

A dissenting view of the Clinton affair
[Alternate title, : The Most Powerful Man in the
World]

Geoffrey Blowers
[University of Hong Kong]

In some quarters Clinton, by dint of being President, is seen as the most powerful man in the world. Yet a look at his daily routine might make this statement seem odd. From dusk till dawn his every waking moment is filled with interpersonal tasks in which the power, far from emanating from him, lies with others. He is told what to wear, where to run, whom to meet and what to say. At best his daily life is

bound up in collective forms of decision making, where the symmetry of the power relationship lies more with the other side, even if they be members of his own team advising him. Nominally the most powerful man in the world, in actuality he is so stripped of power that he must virtually ask permission to go to the men's room (and might seek advice on this for security purposes). Even the spatial arrangements of the White House, combined with his busy schedule, ensure that he is rarely alone. Each room of the House with its myriad doors opening into offices which open into other offices makes solitude and privacy near impossible. More importantly, the energy for initiating and engaging in actions -- any actions -- must all but be sublimated into calls for help, advice, suggestion

Enter Monica. Her story is now well known -- how she became attracted to Clinton the man. His side is becoming known only through details he is forced to reveal under various kinds of duress, fragments revealed -- again, after taking the advice of others. His account is largely framed in terms of a moral fault, a lapse of judgment for which he claims remorse and forgiveness. This is the line that has also been taken by the media which seek to judge him, while the Starr Independent Counsel seeks to expose a strategy of lying for political gain. But none of the accounts really deal with that momentary decision whereby he allowed himself to go from being caught up in a stream of fantastic possibilities -- when he first found himself becoming enamoured of the charms of the young, adulating, Ms. Lewinsky -- to being caught out enacting them.

Embarking upon an affair is a hazardous undertaking. Yet, it is one taken by thousands of consenting adults each and every day. People's reasons vary, but in most instances room is inevitably found for maneuver, of time, and place, and occasion. Although many might confess to being moved by the heart, it is the mind that arranges the timetable. A calculus is quickly set to work, juggling weights in an equation of desire that aims to balance, if only transiently, the libidinal costs (of guilt and the fear of being found out), with the returns (of momentary, joyous, illicit pleasures). Ultimately the equation becomes more complex. As weights attached to other circumstances get factored in, allocations of emotional resources are made to other activities. The affair is brought to an end or moves to a different register. People in the end are forced to confront their options and exercise choice.

President Clinton's affair on this account would appear not to be at all unusual except in terms of his uncharacteristic powerlessness. His lack of opportunity to make even the most mundane of decisions for himself in everyday life. This, I would submit, makes the opportunity of a moment for choosing -- one to which a heavy libidinal investment is attached -- all the more powerful. In that brief moment between the space of adjacent offices, between meetings and consultation, of being a receptacle for informed counsel, he chose to engage in a wholly individual act (of deciding to turn a fantasy into action). Uniquely individual for him, in a day of otherwise all collective verbal engagement.

This would have (and properly should have) remained a private experiment. We know from joint testimony that the affair dissipated quickly. The desire was satiated as much in the act of realizing that such an action -- carefully engineered under the most difficult of circumstances -- was possible, as in the directing of the libido to the body itself. This was also a desire not frustrated in its aim. We know that in giving up the affair with Ms. Lewinsky he was not malicious, indifferent or uncaring, but took steps to ensure her continuing welfare and well being. Perhaps this would have been the end of the experimental phase of his "private Presidency". If other forces had not gathered he might have continued without further involvements of this kind, more secure in the knowledge that even he, powerless in such circumstances as he is, is capable of the momentary individual act, against or in spite of all the collective weight and moral exhortation to do otherwise. Perhaps that is clue to where his true presidential power lies. There, and in the terrible continual rearguard defense he is being forced to mount daily against his critics as his very private affair is subjected to obsessive public scrutiny. Once more he is back listening to others, heeding advice, performing on cue. Stripped of power. The most powerful man in the world.

Biographical note.

Geoffrey H. Blowers Ph.D., is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Hong Kong. He has published papers on the reception of psychology and psychoanalysis in Hong Kong, China and Japan. He is co-editor with Alison Turtle of a volume of papers on the spread of western psychology in Asia and Oceania, *Psychology Moving East*, (Westview Press) and co-author with Kieron O'Connor of the book, *Personal Construct Psychology in the Clinical Context*. (University of Ottawa Press) >>