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ESSAY

PUBLIC INAUTHENTICITY: A CRISIS OF FALLING EXPECTATIONS*

Jack Fuller[†]

It is a rare pleasure to be here today. When I was editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, I learned that an editor is expected to speak with authority about pretty nearly everything. But since I have moved over to the business side of the newspaper, or as my reporter friends like to call it, “the dark side,” I find that nobody expects me to think about much of anything any more—except maybe money. Occasionally, though, I still do sneak a non-monetary thought, and lately I’ve been fretting about the quality of public discourse. I want to thank you for offering me this chance to give voice to this concern.

Shortly after President Clinton first admitted having had an improper relationship with Monica Lewinsky, my wife said something that gave me a chill. She said she didn’t want to watch national political news on television any more. In fact, she said, she didn’t even want to read it in the paper. (That’s when ice went up my spine.) After trying to remind her where our self-interest lay, I asked her why she felt the way she did. Because, she said, everything is spin. People in national politics don’t say what they believe. They speak for effect, saying anything they think might have the desired effect on me. That makes paying attention to the news like looking into a distorting mirror.

* ©1999 Jack Fuller. All Rights Reserved. This essay was delivered at Brooklyn Law School on April 5, 1999 as part of the Media & Society Lecture Series.

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Ever since she made those observations, I have kept coming back to them. Something has gone terribly wrong with the public debate, and the impeachment debacle was both a consequence and a further cause.

A couple of years ago, when Dean Wexler first broached the idea of my coming here to give a talk, neither of us would have predicted that the subject would involve a sex scandal involving the only president either of us is likely to know as a schoolmate. Don't worry, I'm not going to rehash the whole Ken Starr case again.

But I'm left with a terrible sense of incompleteness about the episode. There are a lot of very serious questions left hanging—and I'm not talking about the issues of who touched whom where. Questions such as the standard of truth it is right to hold politicians and public officials to, not to mention journalists. Glad as I am that the impeachment mess is over, somehow or another, it feels as if it didn't really end.

One of our more interesting senators, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, confessed to a similar unease in a recent *New Yorker* article. He likened the situation to the way the public has become numbed to street violence. "We had got used to levels of crime that would have been startling to an earlier generation," he said.

His analogy is very much to the point. What the presidential scandal and the impeachment showed is what we have gotten used to, what we have come to take for granted—not only about standards of personal behavior, but also about standards of discourse. We seem to be in the midst of a revolution of falling expectations, and the potential consequences may be severe.

It was often noted by the opponents of impeachment that the country had plenty of warning that President Clinton was not always perfectly candid, especially about personal matters. There was the business about marijuana. And then the whoppers about how he managed to stay out of the war. Was there anyone in the country who believed he hadn't had a sexual affair with Gennifer Flowers? But the country voted for him anyway—twice. A generation that took to the streets condemning the government's lies about Vietnam elected one of its own, knowing that he could not be trusted to tell the truth, at least when his own political viability was at stake. What

happened? If we understand this, we may get beyond the Dow-Jones averages as an explanation for why the public has been willing to put up with a president pinned by a shameful lie.

One explanation came from Shelby Steele. For Baby Boomers, Steele wrote:

Political and social virtue is more important than private morality in divining a person's character. In this ethic, public virtue is in fact a substitute for individual responsibility, so much so that personal irresponsibility may not threaten the essential "goodness" of a person whose politics are "progressive" and "compassionate" enough.

But I'm afraid there is more involved here. What we have seen is the dramatic elevation of the gesture over the act and the apotheosis of attitude. The quest for a decent depiction of reality has been replaced by the burnishing of image. This defines the age of spin.

Steele wrote, "It has been the dark genius of Bill Clinton to transform much of our public policy into iconography." But I don't believe it began with President Clinton, any more than misuse of intelligence agencies and techniques began with President Nixon. Think of Ronald Reagan's catch in the throat. As acting goes, it was grade B, but he created the first Hollywood presidency. Bill Clinton simply took the technique a few steps further.

But to say so is a little like one turtle in the pot saying to another, as the water shades upward toward a boil: "Nothing to worry about. It's been getting warmer for a long time."

"Spin" is a harmless monosyllable. But don't be deceived. Some spinner or another probably came up with it to soften a dangerous concept. Spin is nothing less than the manipulation of perceptions, particularly perceptions delivered up through the media. A presidential accuser is characterized as trailer-park trash. Another woman is portrayed as a stalker. Spin can precede the event as well as attempt to clean up after it. The word goes out that the President lost it during a videotaped deposition, and the grim expectation this creates makes his hairsplitting during his real performance seem statesman-like by comparison. In fact, the strategic lowering of expectations has become a staple of politics today. It has worked much too well.

Sometimes spin is a flat-out lie. But more often it is a more rounded artifice. And it need not even be an assertion of fact. Spin also specializes in captious argument, unprincipled assertion, good for today's game only. Tomorrow the ball will be whirling in the opposite direction. Once I asked the editorial page editor of a paper with a fiercely tendentious reputation how he could make so many arguments that contradicted his own page's general principles. "It is an intellectual war," he said. "You use whatever weapon comes to hand." Spin can be found in the smirking reliance on the ambiguity of a to be verb or any other sly bit of rhetoric aimed at concealment rather than revelation.

I hope that feels a little uncomfortable to all of us who have learned to think like lawyers, because in one sense it is the importation of the mores of the adversary system into the other aspects of governance. I think most of us will agree that the adversary system is useful to adjudication. But as an epistemological system, it is a distant second best to a discourse in which the participants feel a strong sense of responsibility to speak in accord with what they know and believe, whether or not it advances their immediate interests.

The tension between truth telling and the art of persuasion certainly did not begin with James Carville. Or even with Anglo-American jurisprudence. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* magisterially states: "[O]f the three elements in speech-making—the speaker, the subject, and person addressed—it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object." But even the ancient Greeks felt a little uncomfortable with Aristotle's lesson in how to win friends and influence people. There seemed something empty about it. As Plato wrote in *Phaedrus*, "[T]he art of speech displayed by one who has gone chasing after beliefs, instead of knowing the truth, will be a comical sort of art, in fact no art at all." It is almost as if he were ridiculing the idea of getting your script from the public opinion polls. To Plato it was clear that the process should not *begin* with the audience: one should start with something honest to communicate and then take the audience into account in order to shape the expression to make the point. Or as the

great modern rhetorician, Wayne Booth, put it, rhetoric "presupposes that one has a purpose concerning a subject which itself cannot be fundamentally modified by the desire to persuade."

What we lose when spin is king is authenticity. With authenticity goes trust. And then comes the collapse of public expectations. Honesty may not even be considered a signal virtue in a politician any more, though the ability to create the appearance of sincerity most certainly is. I have a hunch that anyone on the White House staff who suggested today that the President should say what he really believes, even if it may cost him politically, would be laughed out of the corridors of power.

Of course, there have always been liars in American politics. But lately the technology has been perfected, reaching its greatest sophistication to date under the current administration. I am not talking now about the President's thoroughly psychoanalyzed penchant for trying to lie his way out of personal jams. It is the bureaucracy of spin that worries me more than one man's character. You start to wonder if there is *any* unscripted embrace, *any* unplanned tear, *any* backdrop to a camera shot that has not gone through multiple layers of review.

And the news media have surrendered to all of it. Their expectations are even lower than the public's and this is one reason for their reflex to leap to a malign interpretation of every public act. But imagine how you would feel if the spinsters went into a whisper attack on your story about the semen-stained dress, accusing you of tabloid journalism, and later the dress proved to be the very thing that pinned the President with his lie? You would probably feel like Gennifer Flowers felt.

In fact the media have more than surrendered to the breakdown of authenticity. They . . . we . . . have become accomplices. Part of this comes as a part of the very nature of television. It is not, by the way, because the people who do television news are unserious or undedicated. It may be because we in the public haven't learned how to watch television properly. In its nature TV has an insatiable appetite for images, and in our natures images carry undue force. That's why one is worth a thousand words. We tend to take them more

uncritically than we take verbal discourse. Perhaps we should be surprised that it has taken so long for political leaders to turn TV's hunger for the image so completely to their own ends. Deeper still, television has made politics disembodied, unreal, a thing of appearances only. That is how Gerald Ford, probably the finest athlete ever to be President and a graduate of a law school your dean and I can attest is challenging, became known to the public as a clumsy simpleton.

As any schoolchild can tell you today—taking a lesson from the commercial—"Image is everything." The corollary, of course, is that reality is nothing. Am I mistaken to think that this is deeply related to the increasing displacement of achievement by celebrity?

The best suggestion for counteracting spin that I have heard came from George W.S. Trow, who wrote this in *Within the Context of No Context*: "A good question to ask: 'Does this event exist without me?' If the answer is no, leave."

It is, of course, not new to observe that we have a problem of inauthenticity. Almost 40 years ago Daniel Boorstin described the emerging culture of illusion in his book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. At the time he attributed the appetite for the "illusions which flood our experience" to a public with extravagant expectations. But now we can see that a steady diet of image in fact destroys expectations the way a steady diet of junk food destroys the heart or alcohol, the liver. Today one's deepest expectation seems only to be that the illusion be a good one, that the magician succeed in beguiling the eye.

What *is* new is the tangible demonstration of the consequences. There may have been many, many reasons why the American public wanted the Lewinsky scandal to go away. A lot of people thought it was too private. They just weren't comfortable having such things talked about so openly, let alone so piously. They thought Ken Starr had gone too far. They worried that the far right *was* trying to sabotage the Constitution. Or, as David Broder suggested, they just didn't want Al Gore to be president. But the fact is that they did not really expect much more out of President Clinton than they got. They especially didn't expect him to tell the truth.

It does seem, however, that they still expect the truth out of the news media. I suppose that ought to be good news for

someone in my business, though the bad news is that the public doesn't think we come anywhere near to living up to the values we espouse—and that the public shares. Values like accuracy, honesty, and balanced coverage of all sides of an issue.

I hope that the comeuppance journalists have gotten during the impeachment mess will force them to do some rethinking. There are a few encouraging signs. The American Society of Newspaper Editors, for example, has gone on a campaign to get newspaper reporters and editors to understand what is leaching away at their credibility: stupid errors of fact, the use of unnamed sources giving disparaging information about named individuals, and—perhaps most fundamentally—the suspicion that journalists are as insincere and inauthentic in what they say as politicians are.

That suspicion may seem to those of us in the game a little unfair, but I don't think it is without basis. Just listen to the way journalists have come to behave on TV. Many seem to lose all discipline, delivering themselves of naked, often partisan opinions that they would never think to try to slip into their news stories. Moreover, these opinions seem to shape everything they report, which is the very definition of bias. How many times have you listened to a journalist on one of the TV talk shows and had no idea of his political preference? Not often, I bet. How many times did this reporter surprise you with a comment that cut against the grain of his polemic? Almost never. I don't know about your world, but the one I live in does not shape itself so conveniently to anybody's platform. Journalists are supposed to owe a duty to reality, not to platforms.

It isn't only when they stray away from the written word that journalists give people reason to doubt their commitment to the values they espouse. Opinion finds its way more and more into the accounts published on the news pages. Part of this is because the complexity of today's news forces journalists to do some interpretation, just to help the reader understand what is going on. But this decent effort to work for the reader has also led to indiscipline.

Of course, the idea that anyone could ever have written anything without expressing some implicit opinion is epistemologically very naïve. But there is a middle ground

between the myth of objectivity and the journalism of anything goes. It is the discipline of intellectual honesty, by which I mean the imperative to state facts and interpretations contrary to your own with as much force as you have stated the version you favor. Some people like to call this balance. Or neutrality. Let's not quibble over terms. The point is to reflect the best of the position contrary to one's own. The point is not to load the dice.

Even the commentators—editorial writers, columnists and so forth—who everyone should understand are in the business of loaded dice—even *they* have added to the decline in public expectations about the authenticity of political discourse. Too often the commentators adopt the worst standards and practices of the public debate, speaking for effect rather than from the heart or the brain. That's like a referee at a hockey game getting into a fight on the ice.

Just think of some of the more virulent editorial opponents of President Clinton. Did you ever see any of them acknowledge any of his strengths? Did these voices, most of whom usually worry a lot about excessive governmental power, show much concern about a prosecutor running off without institutional limits?

Now think of some of the news media defenders of the President. Did you hear them offering to go back and reconsider their position in the Clarence Thomas debate? Or their prior position on laws concerning sexual behavior in the workplace? Did any of them question whether a lie hiding a President's own selfish misdeeds is less serious than one that he thinks will advance an arguably legitimate purpose of state? Of course, you can ask the same of the politicians. At one point I toyed with writing an editorial suggesting that only Republicans who had supported sexual harassment laws and Democrats who had opposed the Special Prosecutor law be permitted to vote on impeachment. I don't know what the tally would have been under this rule, but I doubt there would have been a quorum.

Many people inside and outside my business have worried about the growth in journalism of an "adversarial culture." Usually that is meant to describe a certain unbecoming surliness directed by journalists at the objects of their attention. Today, I think, the metaphor has deepened. Partisans every-

where, including in the news media, seem to have adopted the stance of a certain kind of prosecutor or defense attorney who will use any argument that comes to hand in order to advance the cause of his client. They have all become Kenneth Starr.

* * *

The gravest consequence of the crisis of inauthenticity, I believe, is an increasing alienation from the political order. As expectations decline, so does interest. This is not good news for my business. People actively involved in the public life of their community are almost always newspaper readers. It is nearly a one-to-one correlation. So as people's interest flags, so does their appetite for newspapers. Remember my wife's comment that got me going. She didn't want to receive national political news any more because she had come to believe no one spoke with sincerity. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror.

I also fear the consequences of the President's deceptions going utterly unpunished. One could say the humiliation is enough, but, in fact, most of the political damage seemed to have been done to those who were obsessed with vindicating the truth. What does this do to the standard of truth telling demanded of public officials from now on? I fear that you can count on human nature to provide future officials who will want to test the limits, no matter how far they have fallen.

The consequences to the news media are not pretty. We took another drubbing, sometimes quite appropriately, but often not. Many of the stories that the President's spinners ridiculed as gossip turned out to be quite true. Sometimes stories people thought were unfair to him came from his own side—usually in order to take the sting out early. I don't blame people for missing that nuance, because we didn't give them the information with which to understand how the source game was being played. Once again we let the partisans use judo on us. We gave them anonymity. And they left us on our backs. With a very few exceptions nobody revealed the truth about who was spinning what under the cloak of unnamed sources. And the few journalists who did try to name names received sharp professional criticism from their peers for doing it.

Meantime, by the way, we did put ourselves under critical scrutiny in our own newspapers with some regularity over how we were behaving in covering the scandal. This instinct should

not be discouraged. It is an important kind of intellectual honesty to open ourselves to examination. But, of course, the Clinton White House gleefully used every self-critical commentary against us. No good deed goes unpunished.

I am not sure what will change the public's low expectations of candor in the political realm. Perhaps another crisis of deception that becomes so awful that we all have to face up to the problem. I wish the media would begin regularly reporting on who is leaking what to whom and why. I don't mean a reporter violating a promise of confidentiality he or she has made. I mean promising it less and intruding on confidentiality promised by others more, just as we do every day when we pry out other hidden facts.

As to the larger issue, I wish I could say that I knew what to do to counteract the inherent quality of television to magnify and reward legerdemain. Marshall McLuhan includes one oddly encouraging metaphor in his classic book, *Understanding Media*, especially when you realize that a powerful new medium is rising very fast beneath the feet of the existing media. "Just before an airplane breaks the sound barrier," he writes, "sound waves become visible on the wings of the plane. The sudden visibility of sound just as sound ends is an apt instance of that great pattern of being that reveals new and opposite forms just as the earlier forms reach their peak performance."

I wish I could believe that in the crisis of inauthenticity we were just seeing the soundwaves on the wing the instant before we broke through. Perhaps it is just too soon after the recent spectacle to see improvement. But I have to tell you, I haven't yet.

In that *New Yorker* magazine article I quoted from earlier, Senator Moynihan concluded by saying, "Our capacity to wake up is obviously still with us." Then he quoted Gladstone: "The resources of civilization against its enemies are not exhausted." I will conclude there too. And hope that both of them are right.