

PL10- "JUST DO IT, BILL: THE PRESIDENT NEEDS TO GET THIS OFF HIS CHEST", SALON, 8/06/98

There is a growing consensus, outside of the White House at least, that President Clinton should tell the truth about Monica Lewinsky, even if it means admitting that he lied in his initial denials of sexual contact with her. But, if so, what exactly should he say? Before answering this question it is important to understand why honesty is called for in this matter.

It is not, as Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, suggested last weekend, because telling the truth provides a way for the president to avoid impeachment. The Republicans are unlikely to impeach a crippled Clinton anyway, because they would prefer that he slowly bleed to death over the next two and a half years, thereby greatly strengthening the chances for a Republican successor.

No, if the president has lied about sex with Lewinsky, he should now tell the truth because his honesty will better serve his nation and himself. If the country reacts positively to his truth-telling, as can reasonably be expected, he will be better positioned to govern than he is now. If the public blames him, a President Gore can better achieve Clinton's policies during the next two-plus years, and preserve his legacy thereafter. If he has been and continues prevaricating, however, he may be able to hang on -- but he will become the lamest duck in American history, weaken Gore's chances of succeeding him, see many of his policies reversed post-2000 and be remembered more for dishonesty than accomplishment.

Some have argued he should not admit indiscretion because of the possible effect on his family. While it's true that it isn't necessarily in a family's best interest that adultery be acknowledged, in a case as highly publicized and charged as this one, the damage already has been done. It can only lessen the first family's humiliation if, for the first time in postwar memory, a president has the courage to admit a personal indiscretion and rely upon the public's understanding. Millions of American families have learned to work through the pain of

acknowledged adultery and move on. The president's family is already in this category.

The overall effect of Zippergate has clearly been salutary. The American people have shown a refreshing maturity about what is important in matters of both public policy and the flesh. It has demythologized the president, who is, after all, a fallible human like the rest of us. And it has removed the cloak of probity the American media so often uses to hide its gross pursuit of sensation and scandal.

One of the most heartening developments of the past few decades has been the degree to which people are willing to be honest about their personal lives. The culture of talk shows and "tell all" autobiographies, however excessive on occasion, is producing a welcome reduction in the kind of guilt, shame and repression responsible for untold personal suffering over the centuries.

And the culture of truth is slowing spreading to other sectors, from the media to law to business. Politics, however, has remained the last redoubt of national hypocrisy. Only in politics is "spinning" not only acknowledged but considered praiseworthy. Only in politics do we expect people to lie. Only in politics is a reputation for lying no hindrance to being elected or winning a high job approval rating once in office.

In this situation, a decision by Clinton to simply tell the truth could be the greatest legacy of his presidency. Imagine: Millions of young people expecting truth rather than lies from their leaders, learning to forgive the sinner rather than engage in endless titillation over the sin, developing a compassion for those who err that replaces their present cynicism over our leaders' failure to live up to unreal expectations.

Imagine a world in which we see our leaders as real human beings who, despite acknowledged failings, once in a while manage to do something noble. Imagine a world where we could truly admire President Clinton not for his artfulness in lying but his willingness to tell the truth.

In that spirit, I've drafted the following speech:

"My Fellow Americans:

"My task tonight is neither easy nor pleasant. But it must be done. I wish to clear up once and for all what occurred between Miss Lewinsky and myself.

"The news reports of what Miss Lewinsky has been telling the independent prosecutors are essentially correct. Miss Lewinsky and I had a personal relationship that included sexual contact. At no time since have I pressured her to lie about it. Any statements she has made since our relationship ended have been entirely of her own volition.

"I do not ask your forgiveness tonight for what occurred between us. For I have not forgiven myself for what this has meant for her or my family. Every night I find myself wishing it had never happened. But I hope you might at least listen a while and, if you wish, to try to understand.

"We humans are subject to temptation. I wish it were not so, but it is. And, sometimes, we slip. I guess it has happened to many of you listening tonight. In this case it happened to me.

"It was not right.

"It was human.

"When the news of the tapes suddenly hit, I and my advisors were totally unprepared. I obeyed my first political reflexes: to deny it had occurred. I think you can understand it. So much seemed at stake: my family, national decorum, the presidency itself.

"In the ensuing months it became clear to me that I had erred. I decided not to say another word about it, both because my lawyers insisted, and because I did not want to compound my initial, one-

sentence misstatement. I decided to wait for the right time to clear this up, once and for all.

"Tonight is that time. I want you to know first that the information I am sharing with you tonight is known to my family. They have chosen to stand by my side. It has deepened our relationship and commitment to each other.

"I want you to know also that this entire incident has not interfered with my commitment to, and performance of, my job. I have been working every waking hour on your business and will continue to do so.

"And, most significantly, I want you to know that this kind of problem will never again arise in my presidency. I have learned my lesson.

"I will understand if some will wish to vilify me over this matter, though I am also reminded of the saying in the Bible: 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'

"Nothing anyone can say about me, however, can compare to the severity of my own self-criticism about my behavior. I understand that what I did was wrong. I understand that it was my responsibility. I understand that it is my ongoing responsibility to make amends.

"So tonight, I say this: I apologize. I apologize to Miss Lewinsky, and her family, for any hurt or embarrassment my behavior has caused them. And I apologize to the American people for not having maintained the high standards my office demands.

"And I ask that your assessment of my presidency, and myself, be based on my overall job performance, not just this one incident.

"I am proud of the things my administration has accomplished: the strongest economy in 30 years, a commitment to social justice that works and cleaning up the environment, and a reassertion of not only our power but principles abroad.

"And I also believe my administration has acted on behalf of our nation's deepest moral values: cleaning up a corrupt political campaign process, supporting a woman's right to choose, helping the poor and feeding the hungry and supporting an end to discrimination based on race, gender or sexual preference.

"Nothing can erase my shame and sadness over the matter I have discussed with you tonight. I have suffered from it, and will continue to do so for the rest of my days. But I hope you will agree with me that it is now time to put the matter behind us.

"I have worked hard over these six years to earn your trust on issues of public policy. Clearly, I must now not only continue this work, but also do more to earn your trust on personal matters. This will be one of my major goals in the remaining years of my term.

"One of the most profound sayings in our common folk wisdom is this: 'To err is human, to forgive divine.' I cannot ask you to forgive me at this point. But I hope I can ask for the opportunity to try to win back your trust, so that when I do leave office two and a half years from now, it will be with my head high.

"Thank you for listening. Thank you for trying to understand. Good night."