

DECEMBER 21, 1998

Jon Wiener on Moynihan's *Secrecy*

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# The Nation.

**BENNETT'S  
LATEST OUTRAGE**  
Michael Massing

**IN DEFENSE OF  
MONICA**  
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those of the cultural deconstructionists” and the “permanent political establishment in Washington.”

In the current Clinton affair, however, the American people have stood up to that establishment. Over and over, polls have documented their disgust with Kenneth Starr, Congress and the news media. Bennett is no longer celebrating them, however. On the contrary, he now finds the American people *lacking* in wisdom and moral fiber. In the space of six years, Bennett has gone from extolling the values of mainstream America to excoriating them.

What happened? On one level, Bennett's change raises questions about how much his earlier views truly were in sync with the average American's. The “American people” he so regularly invokes in *The De-Valuing of America* (the phrase appears there more than thirty times) was a vague, undifferentiated mass to which Bennett reflexively attributed views identical to his own. As evidence, he cited little more than the comments people made to him at the highly scripted events he attended as a government official. Such dog-and-pony shows are hardly the place to take the pulse of public opinion.

If, on the other hand, we accept Bennett's assertion that his views back then were more in line with those of mainstream America, then his current sense of alienation suggests a profound shift in popular sentiment away from the narrow moral agenda favored by Bennett and his allies on the right toward a broader and more tolerant view of human nature. If America has been gripped by a culture war, as Bennett so strongly believes, then the public's lack of outrage over Monicagate would seem to indicate that his side is now losing.

MICHAEL MASSING

*Michael Massing's book, The Fix, a study of US drug policy, has just been published by Simon & Schuster.*

## In Defense of Monica

Pundits across the political spectrum have assumed that there are two ways for feminist-minded people to view Monica Lewinsky: As a careerist Delilah (who exposed the President to humiliation) or as a victim (to whom the President exposed himself). As feminists and activists committed to fighting for the rights of young women, we want to raise our voices not to decry or condescend to her but to support her in the name of feminism.

When the Lewinsky story broke eleven months ago, we did not know the former White House intern and initially learned only scant details of her alleged tryst with President Clinton. Now, she could be our best girlfriend. We know her wardrobe down to her undies, her vacillating aspirations and the intimate details of her sex life. We also know more than enough explicit play-by-play (more than any best girlfriend would reveal) about her relationship with the President. But then none of our best girlfriends have been threatened with imprisonment or have had their mothers subpoenaed and threatened with the slammer if such details were not laid out before the world. With so much information, we feel comfortable coming out in support of Lewinsky despite never having met her.

As far as classic feminist concerns go, Lewinsky has been exploited—but not in the way some of her detractors suggest. Linda Tripp violated her privacy and trust, and she has been ridiculed by the media and by the American people. The independent counsel and FBI agents ambushed her for an eleven-hour intimidation ritual, with nary a pause when she said she wanted to call her lawyer (as if constitutional rights don't extend to people who don't know precisely what their rights are). Then she was served up most salaciously by Kenneth Starr in his report—now for sale in book form. Although she will soon have her own book in the stores, one can't argue that her literary relationship with Starr is consensual. The Barbara Walters interview, scheduled for broadcast early next year, will mark the first time Monica speaks for herself, at least without the threat of jail time hanging over her head.

Many people don't agree with the choice Lewinsky made to have an affair with the President of the United States, a decision that left her subject to public humiliation. Yet the point is not that we think her choice was stupid or her motives delusional but that the relationship was consensual. At the root of feminism is the right to make our own choices, provided our actions don't limit or infringe upon the options of other people. Take abortion: While we would not coerce any woman into having one, we also wouldn't deny that alternative to someone else. And with freedom comes the possibility that we will make bad choices.

If Monica Lewinsky were in fact a best girlfriend, it would be our responsibility as friends to offer an opinion. Maybe you shouldn't be having an affair with a married man; maybe, given his age and job as leader of the most powerful nation on earth, he isn't going to be available as often as you need him to be; maybe you shouldn't be threatening him if he doesn't aid in your future career; and maybe you should have had that dress dry-cleaned. However, we don't need to defend Lewinsky's decisions or justify her love to support her rights in the name of the rights of all young women. We want the right to be sexually active without the presumption that we were used or duped. We want the right to determine our own choices based on our own morality.

Young people should be particularly empathetic with Lewinsky. We know what it's like not to be listened to and to have our ideas dismissed. As a constituency, we fight to be heard by our parents, our teachers and our politicians. In our careers we struggle to do more than operate the photocopier, and in our personal lives we strive to live according to our own moral voice and not that of others. We are also familiar with the linking of sex, lies and tapes. We are a generation whose parents openly had affairs, who have been lied to by Reagan and Bush, and for whom a media-delivered barrage of sex and scandal has been a constant.

Tossed into this national peep show, the figure of Monica Lewinsky has taken on the singularity of the very famous. But in some respects her experience as a young woman was not that weird. Who hasn't dated someone less than in love with you, or what the experts call “emotionally unavailable”? We feminists should take care not to put words in Lewinsky's mouth: She has not said that Clinton “victimized” her, nor that it was a power difference that forced her to express her crush and flash her thong.

She has said that she had an affair with the President, and that she initiated and did her best to prolong this affair. The effect of his presidential authority was not coercive but seductive—the aphrodisiac of power. Whatever we think of this, if feminists hold Lewinsky up as a violated naïf, then we don't believe that an adult woman can take responsibility for her own desires and actions. In other words, we will have gone a long way back, baby. Feminists should support Monica Lewinsky not as a victim of a rapacious man but as a young woman with a libido of her own.

AMELIA RICHARDS AND JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER

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*Amelia Richards, a contributing editor to Ms. magazine and a co-founder of the Third Wave Foundation, and Jennifer Baumgardner, a writer and editor, are writing the book Girl, You'll Be A Woman Soon, to be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.*

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