



The Death of American Virtue: Clinton vs. Starr

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Ten years after one of the most polarizing political scandals in American history, author Ken Gormley offers an insightful, balanced, and revealing analysis of the events leading up to the impeachment trial of President William Jefferson Clinton. From Ken Starr's initial Whitewater investigation through the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit to the Monica Lewinsky affair, *The Death of American Virtue* is a gripping chronicle of an ever-escalating political feeding frenzy.

In exclusive interviews, Bill Clinton, Ken Starr, Monica Lewinsky, Paula Jones, Susan McDougal, and many more key players offer candid reflections on that period. Drawing on never-before-released records and documents—including the Justice Department's internal investigation into Starr, new details concerning the death of Vince Foster, and evidence from lawyers on both sides—Gormley sheds new light on a dark and divisive chapter, the aftereffects of which are still being felt in today's political climate.

The Death of American Virtue: Clinton vs. Starr Details

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Aaron Million says

Riveting book about the scandals that engulfed, and threatened to derail, the Clinton presidency. Gormley interviewed almost every major player involved in the Whitewater, Paula Jones, and Monica Lewinsky scandals. Gormley does a superb job at deftly narrating and interweaving each of the sordid messes that resulted in a House impeachment of Clinton. Gormley steers clear of giving opinions, and does not take a side throughout this 690 page tome. He lets the facts speak for themselves - and gives equal treatment to Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and his fellow prosecutors, as well as to the entire Clinton White House, and also to Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky, and the McDougals. It is painful to realize how much time and money was taken up by this giant mess, when 9/11 occurred in the not-too-distant future.

Jack says

This is THE book on the Clinton scandal(s). It's as even-handed as one can be. Gormley thoroughly analyses all that went into the scandals of the Clinton years, how they were investigated, and how the President and his team responded to all of that. One really gets a sense of how good we had it in the 1990s: we could actually fight ruthlessly over what a guy did with his penis, all the while knowing that many of the people going after the guy with the uncontrollable penis could not control their own penises. This really was a political sausage fest. Now we fight over terrorism, wars, massive deficits, etc. Kind of hard to believe we all took the penis thing so seriously in light of our more difficult worldly situation. A few other things. Ken Starr wasn't the horrible person he was made out to be by others. Sure, a right winger of far right proportions, but seems to have done his job with an underappreciated fairness. He had real flaws, though: he was a HORRIBLE manager who did not focus on this task like he should have. He also filled the office with people who clearly were anti-Clinton (but then, aren't prosecutors usually "anti" whoever they're investigating?). You know who really IS a horrible person? Linda Tripp. There wasn't one thing in this book about her that made me like her even a little. I read this book along with a ideologically diverse crowd, and no one - left, right, or middle - seemed to think she was even slightly decent. Paula Jones? Ick. And although I like Bill Clinton in a lot of ways, all of the nonsense of this book came about because he couldn't control himself. It really is amazing considering he KNEW people were after him. The Gormley could have better covered the impeachment trial, but "The Breach," which came out in late 90s/early 00s, does that just fine.

Ashley says

Breathless. This book left me breathless; I was always in a rush to read the next page, the next chapter. No wonder nearly everyone spoke to the author, they could trust him to write an even-handed and balanced account. Wow, what an amazing read.

Mary says

Although I thought I had followed this episode closely at the time, most of what is revealed in this excellent book was new to me. It is a horrifying tale of a turning point in American history, when partisan politics became so toxic that the president was pursued into a closet in an effort to unseat him. Laws were repeatedly broken in the guise of upholding the law. One wonders why anyone would want to be a politician after witnessing this persecution. And one's faith in the rule of law is utterly destroyed by this story. The only saving grace is that the vast majority of Americans were appalled by the way the president was treated and few supported the effort to force him out of office. The author of this book has done a remarkable job with this complex undertaking. He interviewed everyone at length and he tells the story in a consistently engaging way. Although he remains sympathetic to Starr to the end, he also makes it clear that he made many grave errors and was irresponsible for taking so long with the investigation because he viewed it as a part-time job.

Nannie Bittinger says

Well researched, interesting and seemed to be fairly presented but in the end, I had to quit. It was just making me sick to read about these political types trying to see what they can get away with and everything is someone else's fault. I felt like I should take a shower! YUCK! No reflection on the author's talent intended. I'm not sure if that era was 'the Death of American Virtue' (Did it ever exist?) but it is certainly when the news media started publishing the obituary!

Susan Liston says

Well I have to give this fellow five stars because I don't know how you write a book on what starts out with something that could have been oh-so-boring and evolves into something oh-so-tawdry and keep it a page turner all the way through. And at the same time stay as level and unbiased as he did. Quite a feat. For anyone confused about what the Whitewater thing was, anyway, and how it turned into a truly bizarre sex scandal soap opera taking place in the highest offices in the land, well, here you go. It's all here and you couldn't make it up.

Alan says

I have just finished reading Joe Gormley's book, "The Death of American Virtue: Clinton Vs. Starr."

This book is surely the definitive account of the sad saga in U.S. history known as the Lewinsky scandal. Ken Gormley, a law professor, interviewed almost all the principle players in the drama (including some now deceased) -- President Clinton, Ken Starr and his wife, Lewinsky as well as both her parents, other prosecutors and judges, Linda Tripp, Susan McDougall, Webster Hubbell, Lew Merletti, head of the Secret Service, Henry Hyde and many many others. The only people who apparently declined the opportunity to speak to him were Hillary and Chelsea Clinton.

This book is exhaustive and exhausting but ultimately tremendously rewarding. Gormley has a flair for the dramatic. His descriptions of court scenes, the impeachment trial itself, the depositions and other background

discussions read as if they come from the pages of a thriller. One knows the end -- but one is still gripped.

This is also a fair book. All of the main characters are given ample time to reflect and their views are fairly recounted. We get Clinton's extensive musings and his perspective years later, but also that of Starr and the other chief prosecutors.

Gormely also explodes a few minor bombshells. We learn that an investigation into the conduct of the Starr prosecutors concluded they had far overstepped their legal bounds in their first interrogation of Monica Lewinsky. They ignored her repeated requests to speak to her lawyer, bludgeoning her with crude threats of 27 years in prison while bringing her to the brink of mental collapse. Republican judges quashed the report and managed to keep it sealed to protect the privacy of the prosecutors who themselves had totally trashed the privacy of their victims.

This was not the only case of prosecutorial misconduct by the Starr team who in general comported themselves like bullies and thugs unbound by legal constraint, trampling over the privacy and rights of their victims while conducting their legal vendetta against the president.

We also learn about the strange and sinister death in prison of Jim McDougall, the rogue that set the Whitewater scandal in motion. McDougall was seriously mentally ill and a substance abuser -- also a crook and serial liar who would say anything to advance himself. But he did not deserve to die in a prison hole of medical neglect from a prison staff that was criminally negligent. His medical file strangely "disappeared" and was never recovered. Years later, a prison psychologist revealed that he had received a strange visit from an official investigator who threatened him not to reveal what he knew.

None of the characters of this awful saga emerge looking very good. Clinton still refuses to take full responsibility for his serial womanizing, some of which comes across as crude sexual harassment if not outright abuse. I was angry at Clinton at the time for wasting the opportunity history had given him to be a truly significant president. He was and remains a self-indulgent man with a vast sense of entitlement. Never in this book did I feel remotely sympathetic toward him.

Starr comes over as a sanctimonious, holier-than-thou crusader willing to do anything to bring the president down. Starr had acted as a legal adviser to Paula Jones before being appointed as special prosecutor, giving him a clear conflict of interest. He was clearly motivated by politics. Yet Starr was a "moderate" among the group of far-right zealots he hired as his senior prosecutors.

Lewinsky comes across as a victim. Sure, she made a big mistake but she was just a kid who deluded herself into thinking she was in love with a much older man who ought to have known better. She did not deserve to be hounded, trashed and victimized in the way that she was.

Susan McDougall, who went to jail for 18 months rather than telling Starr what he wanted to hear, is one of the few heroines of the story.

One thing that emerges clearly from this book is that when Hillary Clinton spoke of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" out to bring down her husband -- words that I had always previously dismissed as political hyperbole -- she was in fact speaking nothing less than the truth. Conservative financiers, judges, newspapers, activists, legislators, publicists, general trouble-makers and prosecutors, all motivated by acute hatred of the 42nd president, combined to bring about this crisis. The author demonstrates that numerous opportunities to settle the case honorably were sabotaged by right-wing extremists determined to press the scandal to a crisis and so depose a twice democratically-elected president.

So what was this all about in the end? Henry Hyde, himself an adulterer, who managed the House of Representatives "case" (if it can be called such) against Clinton took comfort in the fact that "were in not for the impeachment, George W. Bush would not have been elected president" in 2000.

So we can thank Mr. Starr for eight years of Bush, the invasion of Iraq, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, the mismanagement of Hurricane Katrina and our massive national debt.

Thanks a lot Ken.

Jerome says

It's often been a goal of mine the past ten years to really read about what I call modern presidential events. Historically speaking, we could look back to many American presidents of the past and ring off their personal scandals or major events hitting them personally in their time in office. The Petticoat Affair with Andrew Jackson, the Credit Mobilier Scandal in Grant's term, The Teapot Dome Scandal, etc. And why is that fact? Because so much has been written on these particular events, over and over again. What about the modern events? Not much is or can be written about them, because the results and effects are still being made out as it takes time to develop an opinion, lasting years after the event.

The journey for me began with taking a close look at the Iran-Contra Affair of 1986, yes Reagan and old Ollie North (and don't say I'm skipping Watergate, much has been written on that event). Well, what is next in line? What is the big event of the 1990s, the Clinton Presidency, the personal scandal/event hitting that presidency and the president in particular? Think no further than the Lewinsky scandal, of course. The only limiting factor of the scandal is that it occurred in 1998. For much of the early 21st century, not much could be written about the second term scandal, because it was still so fresh in our minds.

With this book coming out in 2010, however, Gormley does a great job at interacting with the (living) key characters and researching the thousands of documents to tell a complete story of the power of this scandal. And I feel that with it being a good ten years since the event (I consider that Gormley really pieced the work together in 2008) there has been enough time to let the dust settle and look back with an in-depth mindset and curiosity. And it doesn't matter what your stance on a President's policies are, you should just look at the facts and the actual events that occurred. Additionally, love him or hate him, Clinton's actions certainly brought about a change in politics.

Gormley takes the numerous facts and events, and writes a good tale with all of them. Taking it one step further, he decides to jump back all the way to Clinton's early Arkansas days (thus causing this book to balloon to an 800+ pages). Interestingly, he starts with comparing Clinton and Bart Starr, a la Lincoln and Davis, before turning another way with a close look at Clinton's personal escapades during his political service. Gormley keeps an even unbiased approach, not taking sides. There is also a fascinating conclusion at the end, extra information that no one could have predicted until at least 2004. Ultimately that analysis is what gets me and lead me to finish the work in its entirety, that analysis being the scandal's affect on the 2000 election. But you have to get to the end to understand it all. So much detailed information (you can see Ken Gormley serves in a law school) and so many facts cause one to really get involved in the work. Yet don't worry, Gormley provides about four sections of pictures to accompany you along the way.

If you lived through the scandal especially, this is a nice reflection on the event.

And for the record, what jumps out at me in the 2000s decade, the Bush Presidency, will be Dick Cheney, but that's another review forthcoming.

Jim says

This is a fascinating look at the long face-off between Bill Clinton and Ken Starr. This reads like a novel and you will look at all the protagonists in a different way after reading this. An impartial look at a turbulent time in US history.

R says

I'm not sure everyone would be interested in reading nearly 700 pages (plus a 100 pages of footnotes) on the Clinton Scandal(s), but this is THE BOOK to learn about what really happened. All the major participants were interviewed from Ken Starr and Henry Hyde to Bill Clinton and Susan McDougal. No one comes across as a villain or a hero, because unlike what the media reported, the story is not that black and white. Even though many people think they already know everything there is to know, a lot of new and interesting information is revealed, including the strange and mysterious death of Jim McDougal in prison to the sealed investigation into misconduct by the Starr prosecutors. But the sad part is how different history would be if none of this had happened. Henry Hyde said it best at the end, "If it were not for the impeachment, George W. Bush would not have been elected president."

Ryan says

More than a decade after its climax, the Clinton v. Starr episode in American history probably conjures up no more than a few spicy jokes to any more than a handful of people. World events and the troubled presidencies following Clinton's have made it easier to reflect on better times under his watch, and the legal imbroglios of both Clintons have been largely obscured by taboo actions between the forty-second president and an intern.

In completing this massive tome that strives for neutrality in untangling the complex scandals, I came to new and/or revised conclusions about Kenneth Starr's investigation of Bill Clinton.

1) Motivations on both sides were exacerbated by strong emotions and rushed judgment. In short, a lot of bad outcomes resulted from very stupid decisions by virtually everyone involved.

2) Monica Lewinsky was a young woman caught in a situation that she could not possibly have fully understood. However woeful her actions, no one should really care all that much what she did behind closed doors with another consenting adult; however, most everyone should care if that behavior behind closed doors snowballed into unlawful actions (i.e., a job for silence, signing a false affidavit), which no evidence exists to suggest this happened. In short, she's a sympathetic - if mildly pathetic - character who was, along with the president's wife and daughter, publicly humiliated.

3) Clinton was a popular leader who, despite his political opposition and the near-constant din resulting from legal matters, came into his own as president. Sadly, his second term collapsed by completely avoidable and

frankly stupid behavior that squandered his mandate - particularly his ability to bring attention to important world events. The full attention of American media zeroed in on people and minutia related to tawdry riffraff, thus distracting the entire world from matters of true importance. As much as he wants to spend the rest of his life shaping his legacy and blaming the overzealousness of Starr and the OIC, Clinton and his fans must never be able to deny that his questionable behavior largely set everything in motion. A politician will always have detractors, though detractors can't spend five years whistling dixie, investigating you for no good reason.

4) Whitewater is about the most boring goose chase ever to involve a sitting president, about as fascinating as a trip to Des Moines. The larger-than-life Jim McDougal is the only person who made the whole episode even mildly sufferable, and his death in prison was an odd, unfortunate and unnecessary end to his life. Not to excuse the illegalities performed by McDougal, but the thing he was most guilty of was being a goofball.

5) Kenneth Starr remains this story's biggest mystery. Though a man of deep religious and political convictions, it seems his investigation was not motivated by either; however, his exceptional legal career did not equip him to investigate the president, and his shortcomings in this regard made up for a series of blunders that hurt his office and his reputation. Mix this with the nefarious characters in the OIC and/or those helping the investigation, and you have a big ugly cluster of a mess.

6) Politics is dirty. Any side trying to claim innocence on that score is being less than honest with you. It doesn't take 789 pages to understand that.

Kathleen Gilroy says

I heard the author being interviewed by Terry Gross on Fresh Air and decided I had to read this book. Gormley has gone back and interviewed every living person who was involved in the Clinton vs. Starr matter, and he got candid answers from both Clinton and Starr. The story starts with the Whitewater real estate deal and moves through Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky, and the impeachment. I learned many things that I didn't know or didn't recall -- that Whitewater matter was largely concluded by the special prosecutor when a three judge panel removed Robert Fiske and replaced him with Kenneth Starr and that Starr was probably an inappropriate selection because he had written a brief in the Paula Jones case and had advised some of Clinton's opponents. The story of the first Lewinsky interview by the FBI is harrowing, as is the story of Susan MacDougal who spent 18 months in jail for refusing to testify before Starr's grand jury. Gormley draws no firm conclusions. He lets his readers make their own judgments about what happened based on his interviews with all of the players. This was one of those non-fiction books that is a gripping page turner. It is the most costly book I've downloaded for the Kindle but well worth the price.

John says

Well written book by a law professor on the whole Paula Jones/Clinton/Lewinsky/Kenneth Starr business. Very well written and very informative. The author doesn't seem to side with anyone in particular: he is very even-handed. I think his opinion is expressed in the title -- no one involved exhibited any admirable traits. After half paying attention to each turn in the story back when it occurred, it is interesting to have all the details in one coherent picture.

Mike says

Good comprehensive account of Clintons legal problems. Show the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Starr was knowledgeable, but he was not wise. One of Mr. Gormley's other subjects, Archibald Cox, was both knowledgeable and wise. I thought the title a little overwrought. I think it's interesting that no one treasures their experience in this matter. Only regrets. The only hero I saw was the Arkansan who made the speech on the floor of the senate. He is the one who had the best handle on the problem. As a member of the unwashed masses, I can say that the folks who spun got drilled.

Marc says

An exhaustive look at the Whitewater and impeachment cycle. Well researched yet not overly dry in its style. A depressing look at a contributing factor in the rise of partisanship in Congress that overrode desires for comity amongst a few of the level-headed members serving at the time.
