

Essay  
WILLIAM SAFIRE

# Morris vs. Clinton

Dick Morris is hopping mad. Not so much at "yellow journalism" or the woman who gave prostitution a bad name, but at the vindictive bunch in the Clinton White House who have been violating his privacy with leaks from his confidential file. Let's face it: After all the build detail about the architect of Mr. Clinton's family-values strategy as a result of his own extraordinary folly, not much is left of Morris's privacy. But if Morris is right — if the confidential contents of his White House file were deliberately divulged by venal aides — then we can see why 900 Americans have cause to worry about the easy access to their F.B.I. files by Clinton political operatives.

Eighteen months ago, Morris had a financial-disclosure meeting with Erskine Bowles, then Clinton's deputy chief of staff. At the last question — "Anything embarrassing we should know about?" — Morris confided: (1) He was financially supporting a former mistress and their out-of-wedlock child; (2) he had been arrested but not prosecuted after an altercation on an airplane; and (3) his first wife divorced him in 1974. (Plus other details) and he did not know her whereabouts.

Bowles took notes, put them into the file, and later assured Morris he had told nobody but President Clinton about the notes, which went into the Confidential White House archives when Bowles left.

The first story, about the "love child," may or may not have been first sourced to the prostitute who heard it from her too-trusting john. What infuriates Morris is that White House press secretary Mike McCurry, after first asserting mistakenly that the President had been uninformed, then confirmed the story publicly — without authorization from Morris or any concern for the privacy of the woman or the child.

The second story, about the airplane incident, Morris believes was leaked to Newsweek by Harold Ickes, the deputy chief of staff who despises his longtime rival. Morris heard that Ickes had gleefully told a mutual friend, "Wait'll you see what comes out on Morris next."

The third leak, a non-story about the 1971 divorce, has yet to be revealed. But when Time magazine began asking about it, Eileen McGann, Morris's current wife, called White House Counsel Jack Quinn to protest the continued, vi-

olous leakage of the file. Quinn checked, "not just vicious, but stupid." Erskine Bowles said, "I'll talk to Leon [Panetta] about it." But the official trashing — denouncing Morris for ignoring an unlawful gag rule — goes on.

Talk about irony: Here's the man who let a prostitute eavesdrop on his conversation with the President complaining about invasion of his privacy. But the difference is huge. Morris was an individual betraying his trust, while the Clinton Administration, if retaliating by wrongfully leaking confidential files, would be a government abusing its power.

## Right to privacy in tatters.

What of the prostitute's account in Star of Morris accusing Hillary Clinton of being the prime mover in the F.B.I. Filagate scandal? Morris insists he was merely remarking on polls that showed most people suspected Hillary's hand in the files. Do his own notes corroborate that? Morris has told Congress he can find nothing else about Filagate in his memory or the files he has searched.

But a year ago in June, before he became famous, I interviewed Morris in my office. Rules: candid in exchange for anonymity. (My subsequent "Reading Clinton's Mind" column was not wholly speculative.) When I asked for contemporaneous notes about Clinton's "deficit epiphany," Morris opened a gray notebook computer — not the palmtop he now carries — and consulted detailed notes he had made the night of the key meeting. I wished him good luck with the book he would surely write, and he smiled.

That gray computer (a Compaq Contura Aero 1/25 170-megabyte hard disk) is now supposedly on the fire. Screen stays black. Pity; no telling what's inside or interest to historians and investigators.

Don't feel sorry for Morris, who has the means to get even, post-election, for the damaging disclosure of his White House file. Feel sorry for the 900 Americans whose most intimate F.B.I.-gathered secrets were held for years by White House hardball players demonstrably ready to punish by leak. □

DML  
SAFIRE  
9/11/96  
AL  
9/12/96  
DML