

Sex doesn't sell in this case

Public can see strings being manipulated behind the scenes

A dozen years ago when I was a young reporter in Tucson, Ariz., I found myself covering what was known around town as "the Ben Lindsey trial." The former University of Arizona basketball coach sued the university for failing to renew his contract after one year; he contended that he had been promised several years to build a team.

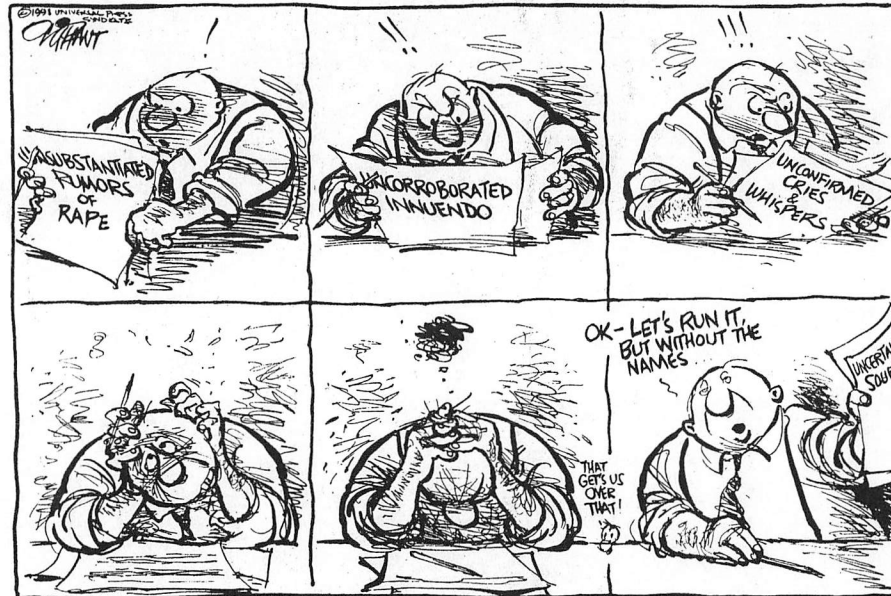
One morning, the courtroom seemed to sizzle with anticipation. The university's attorneys had subpoenaed a Phoenix woman with whom the coach had allegedly had an affair, and for most of the morning grilled both her and the coach about the details of their relationship.

It was one of the cruelest spectacles I have ever witnessed — tawdry entertainment in the name of justice. The motive, of course, was to discredit the coach's character, although what his sex life had to do with his job was never entirely clear.

That afternoon, there was another witness. Presented as if he were an afterthought, the university's former president, John Schaefer, testified that, yes, the coach had been promised three or four years. Here was the heart of the case, but the story I wrote for the Tucson Citizen was the only one in town, print or broadcast, not to lead with the woman from Phoenix.

I have thought about that trial a lot since the Monica Lewinsky story broke. With last week's announcement that Paula Jones met with not only her lawyers but her financial backers and publicity team and decided to appeal a federal judge's dismissal of her lawsuit against President Clinton, I'm thinking about it a lot more.

Just as the woman from Phoenix was used by powerful men to bring down the coach, Lewinsky, Kathleen Willey and Jones are being used by politicians to bring down Clinton, and America is missing the real story. The crisis isn't about whether the president had an affair or even if he



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committed perjury, it's about political forces co-opting women's issues to further their own agenda.

Look at it from the viewpoint of Clinton's enemies. Say you're the Conservative Political Action Committee, the Rutherford Institute or any other right-wing power that has contributed to Jones' legal fund. You want Clinton to fade into history sooner rather than later, and you noticed the unabashed passion invoked among the female electorate against Clarence Thomas and Bob Packwood in recent years. You want a piece of female anger. After all, Whitewater hasn't done the trick; it just puts people to sleep.

So you go after Clinton's alleged "sexual misconduct" by using Jones and Lewinsky and any other woman who may have had sexual encounters with the president.

The problem is, you blunder in the fine art of getting women's dander up — or for that matter anybody's dander.

As others have noted, the terms are too blurred. "Sexual misconduct" is a vague term applied to both sexual harassment and adultery, but the two are entirely different. Like rape, sexual harassment is about using one's power to de-

grade women, to show who's in charge, to intimidate. Adultery, no matter how wrong it may be, is consensual. Sexual harassment belongs on the continuum with rape. It is no more like adultery than rape is like making love.

Yes, there have been the raunchy Clinton jokes and a few million discussions that would best be suited to the tabloids or talk shows or soap operas, but a lot of people have been disgusted that the president has been subjected to such speculation that you'd think he was a member of the British royal family.

Unlike most of the lawyers and reporters in that Tucson courtroom in 1986, America has refused to be entertained.

None of this is to say that Clinton's behavior toward women is exemplary or that his coming on to a 21-year-old intern isn't cause for concern, but what women need to wake up to is how our concerns are being manipulated by politicians who still, as we said during the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, "just don't get it."

Or do you think Kenneth Starr actually cares about Paula Jones?

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IN MY OPINION

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