr Nussbaum Goes – Not the Mess", *The Washington Post*, Mar. 6, 1994.

¹⁶² Susan Schmidt, "Fiske Refocuses Whitewater Probe on Justice Dept. and S&L Case: Special Counsel Says 2 Clinton Appointees are "Potentially Involved"", *The Washington Post*, July 9, 1994.

¹⁶³ Schmidt, *Fiske Refocuses Whitewater Probe on Justice Dept. and S&L Case*, July 9, 1994.

the Treasury Department.¹⁶⁴ What made this transgression significant for the press is it appeared that the Clintons used their political power to attempt to interfere with an investigation rooted in their personal lives. It did not help the Clintons either that those potentially involved were Webster Hubbell and Paula Casey. These friends from Arkansas had senior positions back in Little Rock and potentially could have allowed the Clintons to avoid legal repercussions, for example Casey who denied the RTCs first criminal request to investigate Madison S&L.

The connection the media saw between Whitewater and corruption was the hypocrisy between the President's message of change for the middle class and the disenfranchised and the actions he performed for his own interest. It is not uncommon for a President's actions to not reflect their campaign promises or ideals, but the press seized on Clinton's disparity with intensity. The media framing surrounding corruption was a staple of press coverage for the first year and a half of Clinton's presidency. During this first year Clinton pushed for Welfare and Healthcare reform that would help those he described in his inaugural address, the devastated families and poor children who were systematically repressed by government. Clinton stated that if these conditions were allowed to persist they had not changed from times of scarcity and desperation, where ordinary Americans were unable to get ahead because of those who advanced private interests in secret, as Leach would later say.¹⁶⁵ The media framed the alleged corruption present in the Whitewater scandal as proof of Clinton's hypocrisy which could be easily proved by looking at Clinton's statements of change and his record of self-interest. After this point the scandal changed from one of corruption to one of cover-ups. The scandal would come to be defined by the mishandling of situations that the press portrayed as cunning political manoeuvres to hide the truth of Whitewater.

¹⁶⁴ Schmidt, "Fiske Refocuses Whitewater Probe on Justice Dept. and S&L Case", July 9, 1994.

¹⁶⁵ Leach, "Whitewater Is 'Case Model In How Not to Handle Scandal'", Aug. 8, 1995.

Cover-up

The tragic suicide of Vincent Foster on July 20th, 1993 marked a major turning point in the Whitewater saga and the White House. The death sparked a major ethics controversy as the White House went through his office and cleared it of potentially sensitive files, including Whitewater files and Foster's diary. The authorities wanted the diary and other documents because it could touch on issues related to the White House Travel Office controversy and the previous December Foster handled the sale of the Clintons interest in Whitewater.¹⁶⁶ The scandal alarm rang when the press discovered how the investigators conducted the search and the various reports of what the removed documents contained. Citing executive privilege and attorney-client privilege, Nussbaum told investigators to stand aside as he separated documents into two piles, "personal" matters and White House matters.¹⁶⁷ Investigators reported seeing the diary put into the personal pile and one investigator stated he remembered seeing paperwork related to McDougal among the documents.¹⁶⁸ Nussbaum didn't recall seeing the diary nor did he see any files relating to McDougal.¹⁶⁹ Nussbaum's failure to recall seeing the diary or any McDougal files quickly sparked theories that the White House took and hid the files to protect sensitive information. The White House's refusal to acknowledge the discovery sparked a bipartisan call to action for an Independent Counsel. Three days after the news broke that the White House removed files from Foster's office on December 19th, 1993, the White House confirmed it and said they handed over the files to the Clinton's attorney David Kendall.¹⁷⁰ Hillary Clinton stated that they would not turn over the Whitewater files found in Foster's office, commenting that "I am bewildered that a losing

¹⁶⁶ Michael Isikoff, "Probe Pursues White House Aide's Undisclosed Diary", *The Washington Post*, Dec. 19, 1993.

¹⁶⁷ Isikoff, "Probe Pursues White House Aide's Undisclosed Diary", Dec. 19, 1993.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Michael Isikoff, "Whitewater Files Were Found in Foster's Office, White House Confirms", *The Washington Post*, Dec. 22, 1993.

investment...is still a topic of inquiry... I just think what we've said is adequate.”¹⁷¹

Republican senator Jim Leach touched on the heart of the matters in his article detailing the need for an Independent Counsel, stating:

“While bipartisan probes are always preferable, the minority party in all Western democracies has a traditional responsibility to expose breaches of law or ethics of those in power, especially when the majority closes ranks to limit embarrassment.”¹⁷²

When Leach said “especially when the majority closes ranks to limit embarrassment” he is describing the major issue the press saw with the handling of Foster’s files. While the Clintons had the right to claim files relating to their personal matters, as is the norm in practiced law, it did not matter to the press.¹⁷³ While other politicians have hidden files and other sensitive information from public eyes what made the Clintons transgression so damning is the circumstances as well as their indignation at the presses scrutiny. They stopped the investigators from properly conducting their search of the office and took files that the press already raised in the public forum. Furthermore, the contrasting stories between the White House and the investigators created the appearance that they themselves actively hid potentially sensitive information. The documents are also problematic since Whitewater dominated the news from the beginning of the Clinton presidency. Furthermore, it touched upon the Clinton’s Arkansas past. Again, we can see the clash between cultures. Bill and Hillary Clinton are not the first, nor the last, presidential couple to have an investment go sour. However, the circumstances surrounding the deal brought the press to investigate, and any action relating to the Whitewater files after Foster’s death, other than releasing them to the press, would have been viewed as highly suspicious. Kendall confirmed this when he requested the documents be subpoenaed before they turned them over to the Justice

¹⁷¹ Isikoff, “Whitewater Files Were Found in Foster’s Office”, Dec. 22, 1993.

¹⁷² Leach, “A Special Counsel for Whitewater”, Dec. 31, 1993.

¹⁷³ Gene Lyons, *Fools for Scandal: How the Media Invented Whitewater*, New York, 1996, p.62.

Department.¹⁷⁴ Michael Isikoff and Ann Devroy stated in a January 6th 1994 article that Kendall made this choice specifically to stop the press from getting them through a leak since the leak of a subpoenaed document is a federal crime.¹⁷⁵ Kendall's decision to subpoena the Whitewater files raised the question of what the files contained that required such extreme measures.

On April 22nd, 1994, Hillary Clinton decided to confront the Whitewater issue in a questions and answers session with the press that would address Whitewater, Foster, or any other issues that might arise.¹⁷⁶ The following day Susan Schmidt and Charles Babcock released a damning article that portrayed the First Lady as attempting to resolve the Whitewater situation with a cover-up. The article starts with a paragraph that says:

“She said she did not know about the Whitewater documents that were removed from the White House deputy counsel Vincent Foster's office after his suicide last July; ... and professed ignorance about how the unsuccessful Whitewater land venture was able to pay off its bank debts in the 1980s.”¹⁷⁷

The First Lady also stated that she realizes now that “the public has a right to know certain information about her family's finances”, however the White House still did not release any documents to the press relating to Whitewater.¹⁷⁸ At the end of the article it again states that while documents have been handed over to Fiske, they have all been subpoenaed so that it is impossible for the public to actually see them.¹⁷⁹

The media framed this as proof of a cover-up since information the First Lady said was of public interest was hidden from them by legal jurisdiction. Mrs. Clinton did not help herself much by replying to a comment that the Clintons should have known McDougal did not pay

¹⁷⁴ Michael Isikoff and Ann Devroy, “Subpoena Issued for Clinton Files: White House to Comply in S&L Probe”, *The Washington Post*, Jan. 6, 1994.

¹⁷⁵ Isikoff and Devroy, “Subpoena Issued for Clinton Files”, Jan. 6, 1994.

¹⁷⁶ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.252.

¹⁷⁷ Susan Schmidt and Charles Babcock, “First Lady's Explanations Yield Little Information”, *The Washington Post*, Apr. 23, 1994.

¹⁷⁸ Schmidt and Babcock, “First Lady's Explanations Yield Little Information”, Apr. 23, 1994.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

off the bank debt because Whitewater didn't make enough money by saying, "Well, shoulda, coulda, woulda, we didn't."¹⁸⁰ Hillary Clinton's comment was clearly made in frustration since the press had focused so intently on the Clintons' past, the pressure got to the First Lady. Regardless, the media framed her comments as an attempt to hide the truth of these odd financial decisions. Schmidt and Babcock highlight that the Clintons and McDougals had an equal share in Whitewater Development Corporation, yet McDougal paid considerably more for the investment.¹⁸¹

By highlighting that Mrs. Clinton could not explain why McDougal paid more for Whitewater, nor why neither the President nor First Lady noticed that the business was not gaining revenue through land sales Schmidt and Babcock frame the Clintons as equally guilty in the Whitewater scandal.¹⁸² The two journalists accuse the Clintons of allowing McDougal to perform several misdemeanours as long as it benefits the Clintons interests. Furthermore, by professing ignorance about the files, in combination with the subpoena on the documents, Schmidt and Babcock frame the White House as intentionally hiding the truth from the public. A view that is only cemented by Schmidt and Babcock stating that none of the documents have been released to the public. The Arkansas past attracted the press to Whitewater, and the White House's alleged attempts to cover-up that past would continue to draw scrutiny. Foster worked with Mrs. Clinton at Rose Law Firm in Little Rock and also worked intimately with the Whitewater matter. The handling of these very personal documents created a dilemma for the White House, if they held onto the documents the press would frame the decision, as they did, as a cover-up. However, if they released the files to the media new allegations could be brought against them, or old allegations could resurface. The Foster files dilemma also occurred in early 1994, later in the year was the midterm elections.

¹⁸⁰ Schmidt and Babcock, "First Lady's Explanations Yield Little Information", Apr. 23, 1994.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

Republican Senators had already criticized the Clinton administration for their reluctance to divulge information related to Whitewater. If the Clintons faced more allegations it could harm the Democrats by pushing some members who defended the Clintons out of the House of Representatives. If the Clinton administration lost the House of Representatives their ability to push legislation would be drastically limited.

The White House took action and assembled a “Whitewater Response Team.” Harold Ickes headed the team and called in Jane Sherburne, a partner of Lloyd Culter, a member of Clinton’s White House counsel. Sherburne specialised in internal investigations and was the perfect hire for the Response Team.¹⁸³ Mark Fabiani was also brought into the team as the public face and spokesperson. Fabiani served as counsel and then Deputy Mayor of Tom Bradley from 1985 to 1992. During his time with Mayor Bradley, the Mayor of Los Angeles, Fabiani helped him through several legal and federal probes into Bradley’s finances. Fabiani also assisted Bradley with the riots that erupted in L.A. in 1992 after four policemen were acquitted of police brutality despite being filmed beating an African American man called Rodney King in 1991. Together, Sherburne and Fabiani had the potential to appropriately handle Whitewater and take it out of the headlines. Ickes ordered the team to deal with the Whitewater issue until after Clinton was re-elected.¹⁸⁴ The media sharply criticized this decision and viewed the team as cover-up experts. Schmidt and Devroy published an article on February 8, 1995, which stated that Clinton assembled the team due to Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, who replaced Fiske under hotly contested circumstances, bringing a “parade of witnesses before a grand jury in Washington.”¹⁸⁵ The article concludes by highlighting the various connections between Clinton and McDougal to show that the two

¹⁸³ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.273.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Susan Schmidt and Ann Devroy, “White House Assembling Whitewater Legal Team: Starr Issues New Subpoenas for Documents”, *The Washington Post*, Feb. 8, 1995.

families are at the heart of Whitewater.¹⁸⁶ By starting with the assembly of the Response Team and concluding with the connections between the two families Schmidt and Devroy frame the two events as closely connected. While every White House has a public relations and press department, this team targeted one particular issue, which set it apart from other press departments. The Response Team also dealt with the most sensitive scandal the Clinton administration faced due to the Arkansas past. By creating a team specifically respond to the press the White House attempted to close ranks to limit the damage of Whitewater on the administration. The Team's attempt to limit the damage of the Whitewater scandal was highlighted by the Response Team's attempt at controlling the narrative through a *Newsweek* piece written by Michael Isikoff.

The team reached out to Isikoff and offered to give him an exclusive that specifically addressed the issues surrounding Foster's files and the circumstances of his death.¹⁸⁷ The team specifically chose Isikoff because he was an outspoken critic of Clinton. If they could convince him to write a good piece it might change the tone of the discussion surrounding Whitewater.¹⁸⁸ They created a script that summarised the night Foster died and pointed out the differences in witness testimonies rather than try to hide them. They offered explanations for the differences where they could. Otherwise they did not comment.¹⁸⁹ Sherburne and Fabiani also briefed other reporters about the script and read it to them, which took them an hour and a half, and discussed Whitewater documents one-by-one, detailing what they contained.¹⁹⁰ They believed that if the article was successful it could potentially change the debate surrounding Whitewater and clear the First Family of accusations that stopped the White House from functioning.¹⁹¹ The original *Newsweek* piece by Isikoff was a success for

¹⁸⁶ Schmidt and Devroy, "White House Assembling Whitewater Legal Team", Feb. 8, 1995.

¹⁸⁷ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.283.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Woodward, *Shadow*, p.284.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.283.

the Response Team. While Isikoff stated that the White House had mishandled Foster's files, he made it clear that Foster's suicide was in no way connected to Whitewater. Isikoff discredits the idea that the suicide was linked to the scandal when he wrote "The possibility that Whitewater caused Foster's death is the holy grail for right-wing conspiracy theorists..."¹⁹² The success of the Isikoff piece was short lived. Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato passed on word to reporters that the White House had not released all of the Whitewater documents to the press.¹⁹³ Kendall revealed to the team that around one-hundred pages of documents were intentionally withheld, among them were several damning documents.¹⁹⁴ One document contained accounting records from 1992 that claimed a \$68,000 loss for the Clintons due to Whitewater. However, Foster could only account for \$5,800.¹⁹⁵ Among the withheld documents they discovered a note from Foster that referred to Whitewater as "a can of worms you shouldn't open."¹⁹⁶

The discovery and release of these documents helped to reinforce what the press had stated for years, but now they had tangible proof. The media could now successfully frame the Clinton administration as trying to control the narrative surrounding Whitewater by selectively releasing documents. The media frame that the White House was trying to control the narrative intensified when Fabiani, the team's spokesperson, stated that he released all the documents from Foster's office, the unreleased documents weren't in the office.¹⁹⁷ It appeared that the White House was attempting to cover-up the truth by hiding documents and carefully crafting stories for the press. Again, cover-up dominated the narrative and further entrenched the mutual animosity between the Clinton administration and the mainstream press. The attempt to cover-up Whitewater created the appearance that the White House

¹⁹² Michael Isikoff, "The Night Foster Died", *Newsweek*, Jul. 17, 1995.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.285.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

wanted to hide information that could potentially damage their image. While the Response Team tried to disclose information to the press in a successful attempt to change the narrative, their idea was undercut by the Clintons desire to hide documents. By refusing to fully cooperate with the media the Clintons made it easier for the mainstream media to frame their efforts as an attempt to conceal the truth from the public.

Cronyism

Accusations of cronyism were levelled at the White House from the beginning of the Whitewater scandal. Gerth and Engelberg first picked up on Whitewater during the 1992 campaign highlighting that an investigation into Madison S&L is currently under way due to the “ties between President Clinton and an Arkansas businessman, a political patron of Mr. Clinton in the 1980s.”¹⁹⁸ Further in the article McDougal states that the relationship between himself and the then-Governor was one of favours, one such favour being when McDougal settled a \$35,000 campaign debt on behalf of Clinton.¹⁹⁹ The relationship of favours is the defining aspect of cronyism for the Clintons during their political tenure and the favours they performed for those in their Arkansas circle came to define the political issue of cronyism for the White House. While plenty of politicians have enacted favours for others in expectation of a favour later, what set the Clintons apart for the press is the unique nature of Arkansas politics. The White House directly addressed this in a memo which outlined various responses to the Arkansas atmosphere and used terms that disputed claims that Arkansas politics was prone to cronyism. These phrases included “small state”, “incestuous relationships”, and “undue influence” which the White House sought to dispel, hence why they prepared to address them.²⁰⁰ The White House and the Clintons knew of the accusations

¹⁹⁸ Gerth and Engelberg, “U.S. Investigating Clinton’s Links”, Nov. 2, 1993.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Paul Begala to Lisa Caputo, “Some Thoughts on an Interview”, Mar. 11, 1994. FOIA: 2006-0320-F-Whitewater [Part 6].

and phrases levelled against them, and worked hard to discredit allegations that they engaged in acts of cronyism.

The accusation of cronyism also carried forward into Republican Senator Jim Leach's article calling for an Independent Counsel where he uses the term "favoured inattention."²⁰¹ Leach continually spoke out against the Clinton's connections in Arkansas and is not the only Republican that spoke about the Whitewater scandal, however, he is the most prominent. Furthermore, the fact that the mainstream media publicized his speeches and allowed him to author some articles indicates that they consider him a legitimizing force for their own thoughts regarding the Whitewater scandal. Other prominent Republicans protested against Whitewater and the Clinton's connections with various members of Arkansas' upper class, most notably Newt Gingrich and Clinton's 1996 election opponent Bob Dole. Gringrich was member of the House of Representatives and took over the role as Speaker of the House in 1995 after the Republicans won the midterm elections. Gingrich also played an important role in the 1995 government shutdown and voted to impeach President Clinton in 1998. While Gingrich would later use his positon as Speaker of the House to attack the Clinton administration, he described Leach's argument for an Independent Counsel investigation into Whitewater as "very believable" in a March, 1994 press conference.²⁰² Gingrich further stated that President Clinton needed to answer accusations against him by Leach on the same day as the conference, March 25, 1994, that indicated potential "actions that were totally unethical and wrong in Arkansas" need to be answered.²⁰³ The favour that the President would gain by ignoring Madison while it grew exponentially meant Clinton could use his friend's wealthy business as a fund for his ambitious political career. Leach's accusation

²⁰¹ Jim Leach, "A Special Counsel for Whitewater", *The Washington Post*, Dec. 31, 1993.

²⁰² "Whitewater Republican News Conference", *C-Span*, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?255485-1/whitewater-republican-news-conference>, (accessed: 19/03/20).

²⁰³ "Whitewater Republican News Conference", *C-Span*, (accessed: 19/03/20).

became more damning when he noted that the First Lady's law firm formerly represented Madison S&L. Leach also mentioned that Vincent Foster and Webster Hubbell worked alongside the First Lady at Rose Law Firm.²⁰⁴ This scandal was unique as it seemingly involved everyone from Arkansas that now resided at the top levels of government. The Clintons appeared to be actively consolidating power at the top in an attempt to control the highest levels of government like they did in Arkansas. Even the President's supporters recognized cronyism as a pressing accusation for the White House; one that must be answered. Robert Hirschfield wrote a brilliant satirical article titled "How to Whitewash Whitewater: Dirty Trickery and Other Nixonian Tips for Besieged Bill" in which he criticized the Republicans for "salivating over the prospect of Bill Clinton's downfall."²⁰⁵ However, he concludes his article by saying "While Clinton may have shown favouritism to a small time savings and loan operator and assorted other cronies, Republicans are capable of subverting the constitution."²⁰⁶ While the article ultimately takes the President's side, it sharply criticizes his character for showing favour to "assorted other cronies." The accusation of cronyism however was the most politically damaging. It shows that the public and Washington insiders were considering the possibility that the President tried to consolidate power at the highest level in Washington, like he did in Arkansas.

The next major accusation of cronyism in the Whitewater saga came with the various contacts between the White House and the Treasury Department. The accusation dealt a blow to the White House which is evident in how they tried to curb these accusations with various and highly detailed arguments based on legal precedent. A White House memo dated July 25, 1994, specifically targets Leach's argument that the White House staff contacted the Treasury

²⁰⁴ Leach, "A Special Counsel for Whitewater", Dec. 31, 1993.

²⁰⁵ Robert Hirschfield, "How to Whitewash Whitewater: Dirty Trickery and Other Nixonian Tips for Besieged Bill", *The Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 1994.

²⁰⁶ Hirschfield, "How to Whitewash Whitewater", Jan. 23, 1994.

Department to gain favour with President Clinton. Favour in this specific case meant to gain approval or support from the President by helping him deal with the Whitewater scandal. This support could come in the form of a promotion or a request for some form of benefit later on. Leach argued that the White House staff contacted the Treasury Department specifically to benefit the staff member that provided the president with information regarding a potential criminal referral.²⁰⁷ The memo further states that:

“Mr. Leach apparently reasoned that the employee who takes such an action may benefit because he may place himself in greater favour with his superior and advance his own career within the government.”²⁰⁸

Leach’s accusation fits the definition of cronyism that McDougal provided in 1993 when he said the relationship was one of favours. The memo highlights the ethical standards that need to be broken for cronyism to be present in this transgression. The memo states that the gain required would be one of “tangible benefits, either financial or otherwise.”²⁰⁹ However, if the relationship between Clinton and this staff member is one of favours, as Leach accuses, then a tangible benefit is not the gain sought after by the staff member. It is having the most powerful man in the western world owe you a favour in the future. Manoeuvring for the President’s favour will always be a part of the White House and Washington political culture. Politicians within the White House have competing agendas and getting on the President’s good side is the best way to accomplish it since they have the ability to push that agenda stronger than anyone else in Washington, this is why lobbying is such a huge part of the Washington political culture. Having the President on your side because you helped them in some way is a fundamental part of the Washington establishment. This accusation of cronyism is different because of the sensitivity of the case but also intense partisanship in Washington. Whitewater became a crime of cronyism due to the connections between

²⁰⁷ Memorandum Analysing Treasury-White House Contacts Under the Standards of Conduct for Executive Branch Employees, Draft #2, July 25, 1994, p.11. FOIA: 2006-0320-F- Whitewater [Part 1].

²⁰⁸ “Memorandum Analysing Treasury-White House Contacts, Draft #2”, July 25, 1994, p.11.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

McDougal and Clinton. The methods he utilized in Arkansas and attempted to implement in Washington brought Whitewater to the fore once more. The crony nature of Arkansas' political culture was framed as steadily integrating into Washington through the President's actions and those of his friends. It showed a clash of cultures between the Washington establishment and the Clinton's Arkansan inner circle. Again, the President's alleged acts of cronyism pushed against the understanding that elites in Washington had of their culture. The meritocracy culture born of the Pendleton Act (1883) clashed with the Arkansas culture that the President understood and had worked within during the 1980s. Again, the meritocracy-based Washington system is partly a myth since the connections between people within the system always mattered. However, the elite in Washington did believe in this system. The Washington press and Republicans pushed back against the introduction of Clinton's associates because it limited their ability to act within Washington. President Clinton brought with him close friends and associates who did not receive their political education in Washington, D.C. They were loyal to him and did not accept or passively conform to press and Republican styles of governmental.

Furthermore, the memo mentioned before directly addresses Jim Leach' allegation of cronyism, not the Washington press', showing that Republicans and the press worked in conjunction to keep Whitewater relevant, and whether they knew it or not they worked together.²¹⁰ The clash between the Republicans and the Democrats became particularly fierce during this period and both sides made steps to discredit and attack the other. While the Republicans were called for an investigation into Whitewater the Democrats, such as Henry B. Gonzalez, decried the investigation as a "witch hunt."²¹¹ In public interviews members of the White House staff pushed back against the accusations of cronyism levelled against them.

²¹⁰ "Memorandum Analysing Treasury-White House Contacts", Draft #2, July 25, 1994, p.11.

²¹¹ Susan Schmidt and Kenneth J. Cooper, "House Banking Chief Calls for Hearings: Gonzalez Assails GOP Whitewater "Witch Hunt"", *The Washington Post*, Mar. 22, 1994.

In an interview newly appointed White House counsel Abner Mikva stated that he did not consider himself suitable for the job due to his lack of White House experience and his distant relationship with the President.²¹² Clinton responded by saying he “didn’t want to put somebody in who was a crony and that he wanted somebody with broad Washington experience I [Mikva] had in Congress and the court.”²¹³ By allowing Mikva to say this Clinton sent a clear message to the press and the public, cronyism is not present in his White House. We can see through these legal arguments and public announcements that Clinton actively worked to push back against the accusation of cronyism within his White House. Cronyism represented a serious attack on the President’s ethics, something he valued highly. Clinton detested challenges to his ethical record. When asked to justify his promise of ethical government compared to the reality of government Clinton said, “You know, no one has accused me of abusing my authority here as president.”²¹⁴ He added, “Everybody knows that I have tougher ethics rules than any previous president.”²¹⁵ The memos from July 25th, 1994, examine the ethics that are required of White House staff members and the president and before concluding that the White House committed “no ethical violations.”²¹⁶ While they did not commit any ethics violations, Leach argued that the White House bent the rules to accomplish their goals. While Clinton gave no tangible benefits, the favours granted to those who warned the President of the developments would benefit in other ways. Clinton could offer benefits such as transfers to another department, promotions, or other favours to boost the informants standing within the White House and Washington. Leach’s argument is

²¹² Ruth Marcus, “Mikva to Take on New Role as Counsel at White House After Court, Hill Career”, *The Washington Post*, Aug. 12, 1994.

²¹³ Marcus, “Mikva to Take on New Role as Counsel at White House”, Aug. 12, 1994.

²¹⁴ John F. Harris, “Clinton Defends Ethics Record, Decries Climate of Suspicion”, *The Washington Post*, Mar. 4, 1995.

²¹⁵ Harris, “Clinton Defends Ethics Record”, Mar. 4, 1995.

²¹⁶ “Memorandum Analysing Treasury-White House Contacts, Draft #2”, July 25, 1994, p.1.

establishing the basis for a quid pro quo agreement between the President and a member of his staff.

Leach hit on these points of bending the rules and hammered home the dangers that cronyism represents to democracy in his prepared statements on August 8th, 1995. Leach argues how important the issue is by saying that he “would caution sceptics’ by noting that to date nine persons have been convicted, three await trial, and the Independent Counsel’s investigation is continuing.”²¹⁷ He indicated there is an issue with cronyism in the White House without actually stating it outright, stating:

“Time after time in the 1980s, politicians posturing in public as defenders of the little guy found themselves in private advancing the interests of a small number of owners who ran their financial institutions, as one Madison employee told regulators, like a “candy store” for insiders.”²¹⁸

Leach continued to highlight why this matters by proclaiming “it is fatal to democracy because it destroys the foundation of trust between the electorate and their leaders upon which representative government depends for its legitimacy.”²¹⁹ Leach’s statement shows how people perceived the issue. Cronyism is a rot that erodes the polity’s faith in representative government. These statements are the most damning for the Clintons as it presents the polity with a clear cut and understandable case against the President that tries to move the American public to action by appealing to their fundamental understanding of representative government. This attack on the President’s legitimacy questioned the President’s character and challenged the Clinton’s claims of higher ethical standing than previous presidents. The media and Republicans framed the President as engaging in unethical acts of cronyism, such as Gingrich stating that Clinton needed to answer these claims.²²⁰ Leach’s statement also reveals how the media’s portrayal of cronyism had centred

²¹⁷ Leach, “Whitewater Is ‘Case Model In How Not to Handle Scandal’”, Aug. 8, 1995.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ “Whitewater Republican News Conference”, *C-Span*, (accessed: 19/03/20).

on Arkansas. Leach uses the Arkansas background as the basis for a generalisation about other major enterprises across America in the 1980's, regardless of the specific situation in Arkansas or other states. Leach uses the Arkansas atmosphere to attack Clinton, placing him within the "small number of owners" that utilized the Madison S&L as an easy source of cash. While this undoubtedly happened across America in the 1980s, to make Arkansas and Madison the defining example Leach attempted to label the President as a crook and attack his claims of higher ethical standing.

The accusation of cronyism hit on several key issues surrounding this scandal. The media examined the Arkansas past and the Clintons' connections and criticized their transposition to Washington, even though many Republicans and urban Democrats brought their connections into the White House as well and did not face the same level of scrutiny such as John F. Kennedy who appointed his brother as Attorney General. Furthermore, the criticisms of the President's ethics and his administration by the media eroded the faith the power and prestige of the executive office, the man within it, and the White House itself.

Conclusion

The results of the consistent message from the media and elite politicians that Whitewater was dangerous to democracy took its effect and can be seen in polling data about the President. When the public was asked in mid-1996 if they associated the words "honest and trustworthy" with Clinton, he lost 49 to 46 percent.²²¹ In relation to Whitewater 49 percent thought he was not telling the truth compared to 42 who thought he was, and 46 percent thought he had done something illegal, compared to 44 who think he did not.²²² Six months later in January 1997 Clinton fared no better, with 54 percent of those interviewed thought Clinton was not honest or trustworthy, and an equally large majority thought he did not have

²²¹ Charles Krauthammer, "A President for Our Time", *The Washington Post*, July 5, 1996.

²²² Krauthammer, "A President for Our Time", July 5, 1996.

high personal and moral ethical standards.²²³ With Whitewater 51 percent said Whitewater was an important issue and 45 percent disagreed, this was generally divided along partisan lines.²²⁴ However, rather ironically, in the 1996 poll, when asked if Clinton had the honesty and integrity to serve well as President he won 62 percent to 36 percent, a landslide bigger than Lyndon B. Johnsons.²²⁵ While Clinton was not viewed as being honest or trustworthy with his handling of Whitewater it was not viewed as a deal breaker for the Presidency. Charles Krauthammer summed it up by saying, “Republicans are at their wits end with frustration that, as the sordidness of this administration is progressively exposed, Clinton suffers little political damage.”²²⁶

However, this scandal shows how the media approached this topic and what it represented for the American public. Whitewater was the Pandora’s box of the Clinton administration, once opened all the issues within could not be contained, despite the White House’s best efforts. Hypocrisy, corruption, cover-ups, cronyism, and ethical erosion were framed to the American public by the Washington press and key Republicans in power, which brought the nation into the middle of the Whitewater scandal and made them spectators to an event that would dominate the headlines for over eight years.

²²³ Richard Morrin, “Clintons’ Approval Rating at Highest Mark Since ‘93”, *The Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 1997.

²²⁴ Morrin, “Clintons’ Approval Rating at Highest Mark Since ‘93”, Jan. 19, 1997.

²²⁵ Krauthammer, “A President for Our Time”, July 5, 1996.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

Chapter Three: Lincoln Bedroom Scandal

Introduction

The Lincoln Bedroom scandal, also known as the “Funny Money” scandal, arose from the way that the President raised funds for his re-election campaign in 1996. President Clinton pushed the envelope and bent the rules when figuring out new ways to raise more and more money for his campaign which adopted new and fascinating strategies to push for re-election. Seeking to counter the negative press that he received from news outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Clinton used television ads that “pierced into the soul of middle America and the homes of people who often did not read political coverage in their daily newspapers or watch the evening television news.”²²⁷ This cost a fortune to do and Clinton blended tradition and new ideas to raise an extraordinary amount of money; the total spent on TV ads reached upwards of \$85 million dollars, the biggest tv ad campaign of its time.²²⁸

On the 27th of December 1994, the chief fund-raiser for the Democrats, Terry McAuliffe, met with President Clinton at the White House for breakfast.²²⁹ McAuliffe gave Clinton a guarantee, he could raise the money needed to win if Clinton agreed to give big donors regular access to himself and high tier members of the White House.²³⁰ These regular meetings would include informal coffees, Oval Office meetings, state dinners, receptions and even sleepovers in the Lincoln Bedroom; a room just down the hall from the President and First Lady’s bedroom.²³¹ The President authorized prizes for donors who gave above set thresholds, which is a major discussion point when the media discussed the scandal, alongside the various connections between Clinton and his associates from Arkansas.

²²⁷ Woodward, *The Choice*, p.437.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.435.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p.436.

However, it is important to mention that Clinton also bent the rules in other important ways. Federal campaigns are limited so they could only receive \$1,000 per individual donor, with an aggregate limit of \$40 million.²³² Clinton and his team skirted this limit by sending donations to the Democratic National Committee (DNC), which the President himself controlled. The DNC had no set limit for how much could be given by individuals or organizations.²³³ This allowed Clinton to raise a staggering amount of money from donors.

While this manipulation of financial limitations is concerning, the media paid more attention to where the money itself came from. The scandal started with the analysis of the rewards donors to the DNC received in return for their money, but quickly evolved to examine the ethics of the White House and the President. It quickly became known that Clinton accepted money from potentially illegal or highly unethical sources. The focus became who the President decided to consort with and what he would do to in order to win re-election.

Corruption

The issue of corruption arose due to the various ways that Clinton encouraged donors, the money they provided, and the effect of donors on policy pushed by the President after they donated to the DNC. On July 7th, 1995, the media first discussed the President's fund-raising techniques and examined the various rewards big donors received. The prizes followed a tier system: for a \$100,000 donation the donor received two meetings with President Clinton, two with Vice President Al Gore, a place on foreign trade missions with Democratic Party and business leaders, "impromptu meetings" with various administration officials, and a daily fax report.²³⁴ This is a particularly tantalizing offer for big donors who likely worked in major

²³² Woodward, *The Choice*, p.436.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Tom Raum, "Democrats Defend Perks for Big Donors: Clinton Had Campaigned Against Practices His Party Is Now Using", *The Washington Post*, Jul. 7, 1995.

industries that could afford to spend large sums of money without batting an eye and would utilize the meetings to influence policy in their favour. There are many examples but one of the clearest examples of how donors influence the President is when Clinton was approached by an exporter called R. Warren Meddoff two weeks before Election Day. Meddoff represented a Texas speculator called William Morgan who would give \$5 million to the DNC if the President lifted the current ban on aid flights to Cuba.²³⁵ A 1997 article by Michael Kelly explained these actions:

Meddoff makes his offer to Clinton; then Clinton asks for a second business card [bringing the total up to \$10 million] and promises to have a staffer call about the money; then Meddoff broaches the subject of the aid flights; then the president tells Meddoff that he had “made the decision to allow the supplies to be flown.” And it is a matter of record that the president did lift the ban on flights to Cuba that very day. A coincidence, explains the White House.²³⁶

While this came to light later, Kelly’s article demonstrated that the President could be swayed by the money donors offered, which presented a major ethical issue for the President and an issue of national security for the public. The media made it clear that the President could be swayed by a large enough sum and questioned his legitimacy since he willingly performed quid pro quo actions for those that provided him with large sums for his campaign.

The other tiers also offered ways for smaller interest groups to get involved with the President and the Democratic Party. For \$50,000 a donor received a presidential reception, a dinner with Gore and special policy briefings; for \$10,000 a donor received a reception and dinner with Gore as well as a “preferred status” at the 1996 Democratic National Convention; and a \$1,000 could be invited to events with Hillary Clinton, Tipper Gore (Al Gore’s wife and Second Lady) and other female appointees.²³⁷ Clinton spent his 1992 campaign railing against “cliques of \$100,000 donors” and now actively encouraged people to donate as much

²³⁵ Michael Kelly, “Follow the Money”, *The Washington Post*, Feb. 16, 1997.

²³⁶ Kelly, “Follow the Money”, Feb. 16, 1997.

²³⁷ Raum, “Democrats Defend Perks for Big Donors”, Jul. 7, 1995.

as possible.²³⁸ This reeked of hypocrisy and corruption to the press. Furthermore, the President advocated for campaign reform, but appeared willing to put his principles on the shelf if it helped him to win. The DNC did reply to this accusation, stating that their donor program corresponded in “significant detail to every donor program used by both political parties since Dwight Eisenhower was president.”²³⁹ However, they then contradicted their statement by inadvertently agreeing with the media. The DNC implied that Clinton would set aside his principles by confidently stating that while Clinton advocates for campaign reform, “until the system is changed, we will not unilaterally disarm.”²⁴⁰ The language of “disarm” provides insight into the partisanship of the time; it was a war between two parties.

By 1996 the focus on the practices of the President and the DNC intensified dramatically since the fund-raising effort generated enormous wealth for the re-election campaign. These articles consistently focused on the various hypocrisies of the President and his administration, who acted against their own principles in favour of enormous donations. Proof of how successful the fund-raising became is the May 8th, 1996, DNC fund-raising gala which garnered a total of \$12.3 million; nearly triple the previous fund-raising record.²⁴¹ The following day Ruth Marcus, a consistent voice of criticism in the media during the Clinton era, did not miss a beat. In her article Marcus stated that the Democrats, but Clinton in particular, “find themselves in the tricky position of simultaneously denouncing the current campaign financing system – and exploiting it.”²⁴² Marcus did not fail to point out further hypocrisy on Clinton’s behalf, when she stated that:

Four years ago, Clinton ran against what he described as a corrupt Washington culture of “high-priced lobbyists and Washington influence peddlers,” saying that American

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ruth Marcus, “Democrats’ Two Days of Fund-Raising Nets Party \$12.3 Million”, *The Washington Post*, May. 9, 1996.

²⁴² Marcus, “Democrats’ Two Days of Fund-Raising Nets Party \$12.3 Million”, May. 9, 1996.

politics was “being held hostage by big money interests.” Now he is leading his party’s efforts to raise money from many of those same interests.²⁴³

President Clinton said that he did not want the American political system limited by lobbyists, but then indulged those interest groups when he needed to. A consistent issue the media raised when examining Clinton’s scandals was the disparity between his words and deeds. This resulted in a portrait of the president as an untrustworthy person, someone willing to say whatever it took in order to achieve his goals. These articles criticised the President’s character by framing him as hypocritical. Seemingly, Clinton would be willing to sacrifice his principles in favour of money that would help him gain re-election.

The fund-raising scandal did not limit itself to domestic shores. The Clinton’s donations came under increasing suspicion when reporters discovered that the DNC’s chief fund-raiser generated donations from predominantly Asian-Americans. Some of these Asian-American donators may have been giving money illegally, if the media coverage was believed. William Safire, a Pulitzer prize winning journalist who worked at *The New York Times* during the Clinton administration, discovered that a friend of the President introduced Clinton to a South Korean magnate who contributed \$250,000 to the Democrats through a subsidiary company, an expressly illegal action.²⁴⁴ Safire’s article continues on to state that this is the first time that the President of the United States “was personally involved in the solicitation of a major illegal contribution...”²⁴⁵ The main criticism of Clinton from the media is that he solicited money from questionable sources, a call that Bob Dole and Ross Perot, Clinton’s 1996 presidential competitors adopted wholeheartedly. Both Dole and Perot suggested that President Clinton overlooked human rights violations in Indonesia in order to boost his campaign coffers.²⁴⁶ While Dole and Perot leaped to denounce Clinton it is

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ William Safire, “The Asian Connection”, *The New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1996.

²⁴⁵ Safire, “The Asian Connection”, Oct. 7, 1996.

²⁴⁶ Jack Anderson and Jan Moller, “GOP: Pioneers in Foreign Fund-Raising”, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 1996.

important to state that Clinton is not the first candidate who accepted donations from ethically dubious sources. Nor is he the first to ignore human rights violations out of convenience. The most egregious ethical violation in return for campaign funds comes from former President Richard Nixon. In 1968 Nixon willingly accepted money from Greece's military junta, but to complicate matters more it is alleged that CIA funds found their way through Greek connections into Nixon's campaign.²⁴⁷ The money that flowed into the Nixon campaign came from the wallet of Tom Pappas, a Greek American who served as a major fund-raiser for Nixon.²⁴⁸ The trail led from the CIA to the Greek counterpart, the KYP, then to Pappas who funnelled the money to the Nixon campaign. A story confirmed by Henry Tasca, the former U.S. ambassador to Greece in 1976 in a sworn testimony to the House Committee.²⁴⁹ In 1972, Nixon and Pappas teamed up again and Pappas was even promoted to co-chair of the fund-raising effort.²⁵⁰ The media has a blind spot when it comes to Republican transgressions. Nixon's transgressions are considerably more egregious, yet Clinton bares the brand for being the first to accept illegal campaign contributions. Part of the scepticism towards Clinton and not Nixon is that Clinton lived in a post-Watergate, post-Vietnam world where the polity was more suspicious of their representatives. Harold Ickes, the former White House Chief of Staff, ironically used Republican models to argue for the closing of certain Democratic donor clubs that were not as useful as they once been.²⁵¹ Ickes initially attacked the Republican files as a criticism of the system and to display how the opposition consistently raised large sums of money. When the Clinton campaign decided to adapt this model is unknown but can be dated closest to the meeting with Terry McAuliffe on December 27th, 1994.²⁵² The way that

²⁴⁷ Anderson and Moller, GOP: "Pioneers in Foreign Fund-Raising", Nov. 7, 1996.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Dan Morgan, "Clinton Aide Opposed Democrats' Use of Donor Club: Ickes' 1995 Memo Included Documents Detailing RNC Practices for Wooing Big Givers", *The Washington Post*, Feb 27, 1997.

²⁵² Morgan, "Clinton Aide Opposed Democrats' Use of Donor Club", Feb 27, 1997.

the media framed Clinton's solicitation of funds is remarkable. Clinton is framed as the first President to accept illegal contributions from a foreign source, however contemporary observers knew this was not true. The example of Clinton soliciting money from a South Korean magnate shows not only how the press viewed Clinton, but also their eagerness to criticize Clinton. Part of this is that the Republican opponents of Clinton took up the call to condemn the President for his fund-raising activities. Republicans controlled the House of Representatives and were able to consistently support the media's criticism of Clinton.

This is important to the way the media viewed and interpreted the scandal facing Clinton, and how it related to corruption on behalf of the President and the DNC. Clinton did not break new ground here, almost thirty years prior a president committed similar transgressions, so why were the media so fierce when handling Clinton as opposed to the relatively unknown actions of Nixon? The media highlighted Clinton's hypocrisy. The President railed against the practices of the Washington elite and attacked the lobbying practice with furore, as Ruth Marcus notes in her article on Clinton's hypocrisy.²⁵³ In his memoirs Clinton wrote that the Republicans gained a lot from lobbying heading into the 1996 election and complained when recalling how Newt Gingrich, the Republican House leader, refused to bring a reform act forward.²⁵⁴ The bill required lobbyists to disclose their activities and limited their ability to give lawmakers gifts.²⁵⁵ Clinton stated that the Republicans refused to bring the bill forward because they made large amounts of money "writing legislation that gave tax breaks, subsidies, and relief from environmental regulations to a wide degree of interests groups."²⁵⁶ By engaging in lobbying and exploiting special interest groups Clinton engaged in the behaviour he decried before the election and complained about

²⁵³ Marcus, "Democrats' Two Days of Fund-Raising Nets Party \$12.3 Million", May. 9, 1996.

²⁵⁴ Clinton, *My Life*, p.676.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Clinton, *My Life*, p.676.

in his memoirs years later. The media seized on this disparity with vigour. Clinton's willingness to exploit special interest groups displayed a disparity between the President's ideals and his actions. By exposing this character fault, the media eroded the legitimacy of the President, but by doing so they exposed their own ignorance as well. The press scrambled to point out that Clinton received money from dubious sources but showed hesitation to discuss the fact that Dole, Clinton's opponent, worked as the Chairman of the GOP during Nixon's fund-raising efforts with the Greek Junta.²⁵⁷ While there is no evidence that Dole knew of the illegal fund-raising practices it seems impossible that he could not know. It is telling that while Clinton faced severe criticism of his ethics, Dole did not receive a similar treatment.

Cover-up

Unlike the other scandals discussed the Lincoln Bedroom scandal is interesting in its lack of response for the White House. While the administration fierce criticism the apparatus put in place to counter the various accusations levelled at the President and his administration failed to deploy. A peculiarity noted by the press. The Response Team made limited attempts to disguise the nature of the fund-raising fiasco and often followed the familiar pattern that Bob Woodward highlights in his book *The Choice: How Bill Clinton Won*. Clinton, when faced with accusations by the press regarding his actions often revealed only a small part of the truth, providing misleading, partial or incomplete information, or denying the accusation completely.²⁵⁸ Denial became the order of the day when confronted with the reality of the fund-raising effort. The President and his administration actively worked to control the outflow of information to the press and took strategic action to counter potentially damaging information escaping without their knowledge. In many ways this scandal represents the

²⁵⁷ Anderson and Moller, "GOP: Pioneers in Foreign Fund-Raising", Nov. 7, 1996.

²⁵⁸ Woodward, *The Choice*, p.441.

culmination of their experience from Travelgate and Whitewater. Rather than engaging completely and wholeheartedly in the debate surrounding the fund-raising issue the President and his administration responded only when they needed to, and only offered a response when the repercussions for not doing so would cause immense political damage.

Attempts to cover-up the debacle came late in the 1996 election when the President faced increased criticism. When trying to defend the various connections between himself and fund-raising in Taiwan Clinton simply denied the accusation. He said that he knew of no attempt to gain money specifically from Taiwanese people, and if he knew he would have fiercely opposed it, even though the people targeted were “legally qualified donors.”²⁵⁹ However, evidence provided by White House records counter this statement and clearly indicate that the President met with the chief fund-raiser who actively targeted Asian-Americans.²⁶⁰ By highlighting that Clinton met regularly with this fund-raiser, John Huang, who in his own right was rather controversial, the media showed that Clinton wilfully misled the public regarding the nature of the meeting and the fund-raising effort.²⁶¹

The lack of response from the White House Response Team, created interest for the media and generated articles that pondered why the team failed to act in the face of a major ethics scandal.²⁶² The press theorized on why the team refused to enter the debate for a scandal that implied the President committed a federal crime to win the Presidency. Peter Baker, a journalist for *The Washington Post* and later author of *The Breach: Inside the Impeachment Trial of William Jefferson Clinton* (2000), wrote that the alarms in the White House went answered, “or perhaps were consciously ignored.”²⁶³ Learning from their

²⁵⁹ Dan Morgan and Serge F. Kovaleski, “President Unaware of Fund-Raising in Taiwan, White House Says”, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 16, 1996.

²⁶⁰ Morgan and Kovaleski, “President Unaware of Fund-Raising in Taiwan”, Nov. 16, 1996.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Peter Baker, “‘Scandal’ Alarms Went Unanswered: White House Response System Broke Down As Fund-Raising Questions Dogged Campaign”, *The Washington Post*, Dec. 3, 1996.

²⁶³ Baker, “‘Scandal’ Alarms Went Unanswered: White House Response System Broke Down”, Dec. 3, 1996.

mistakes the Response Team decided to stonewall and ignore the intensifying criticism. They thought the election was in hand so decided to avoid creating headlines by responding as they had with Whitewater and Travelgate.²⁶⁴ The staunch refusal to engage with the issue became prolific before the election concluded, afterwards they tackled it when they felt appropriate. The press latched onto the idea of a cover-up due to the refusal to strike back against the criticisms of the President's ethics. Baker framed his accusations of a cover-up as correct when the press discovered that the White House fulfilled Woodward's hypothesis by releasing incomplete, partial or misleading information. The White House withheld letters from a major player in the fund-raising effort so that they would be released as late into the election as possible. Undoubtedly the White House hoped that the letter would not be discovered until after the final vote was cast.²⁶⁵ The White House's plan succeeded as the letter did not come out until December 1996, after Clinton won the election. Furthermore, Clinton's aides decided to refer all questions regarding the fund-raising to the DNC, even though the DNC acted as an extension of the presidential campaign.²⁶⁶ Furthermore, Clinton himself actively mischaracterized the meetings with his biggest fund-raiser and a close friend, describing them as social chats. However, this proved to be false when the press discovered that the President discussed foreign policy with the two men during the meeting.²⁶⁷

During December 1996 and early 1997 the White House made several attempts to minimize the damage of the controversial financial sources funding the election. The DNC released documents that showed clearly that the declared funds raised figure is incorrect. Furthermore, the DNC and White House knew the controversial nature of the sources but forged ahead with the fund-raising effort regardless. Due to the huge backlash against their

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

fund-raising activities the DNC returned money to various sources that they deemed too controversial to keep. Notes discovered among the DNC files described why the DNC officials decided to return the money to various sources. In one case the money was deemed as an overseas contribution and is therefore illegal.²⁶⁸ In another case the DNC returned the money after the circumstances were deemed suspicious. Al Gore, the Vice President, attended a meeting at a Buddhist temple and would later claim that he did not know it was a fund-raiser. Regardless of whether Vice President Gore knew it was a fund-raiser or not he walked away with \$140,000 at the end of the event.²⁶⁹ The note provided by the DNC stated that they returned the money to their donors because they took money from a religious location. The note simply stated, “It was a temple, you idiot.”²⁷⁰ By December 21st, 1996, the DNC had returned \$1.5 million to their donors. The press regularly included updated figures in their coverage of the Lincoln Bedroom scandal. By doing so the media framed the President and the DNC as willingly accepting illegal or ethically dubious finances, and only returning the money after it was revealed that the money came from questionable sources.

The White House would continue to release partial or inaccurate information in 1997 and the media latched onto it as an attempt to actively mislead the public. On February 22nd, 1997, George Lardner Jr. published an article discussing how the White House sought documents from the Justice Department. The White House sought these documents to determine whether the Chinese government tried to influence the election by funnelling money to the DNC through the Chinese Embassy.²⁷¹ The Justice Department provided documents to the White House regarding connections between the Chinese government and

²⁶⁸ Ruth Marcus and Charles Babcock, “DNC Releases Fund-Raising Details”, *The Washington Post*, Dec. 21, 1996.

²⁶⁹ Michael A. Fletcher, “Coalition Says DNC Fund-Raising Flap is Generating “Asian Bashing””, *The Washington Post*, Oct. 23, 1996.

²⁷⁰ Marcus and Babcock, “DNC Releases Fund-Raising Details”, Dec. 21, 1996.

²⁷¹ George Lardner Jr., “Justice Dept. Probe of DNC Fund-Raising Moves Toward Grand Jury”, *The Washington Post*, Feb. 22, 1997.

American citizens. However a source that knew the content of the requested documents claimed they “shed no light” on whether the Chinese government had tried to give money to the DNC.²⁷² At the same time, former White House staff member and close friend of the Clintons, Webster Hubbell, refused to produce any of the twenty-five categories of records requested of him.²⁷³ Hubbell worked with Hillary Clinton in Arkansas at Rose Law Firm, and when Clinton was elected in 1992 he was appointed Associate Attorney General. In 1994 Hubbell was forced to resign after it was discovered he had consistently overbilled clients while working with Mrs. Clinton at Rose Law Firm. He was convicted of fraud and sent to prison in 1996. Similarly, chief fund-raiser John Huang handed over some of the forty-four categories of documents requested, but not others.²⁷⁴ Both Hubbell and Huang knew the Clintons from Arkansas, and their refusal to give documents requested of them suggested they were hiding crucial information regarding the DNC fund-raising effort. The Justice Department sought documents relating to an Indonesian business conglomerate and another close friend of the Clintons.²⁷⁵ The media displayed to the public the White House attempting to provide a counter-narrative, that the Chinese government had interfered. Simultaneously the White House refused to hand over documents that became increasingly relevant to the DNC fund-raising story. The media framed the Clintons and the White House as actively attempting to cover-up the true nature of events. Lardner Jr.’s article attempts to display to the public that the White House is trying to mislead them by creating a counter allegation that the Chinese government interfered with the election. On one hand the White House presented an allegation that offered credible threat to democracy, and with the other they obscured the ethical issues present. By showing the public this information, the media presented a

²⁷² Lardner Jr., “Justice Dept. Probe of DNC Fund-Raising”, Feb. 22, 1997.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

damaging image of the White House that eroded the legitimacy of the President by challenging the truthfulness of the narrative the White House professed.

Further questions about what the President was willing to do to cover his trail arose after Susan Schmidt discovered that Webster Hubbell received an undisclosed sum after he left the Justice Department in March 1994.²⁷⁶ The money came from Lippo Group, the Indonesian conglomerate with links to Clinton, who hired Hubbell after he was unceremoniously ousted from the White House. What Hubbell did for the money is unknown to this day, however when asked to discuss the payment during testimony in early 1996, Hubbell declined to comment.²⁷⁷ Hubbell became outraged when Republicans stated that he refused to comment because the money from Lippo encouraged him to stay silent on matters regarding the Clintons.²⁷⁸ Schmidt's article accuses a Clinton associate of accepting money for silence, so called "hush money." By framing Hubbell's acceptance of cash from Lippo Group Schmidt frames the President and his associates as engaging in unethical and illicit activity. If Schmidt's allegation was true, then one of the President's close associates had accepted money to hide potentially damaging information about the Clintons. The media framed this as further proof of a cover-up and tied it into other scandals since Hubbell had been involved in the Whitewater scandal as well. This is one of the rare instances where the press is not targeting specifically one scandal but is declaring the White House as unilaterally guilty of covering up information.

Ironically, the next act of cover-up for the media is the release of documents by the White House. In February 1997, White House aides released many documents after Clinton boldly claimed that "The Lincoln Bedroom was never 'sold'. That was one more false story

²⁷⁶ Susan Schmidt, "Hubbell Turns Up as Small-Time Player in Investigation of Huang, Lippo", *The Washington Post*, Dec. 13, 1996.

²⁷⁷ Schmidt, "Hubbell Turns Up as Small-Time Player in Investigation", Dec. 13, 1996.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

we have had to endure. And the facts will show what the truth is.”²⁷⁹ The documents revealed that the President intimately involved himself in the scandal and permitted the use of various means to draw donors.²⁸⁰ One piece of information that contradicts the President’s statement is the discovery of Clinton’s handwriting on the back of a 1995 memo from Terry McAuliffe. The note in the President’s hand states that he wanted to start “overnights” for donors who gave \$100,000 or \$50,000 immediately.²⁸¹ Clearly this contradicts Clinton’s explanation of the fund-raising issue, however, he did not back down. He responded to a question by the press asking if he could honestly say that the White House was not used as a fund-raising instrument. Clinton responded “Absolutely.”²⁸² The White House released the documents on their own accord; however, the press framed this as more evidence of a cover up. John F. Harris stated that “These disgorgements, White House aides privately acknowledge, are not motivated by pure interest in the public’s right to know. Instead, Clinton’s team is making a calculated decision about how best to handle a bad story.”²⁸³ The White House staff argued that it was better to release documents on their own terms than “wait helplessly for a shoe to drop.”²⁸⁴ Furthermore, the White House judged the documents to be released those most likely to be leaked regardless.²⁸⁵ By showing the various ways in which the President contradicted his statements and showing that he lied about various aspects of the fund-raising scandal the media again showed the aforementioned disparity. The media framed Clinton’s actions as hypocritical since he seemingly continued to hide information and deny all accusations that came before him. Ken Johnson, an aide to Republican Senator W.J. “Billy” Tauzin provided a good summary of the media’s view of Clinton’s actions. Johnson said,

²⁷⁹ John F. Harris, “Hundreds of Pages Added to White House Experiment in Disclosure”, *The Washington Post*, Feb. 26, 1997.

²⁸⁰ Harris, “Hundreds of Pages Added to White House Experiment”, Feb. 26, 1997.

²⁸¹ Woodward, *The Choice*, p.441.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Harris, “Hundreds of Pages Added to White House Experiment”, Feb. 26, 1997.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

“When you admit you’ve made a mistake, people tend to forget and move on. But when you lie and mislead, you just make it much worse.”²⁸⁶ The media repeatedly offered Clinton and the DNC the opportunity to admit their wrongdoing. Their continued resistance convinced the media of their hypocrisy and willingness to hide the truth from the public. This is clear when we examine the increasing intensity of the accusations levelled against the Clinton administration as the scandal progressed.

Cronyism

The beating heart of outrage is the connection between Clinton and friends from Arkansas that helped him to raise money and provided contacts that enabled him to launch the most ambitious campaign of his career. Without the connections Clinton developed in Arkansas the massive fund-raising effort would not have occurred since Clinton’s friends raised most of the ethically dubious donations. The press first publicized the connection between Clinton and his friends. On the October 7th, 1996, William Safire first publicized the matter, the same man who helped to break the original Whitewater story. In an article titled *The Asian Connection*, Safire discussed the various connections between the President and an Indonesian conglomerate called Lippo Group. The \$6 billion conglomerate contacted the Clintons through James Riady, the son of Mochtar Riady who sat at the head of Lippo Group. During the 1980’s the Riadys maintained an interest with a Little Rock financier called Stephen Jackson who worked in the Clinton-friendly Worthen Bank, the bank worked with Webster Hubbell.²⁸⁷ Hubbell worked as White House counsel before leaving in 1994 after allegations that he had overcharged his clients while working at Rose Law Firm with Hillary Clinton. Already it is evident that the Riadys through their various connections quickly

²⁸⁶ Baker, “‘Scandal’ Alarms Went Unanswered: White House Response System Broke Down”, Dec. 3, 1996.

²⁸⁷ Safire, “The Asian Connection”, Oct. 7, 1996.

became embroiled in the Arkansas elite culture and were gaining contacts in powerful positions.

In 1992 James Riady and his wife donated around \$200,000 in “soft money” to the Clinton campaign, and brought in their man James Huang to raise money for the Democratic campaign.²⁸⁸ Marvin Rosen, the Democratic financial chairman, stated that Huang “helped a lot in raising money in ’92.”²⁸⁹ The Riadys boasted soon after the election that they had placed a man in an influential position within the Clinton administration as Huang was named Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for International Economic Policy.²⁹⁰ Just before Huang accepted the position Lippo Group gave him almost a million dollars in severance and \$788,750 from Hip Hing Holdings, a subsidiary business in Los Angeles owned by the Riadys.²⁹¹ Huang utilized various connections that benefitted the President, in fact it was Huang who introduced the President to the South Korean magnate that donated \$250,000 to the Democrats, and also hosted the fund-raiser at the Buddhist temple that netted \$140,000 for the campaign. It quickly became apparent to the media that the Clinton and the Riady families had deep connections to each other. James Riady attended the inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993 and spent the following two months touring Washington and Indonesia with Mark Grobmeyer, a golfing friend of the President from Arkansas.²⁹² Riady wasted no time and made sure that people knew that he was a close friend of the new American President with the ability to set up deals for American entrepreneurs in the East.²⁹³ Already it is evident that the relationship between the two families was based on the ability of each to benefit the other. It is crucial to note that the then-Governor contacted the Riadys due to the family’s

²⁸⁸ Safire, “The Asian Connection”, Oct. 7, 1996.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Jeff Gerth, “Clinton and Arkansas Have Long Ties to Indonesian Family”, *The New York Times*, Oct. 16, 1996.

²⁹³ Gerth, “Clinton and Arkansas Have Long Ties to Indonesian Family”, Oct. 16, 1996.

interest in Arkansas, similarly their increasing contact after 1993 indicates that the Riadys were eager to exploit their friends' position.

By early 1996 Huang left the Commerce Department and joined the DNC as a fund-raiser. Huang faced suspicion due to the donations he generated for the DNC from Asian-Americans, which he targeted since he himself was a naturalized American born in China.²⁹⁴ Huang is the centre of the early controversy since he raised the dubious funds, however the focus soon shifted to examine Lippo Group and their connection to the President. It quickly became apparent that the President regularly met with at least one of the Riadys and Huang. In November 1996 Charles Babcock revealed in *The Washington Post* that since 1993 James Riady had visited the President 15 to 20 times.²⁹⁵ While it is not uncommon for presidents to meet people they deem important, nor is 15 to 20 times in 4 years particularly much, it struck the media as curious since Riady did not involve himself in a professional capacity with the White House. Certainly, at the same time there is a hint of America's race problem present and the fund-raising fiasco raised issues of "Asian bashing." Jeff Gerth, a major contributor to the Whitewater scandal, stated that the problem apparent with the Riady family's involvement with the Clintons was that they're foreigners with ties to other countries.²⁹⁶ The co-chair of the National Conference of Korean American Leaders, Jocelyn Hong, summarized the race issue succinctly when she stated:

All campaigns raise money from a variety of ethnic communities. The irony is that when Caucasian Americans raise money from other Caucasians, it is called gaining political power. But somehow, when Asian Pacific Americans begin to participate in providing financial support, we are accused of being foreigners attempting to infiltrate U.S. policymaking.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Fletcher, "Coalition Says DNC Fund-Raising Flap is Generating "Asian Bashing"", Oct. 23, 1996.

²⁹⁵ Charles Babcock, "Indonesian Businessmen Riady Met With Clinton to Discuss Business", *The Washington Post*, Nov. 5, 1996.

²⁹⁶ Gerth, "Clinton and Arkansas Have Long Ties to Indonesian Family", Oct. 16, 1996.

²⁹⁷ Fletcher, "Coalition Says DNC Fund-Raising Flap is Generating "Asian Bashing"", Oct. 23, 1996.

While this argument tends to fall down in the face of the evidence that would soon come to light that Huang had raised funds from several sources that were considered suspicious and the DNC would return millions of dollars, it is important to note that the racial issue certainly contributed to controversy surrounding the President's relationship with the Riadys. But what really raised concerns for the media with the scandal by late 1996 was that the President was abusing connections to foreign magnates in order to win an election and his meetings with the various members of the family and Huang seemed to confirm this suspicion.

The President attempted to characterize the meetings as nothing more than social chats between friends, and they discussed nothing relevant to the executive office.²⁹⁸ However, this turned out to be false since the President had discussed foreign policy with the two men, and actively pursued legislation based on the advice given to him. During a meeting in June 1993, Riady discussed Indonesia as well as China, two places where he maintained business interests.²⁹⁹ Furthermore, under Clinton China's "most-favoured-nation" status was annually renewed for three years.³⁰⁰ This benefitted the Riadys since they owned two twin skyscrapers in Hong Kong and controlled four companies whose shares traded on the Hong Kong stock exchange.³⁰¹ If Clinton refused to renew the status it would damage the Chinese economy and in turn Hong Kong, since one third of all Chinese exports came to the United states, if the U.S. placed restrictions upon China the Hong Kong economy would enter a tailspin.³⁰² Lippo also owned half interest in a Hong Kong bank along with the Chinese government and also had plans to launch a series of hotels, a power plant and even an airport in Hong Kong.³⁰³ By annually renewing the "most-favoured-nation" status Clinton directly

²⁹⁸ Babcock, "Indonesian Businessmen Riady Met With Clinton", Nov. 5, 1996.

²⁹⁹ Charles Babcock and Paul Blustein, "More Complex Tie Seen Between Clinton, Riady", *The Washington Post*, Nov. 6, 1996.

³⁰⁰ Babcock and Blustein, "More Complex Tie Seen Between Clinton, Riady", Nov. 6, 1996.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

contributed to the continuing financial prosperity of Lippo Group and in turn Riady. This is a clear example of a “quid pro quo” relationship, and fits into the relationship of favours that James McDougal described when discussing his relationship with then-Governor Clinton in the 1980’s.³⁰⁴ However, this is not the sole example of a quid pro quo relationship, which became particularly egregious during this scandal. Meddoff is one example mentioned earlier, the exchange of money in return for action for an action was certainly apparent in that case since \$10 million dollars was exchanged for aid flights to Cuba.³⁰⁵ Clinton stated that quid pro quo agreements never took place, the only thing a donor received was a respectful hearing.³⁰⁶ However, this did not stand up when the press revealed that Clinton offered various favours in exchange for money that would help the Clinton campaign. In one example two Boston businessmen, Alan Leventhal and Fred Siegal, met with Clinton in the White House after raising \$3 million for the re-election campaign.³⁰⁷ In exchange for their efforts Clinton rewarded the two with a fantastic deal. President Clinton gave their company Energy Capital Partners the main administrator role for a new \$200 million loan program by Clinton’s Department of House and Urban Development.³⁰⁸ The deal allowed them to develop their business with the loan, providing the company with access to millions in profit with next to no risk. In fact, if the deal went wrong Energy Capital Partners would be paid back before the government itself.³⁰⁹ While this may be explained as coincidental, other examples peppered the news such as a memo that showed Huang used the president as an incentive to gain donors. Mike Mitoma, the mayor of Carson, California, asked “Is it possible to have Lee [John H.K. Lee, the head of Cheong Am America] meet Clinton privately for 30 minutes in Korea? Is possible let me know...what kind of fund-raising would be

³⁰⁴ Gerth and Engelberg, “U.S Investigating Clinton’s Links to Arkansas S&L”, Nov 2, 1993.

³⁰⁵ Kelly, “Follow the Money”, Feb. 16, 1997.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

appropriate... Also what is the dress and how should the donation check be made payable to.”³¹⁰ One week later, Lee made a \$250,000 donation that the DNC later returned.³¹¹ This damaged the White House and the President’s legitimacy as it appeared that foreign and domestic policy could be influenced by the highest bidder. The media seized on this with a fervour since the threat to democracy itself as well as the health of the nation was on the line. Reading the articles published during this period portrays the state of America as dire, and the actions of the President are openly declared scandalous. The press even used term “crony” against the President when discussing his actions.

Cronyism became a pressing concern for the American media, especially in light of Clinton’s incredible TV ad campaign, that Bob Woodward said, “pierced into the soul of middle America and the homes of people who often did not read political coverage in their daily newspapers or watch the evening television news.”³¹² There were three pressing concerns for the media with this scandal in regards to cronyism: the relationship between Clinton and Riady, the quid pro quo relationship Clinton formed with donors, and the Arkansas culture being imported to Washington. The relationship between Clinton and Riady is problematic due to the various connections the Riadys had with China and Indonesia, as well as the undue influence that the family exerted over U.S. politics through the advice during “social chats.” The media told their readers the White House is eroding democracy; it is not the will of the people but the will of interest groups that would decide foreign policy and who became president. This can be seen in how the press presented the influence that Riady exerted when dealing with China, since they make it clear that Riady influenced the president to renew the “most-favoured-nation” status. Furthermore, the family’s connections allowed the President to generate an extraordinary amount of money for his campaign and

³¹⁰ Marcus and Babcock, “DNC Releases Fund-Raising Details”, Dec. 21, 1996.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Woodward, *The Choice*, p.437.

was therefore able to outspend his opponents in key swing states that allowed him to pull ahead in the 1996 election.

Money was later viewed as so influential in the election that Bob Woodward put it second on the list of key things that won the election for Clinton.³¹³ The quid pro quo, or relationship of favours, that Clinton established with the Riady family and other political players did not sit well with the press. The various examples provided show the President only acting after he received money from the donor created a picture for the public that domestic and foreign policy could be bought for the right price. The media deemed this environment as fatal to democracy and is why they attempted to ingrain it in the public consciousness that the President's behaviour is simply unacceptable. However, despite the medias best intents this argument did not particularly affect the discourse surrounding cronyism or the Lincoln Bedroom scandal. For the most part the public seemed to be unreceptive to this information. For whatever reason the public simply did not care about more corrupt politics; they became burnt out after years of scandal reporting. The United States has a huge enterprise in lobbying that has been a consistent part of the political procedure for a long time. By examining the politicians who consistently push back against gun reform or medical care for example, and then examining who regularly contributes to them we can discover why they may vote in certain ways. Often these politicians are supported by the National Rifle Associate or a pharmaceutical company which would provide and explanation as to why they vote the way they do. I believe that the public viewed this as no different. Clinton received money from Asian-Americans in large numbers and this popular base with money coming from seemingly ordinary people did not seem as dangerous as any other political lobbying. However, the media did view it as different since the people buying their place at the table were able to influence policy because of their money and often belonged to special interest groups that

³¹³ Woodward, *The Choice*, p.439.

were used the position to attempt to subvert the law, for example, when the President lifted the ban on aid flights to Cuba. Finally, the President's decision to carry forward his practices and the culture of Arkansas struck the press as dangerous and disgusting. One reported stated that the stories surrounding Clinton's election operation caused his defenders to argue that "it was all perfectly legal, if perfectly revolting."³¹⁴ Michael Kelly, a consistent critic of the President's fund-raising operation, stated that:

"Critics maintained that these things [Whitewater, Travelgate and the Lincoln Bedroom scandal] did amount to something definite and significant: they were indications that the president and the advisors closest to him had a predilection for corrupt practices and the abuse of power. This predilection, critics suggested, was rooted in the crony-centred practices of the Arkansas state-house and in the politics of total war waged by the Clintonites."³¹⁵

The transfer of Arkansas practices did not sit well with the press. Again, the clash between the Washington and Arkansas cultures is significant and drastically effected how the press viewed the President and his operation. The language used by the press such as "rooted" and "Arkansas state-house" create the image of a small group of elites that have total control over the area they are in. This is only furthered by the term "total war" which conjures the image of the President using all his powers to abuse the system and warp it to his own machinations. This did not sit well with the press or the rest of the Washington elite that did not appreciate the disruption to their way of operating and wanted the president, regardless of where they came from, to adapt to their way of operating. By presenting this image to their readers they portrayed the President as someone who is willing to contort the system through a web of Arkansas cronies in order to gain re-election.

³¹⁴ Kelly, "Follow the Money", Feb. 16, 1997.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

For the White House and the press, the Lincoln Bedroom scandal acts as the culmination of both Travelgate and Whitewater. Both sides learnt from the earlier scandals and used them to inform their responses to various situations. The White House did not leap to respond to the media as they had before, they restrained themselves. Their restraint benefitted them as the media had nothing to respond to and perpetuate the cycle of misdemeanour and response. By allowing the criticism from the Washington press to roll over them the administration freed themselves from the burden of having to face constant questions or clarify statements. Instead they focused their efforts on the re-election, to Clinton's benefit. This scandal, unlike the others, happened over a relatively short period, starting a few months before the 1996 election and carrying through only a few months into Clinton's second term. Unlike the other scandals where the White House constantly tried to control the narrative, they stonewalled the press and let the silence speak for them.

The press did not learn from earlier scandals. The media continually tried to rouse public interest in the Lincoln Bedroom scandal, however it seemingly made no difference to the American people. Public approval ratings shows that President Clinton maintained an above 50% approval rating during the period of this scandal, from June 1996 to February 1997.³¹⁶ In fact, during this period the lowest approval rating Clinton received was 54%.³¹⁷ I suggest that despite having press and oppositional support this scandal did not become as big as it could have because the public were worn down from scandal. For Clinton's first term the mainstream news media consistently reported on the President's transgressions, both big and small. After being bombarded for years the public may have not been interested in another scandal. Harris theorises in *The Survivor* that the public did not react as explosively towards

³¹⁶ "Clinton's Approval Ratings", *Gallup*, (accessed: 23.03.20).

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the Clinton Affair because they believed what Clinton said was the reason behind the criticism.³¹⁸ That is, political opponents of the Clintons were trying to bring down the Presidency, and in the case of Starr he was more interested in hurting the Clintons than unveiling the truth.³¹⁹ The public seemingly had the same mindset when considering the Lincoln Bedroom scandal. This mindset can be seen in the various polls from January 1997, soon after Clinton had taken up office for his second term. A survey reported upon in *The Washington Post* states that more than half surveyed, 54 percent, said that “Clinton is not honest and trustworthy, and an equally large majority don’t believe that he has high personal and moral ethical standards – percentages unchanged since the summer.”³²⁰ While the Lincoln Bedroom scandal had not run its full course, it appears that ordinary Americans had a “wait-and-see” attitude towards Clinton.³²¹ It is clear that despite the associated press’ best efforts ordinary Americans had been worn down by the constant reporting. For four years they faced nothing but the constant call for Clinton to be brought down by Robert Fiske Jr. or Kenneth Starr, from not only the media but from Senate Republicans as well. They had simply had enough and preferred to judge him on what they saw, rather than what they were told.

³¹⁸ Harris, *The Survivor*, pp.311-2.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Morrin, “Clinton’s Approval Rating at Highest Mark since ‘93”, Jan. 19, 1997.

³²¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

The Clinton presidency is one of scandal. From the very beginning of his presidency in 1993 to the end in 2001 Clinton faced controversy and scandal in abundance. The media and Republicans worked together to keep Clinton's scandals in the headlines, creating a desire for scandal that permeated the public consciousness. This is a legacy of the Clinton era. In the years since Clinton departed the White House scandals have been a consistent part of the American news media, often dominating the headlines. Indeed, scandals have also become more acceptable because of Clinton. Leading into the 1988 election Democratic Presidential candidate Gary Hart was forced to drop out of the race due to a sex scandal. The media framed Hart's transgression as irredeemable. Ultimately, Hart had to leave the race as it destroyed his credibility. Clinton faced far more severe scandals that questioned the role of the executive office and criticized his character in poignant and intense ways. The White House administration also faced a new scrutiny. Members of the White House faced increased criticism for their actions, the media often equated the White House staff as equally guilty in the various Clinton scandals of the 1990's.

This is present in modern politics. The factors that made it more likely for scandals to be reported on are present in the modern world. The current President, Donald Trump, has at the time of writing low approval ratings sitting at 44 percent.³²² The media also faces relatively low congestion unless faced with a major international incident. The mainstream media has the resources to constantly monitor the President and report on their every move. In many ways the modern media now replicates what *Fox News* did during the Clinton presidency. *Fox* delivered to a partisan audience what the viewer wanted, confirmation of their beliefs. David Greenberg states that while *Fox News* would not make a huge impact for

³²² "Trump Job Approval", *Gallup*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/203207/trump-job-approval-weekly.aspx>, (accessed: 23.03.20).

several years after its launch in 1996, they managed to build a substantial viewer base. *Fox* achieved this by “hyping the assorted scandals to its conservative viewers.”³²³ The intense coverage of President Trump and his scandals by mainstream news outlets is a direct legacy of the Clinton administration that opened the door to a new scrutiny of the executive office.

Corruption, Disparity and Hypocrisy

There are some continuities between scandals but first and foremost the media pushed the idea of disparity. The press increasingly highlighted how unacceptable this “gap between who he said he was and how he actually behaved” was.³²⁴ The Travelgate scandal allowed the media to display the disparity between Clinton’s actions by contrasting his stated reasons for dismissing the original Travel Office staff with the media’s framing of the “real” reason. Clinton stated that the staff were dismissed because the job could be done with three people rather than the seven employed by the office. When the press revealed that the President’s friend encouraged him to replace the staff with those “less sympathetic to the press”, it revealed a disparity between his words and his deeds.³²⁵ Friedman, who revealed the “less sympathetic” statement, framed this revelation as proof of the President’s selfishness. The media framed Clinton as willing to dismiss the original staff for personal benefit. However, there were more complex reasons behind the dismissals. As mentioned earlier the members of the Travel Office were career staff who worked within the White House regardless of who the President was. Furthermore, many members of the press were close friends with people who worked in the Travel Office. Clinton himself recognized this later in his memoirs. He stated, “Many in the press felt the Travel Office staff virtually worked for them, not the White House, and felt they should have at least been notified, if not fully consulted, as the

³²³ Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, p.422.

³²⁴ Friedman, “Time to Regroup”, May. 29, 1993.

³²⁵ Friedman, “White House Errors Cited”, Jul. 1, 1993.

investigation proceeded.”³²⁶ The framing from the media of Clinton’s Travelgate disparity questions his character and his legitimacy. The framing questioned whether Clinton had the ability to lead the public if he was able to turn act as a different person behind closed doors.

Whitewater also had elements of disparity in the way the press reported the scandal. The disparity present in the Whitewater scandal was the gap between the Clintons’ earlier declarations of disgust that the wealthy used their influence and connections to make money during the era of deregulation in the 1980s. Clinton stated in his 1992 inaugural address that America needed to change, they needed to look after ordinary Americans. He directly contrasted his ideals of what America could be with what America had been during the 1980’s. For the press the disparity came into play when they compared these statements with the Clintons’ Ozark deal. The Clintons land development and the relationship they had with James McDougal were framed as confirmation of the Clintons’ hypocrisy. The First Family spent the 1980’s railing against use of connections to gain wealth, and yet they appeared to have attempted the same thing. The difference between what the First Family presented and what was “real” was of interest to the media, and they considered it vital for the public to know. Hence why they published so many articles highlighting how the Clintons used Whitewater to offset tax and so on. The framing of this element of the scandal eroded the President’s legitimacy by targeting the ideals he professed and showing that he allegedly did not practice them.

Lastly, the media framed the Lincoln Bedroom scandal as further proof of the President’s hypocrisy and the disparity between his words and his actions. Again, the press contrasted Clinton’s statements regarding the 1980s with his willingness to involve himself in fund-raising that gave perks to interest groups with enough money. The press specifically

³²⁶ Clinton, *My Life*, p.520.

framed the various ethically dubious donations to the DNC as proof that Clinton was willing to accept money from almost any source. They only added to this frame by continually releasing updated figures of returns to donors from the DNC. William Safire even branded Clinton the first United States President to ever be “personally involved in the solicitation of a major illegal contribution.”³²⁷ The press gave him this label even though it was not strictly true since contemporaries within the media contested this narrative. Jack Anderson and Jan Moller pointed out that Clinton was not the first, rather the Republican President Richard Nixon was.³²⁸ Regardless, the majority of the contemporary media continued to frame Clinton’s ongoing donation controversy as proof of the gap between his ideals and his practices. This further challenged the President’s authority and legitimacy by accusing him of hypocrisy, a claim that limited the executive office’s ability to command.

Cover-ups and Obscuring the Truth

The media consistently framed White House attempts to control the narrative as proof that they were hiding sensitive information from the public. During the Travelgate saga the White House took several actions as an attempt to mitigate the damage that the scandal was having on the White House. This included subpoenaing documents so that the press could not access them since the leaking of a subpoenaed document is a federal crime. The media framed this as the White House’s attempt to hide potentially damaging information from the public eye. Ironically, the decision to hide documents from the polity only increased media scrutiny of the White House’s decisions. Further proof of the White House and the Clintons’ alleged desire to control the narrative and obscure the truth came with the Watkins memo. The memo revealed that despite Mrs. Clinton’s claims of being a concerned observer she had been intimately involved in the dismissal of the office.³²⁹ The memo revealed she demanded

³²⁷ Safire, “The Asian Connection”, Oct. 7, 1996.

³²⁸ Anderson and Moller, “GOP: Pioneers in Foreign Fund-Raising”, Nov. 7, 1996.

³²⁹ Mitchell, “Issue-Oriented First Lady”, Jan. 6, 1996.

Watkins remove the Travel Office staff as soon as possible.³³⁰ The press framed this as proof of the White House's attempts to hide the truth from the polity. It further framed Travelgate as truly scandalous since the White House seemed to have told an outright lie, something the press had caught them out on. The framing of the cover-up aspect confirms White House counsellors' statements in 1993. Any new information would be framed as proof of a cover-up.³³¹ The continuing revelations regarding the Travelgate scandal allowed the press to legitimize other claims surrounding the scandal. The framing of allegedly corrupt and crony actions gained legitimacy considering the White House's attempts to control the narrative.

Alleged attempts to obscure the nature of Whitewater had the same effect. The handling of the Foster files and the attempt to control the narrative with the Isikoff piece added legitimacy to claims from the media that Whitewater was more than just a failed land deal. The mishandling of Foster's private files that contained information about Whitewater led to various conspiracy theories surrounding what the files contained. Combined with Foster's tragic suicide in July 1994, theories as to why he took his life sprung up that connected his suicide to Whitewater and the Clintons. Many of these conspiracy theories are still in circulation today in the "Clinton body count" conspiracy theory that is usually circulated online by extreme conservatives. Similarly, the Isikoff piece and the subsequent release of documents that proved the White House had not released everything as they claimed framed the White House as deliberately hiding information. Statements from Mark Fabiani that they had released all the documents in Foster's office, the unreleased documents were not in his office only made the White House appear more guilty of media accusations.³³² The framing of Whitewater's cover-up component had the same function as Travelgate. The various attempts by the White House to control the narrative through selectively releasing

³³⁰ Watkins, "Excerpt From a Memo", Jan. 4, 1996.

³³¹ Clinton, *My Life*, p.573.

³³² Woodward, *Shadow*, p.285.

information and carefully managing documents backfired. The media were able to successfully frame the attempts as proof of some transgression, which helped to legitimize their claims of ethical wrongdoing.

The Lincoln Bedroom scandal is different to the other two scandals examined in this thesis. Unlike the previous two, Clinton and the White House did not attempt to control the narrative immediately. Rather they waited and allowed the media to criticize them and frame the issue however they liked. By not responding the White House limited the media's ability to perpetuate the scandal by analysing and discussing the responses to their accusations. When the White House did respond and were forced to return money to donors that were deemed to high risk to keep, the response was measured and purposeful. Clinton maintained that he did not use the Lincoln Bedroom as an incentive to gain donors, even when confronted with evidence to the contrary. While his refusal to change his story added legitimacy to the press' accusations of ethical transgressions, it limited the media's ability to respond. The press could not accuse him to trying to cover-up because he maintained his story despite their claims that he was misleading people. Instead their focus shifted away from Clinton and the White House to Clinton's associates and the DNC. The allegations from Republicans and the media that Webster Hubbell had accepted "hush money" so he would not reveal damaging information about the Clintons is remarkable. Hubbell's refusal to comment on the money and his refusal to hand over documents allowed the media to legitimize their accusations by proxy. They could not directly accuse Clinton of a cover-up, so they accused the DNC and Clinton's associates.

Cronyism and the “Relationship of Favours”

Cronyism also played a major part in each of the scandals, often being the original action that instigated media interest in the scandal, often in unison with corruption. In the Travelgate scandal cronyism played a major role. The decision to dismiss the office was informed by the Clintons friend Harry Thomason. Thomason had an interest in an airline company and regularly complained to the Clintons that the Travel Office refused to consider his company for travel arrangements.³³³ Furthermore, Clinton’s friend Catherine Cornelius recommended replacing the staff with those “less sympathetic to the press.”³³⁴ Thomason was even provided the White House with the accusation that the Travel Office had committed acts of “gross financial mismanagement.”³³⁵ The undue influence that Clinton’s allies exerted over the White House and their decisions led to the dismissal of the original staff. The media framed these connections as inappropriate and dangerous to the American system. The press highlighted the connections between Thomason, Cornelius and the Clintons to display that the First Family and the White House was acting on the advice of their friends. Acting on the advice of friends is not a transgression. However, acting on the advice of a friend to whom you owed a favour was. Thomason had produced Clinton’s 1992 campaign film *The Man From Hope* that acted as the centrepiece of the 1992 Democratic National Convention. Similarly, Cornelius had helped pay off some of Clinton’s gubernatorial debt.³³⁶ The media framed this exchange as unacceptable for the polity because the President was seemingly acting on the advice of friends who had helped him in the past. By helping them in return Clinton was engaging in a dangerous act of cronyism.

³³³ Friedman, “White House Errors Cited”, Jul. 1, 1993.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Devroy, “Staff Denies Clinton Ally Had Role in Firings”, May. 21, 1993.

³³⁶ Applebome, “Unwelcome Limelight for a Little Rock Travel Agency”, May. 21, 1993.

Whitewater has similar components of cronyism. The Clinton's connections caused problems when they came to Washington and the press started to investigate their Ozark deal. The media investigated the Clintons past and discovered their past with their associate James McDougal. McDougal described their relationship as one of favours, they helped each other by using their positions to gain status, wealth or power. For example, Clinton allegedly pressured David Hale, a municipal judge in Arkansas, to grant McDougal's wife Susan McDougal a \$300,000 loan. The media framed these connections and this abuse of power to challenge his legitimacy. If Clinton was involved in illegal acts such as pressuring someone to make a loan they knew would not be used as intended, he would not be fit to lead the country. The media framed the cronyism aspect of Whitewater as a character fault of the President. These criticisms eroded the legitimacy of the President and again restricted his ability to act. The media's allegations of cronyism were joined by Republican Senators who used Whitewater as a tool to damage the President's image. Chief among the Senators who used Whitewater in this way was Jim Leach. Leach consistently used Whitewater to criticize the character of the President and erode his legitimacy. Leach described how Clinton's alleged decision to give "favoured inattention" to Madison S&L cost the federal taxpayer \$50 million.³³⁷ By framing the Whitewater scandal in this way, he creates the image that Clinton is acting purely in his own interest. Rather than take a loss to his finances by letting Whitewater run its course, Leach accuses the President of pushing the bill onto the citizens of Arkansas. This eroded Clinton's legitimacy by contrasting his idealist vision of America with the alleged reality of what he practiced in Arkansas.

Lastly, the Lincoln Bedroom scandal also had elements of cronyism that mirror both the Travelgate scandal and the Whitewater scandal. Clinton's connections to friends from Arkansas allowed him to raise large funds for his 1996 re-election campaign. John Huang and

³³⁷ Leach, "A Special Counsel for Whitewater", Dec. 31, 1993.

his former employer Lippo Group used their connections with the Asian American community to raise funds for Clinton. However, Clinton's fundraising was not limited to just this community. The President accepted donations from various sources, some of which raised ethical questions surrounding what the President was willing to do in order to achieve re-election. One example is Clinton accepting a \$10 million donation in exchange for lifting the ban on aid flights to Cuba.³³⁸ This is a clear example of the relationship of favours that McDougal mentioned when describing his relationship with Clinton in the 1980's. The media framed this as an example of the President's willingness to make quid pro quo deals if it benefitted him. Regardless of how ethically dubious the source of funding was. By framing the cronyism aspects of the scandal in this way the media challenged Clinton's legitimacy as he appeared willing to sell domestic and international policy for the right price.

Cultural Clash

Cultural clash was present in all the scandals. The clash between the Arkansas associate culture and the Washington meritocratic culture resonated through every aspect of scandal framing. Travelgate was the first clash that Clinton had with the media that took on a cultural component. In his memoir Clinton wrote that, "The Travel Office affair proved to be a particularly powerful example of the culture clash between the new White House and the established political press."³³⁹ Continually Clinton faced backlash for his decision to employ and promote his own staff over those that were already established in Washington. In the Travelgate scandal the decision to employ his cousin as the temporary head of the office after dismissing Billy Dale caused major friction for already stated reasons. However, by refusing to work within the established Washington system and instead utilising his own understanding of government from Arkansas, he created friction. Further example of this can

³³⁸ Kelly, "Follow the Money", Feb. 16, 1997.

³³⁹ Clinton, *My Life*, p.520.

be seen in how the media responded to John Huang's employment in the White House and later as chief fund-raiser of the DNC. The media went to great lengths to highlight that Huang and Lippo Group soon told prospective clients that they were close with the President. While this ties into cronyism, the way that Huang and Lippo Group's boasting is framed shows the clash between cultures. The established Washington elite showed disdain in their articles for Huang and others sudden boost to the top of the political ladder. While a smaller explanation for why the media framed the three scandals the way they did, the clash between cultures acts as a subconscious motivation for the media and Clinton's political opponents.

Conclusion

While the Clinton Affair came to dominate the narrative of the Clinton presidency. The relationship between the President and a 22 year old intern has become a cultural touchstone for the Clinton Presidency, but also for the 1990s. However, the three scandals presented in this thesis attempt to change the narrative. For six years between 1992 and 1998 the press and political opponents focused intently on the Clintons and their scandals. By focusing on the Clinton impeachment scholars have not acknowledged the process that led to that scandal. The press and the President's political opponents framed the Travelgate, Whitewater and Lincoln Bedroom scandal in different ways. However, they continually focused on alleged acts of corruption, cover-up and cronyism. All of these were present during the Clinton Affair and were publicized during the period and afterwards. However, by focusing on solely the Clinton Affair scholars have failed to see how the press created an atmosphere that allowed such intense scrutiny of the President.

The media and Clinton's opponent's opinion of the man can best be summarized by Bob Dole, Clinton's opponent in the 1996 election. Bob Woodward went to interview Dole three months after the 1996 election, on March 10, 1997. Woodward asked Dole what he thought about the unfolding campaigns scandal. Dole responded by saying, "It's mind-

boggling to somebody who follows it every day and you sort of, for a while you want to leap out and say something.”³⁴⁰ A sentiment that many in the Washington elite would agree with. When asked what he thought about Clinton Dole said, “He’s sort of a likable rogue.” He continued to say, “He’s always pushing the envelope. Go as far as you can go. “Nobody’s going to catch me. I didn’t do anything wrong.” And it doesn’t look like that’s what happened. Somebody did something wrong.”³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Quoted in Woodward, *The Choice*, p.445.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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