

Part 7/21/95

The Whitewater Primary

Having trouble with the Whitewater hearings? Bewildered? Think you've heard it all before? Relax. Think politics. Think '96. Your mind will instantly clear.

Sen. Al D'Amato's committee is putting on a charade that the Republican National Committee should pick up the tab for. Republicans are in general hostile to subsidized theatricals—see how they carry on about the National Endowment for the Arts—but they are willing to let the taxpayers shell out \$950,000 for these stale revels.

The inquiry is formally billed as an investigation of the handling of Vincent Foster's White House papers after his suicide two years ago. What is really going on is a presentation of "This is Your Life, Bill Clinton." It is a preemptive campaign gig being conducted in the air-conditioned comfort of a Senate hearing room.

A number of witnesses have relived the night that Foster died. Webster Hubbell, former associate attorney general, asked if he could break the news to his old friend's wife but was overruled by the Park Police. Bernard Nussbaum, White House counsel at the time, and the first lady's chief of staff Maggie Williams sat on the sofa in Foster's office and cried. These may be affecting vignettes, but for this must Lisa Foster and her children endure gumshoes at his grave, every year?

The Republican attitude is exemplified by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who, faced with a choice of heartlessness or tastelessness, often chooses both. He said, by way of endearing himself to the conspiracy collectors who hover over the tragedy, that he's "not convinced" Foster was a suicide.

It is a widely known fact that the staff, shocked and grieving, behaved in a panicky and protective manner that forced the least cynical to suspect them of covering up. The frantic search for a suicide note is not strange. So much had gone wrong that any of them might have been mentioned as having contributed to Vincent Foster's misery.

The Republicans have organized a pantomime of haplessness that has become the hallmark of the Clinton White House. They have brought in a number of figures who may not have had much to do with the disposition of Foster's papers, but who bring back low moments in the administration. Webster Hubbell, for instance, had nothing to do with the papers. But he has been convicted of padding his legal bills, and the Republicans put him on the witness

stand as a reminder of the caliber of Clinton's friends.

They committee also called W. David Watkins, another Arkansan come a cropper, an alumnus of the Clinton travel office debacle. He was also involved in another tangled tale of overreaction and ineptitude that culminated his service at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. He went scouting for golf sites for the president in government helicopters. He certainly had reason to think that the travel office misadventure, also masterminded by Bernie Nussbaum, had contributed to Vincent Foster's depressed state of mind. He dispatched his Girl Friday to Foster's office to look for the note. The Republicans were outraged that she did not have a security clearance, especially Sen. Lauch Faircloth (R-N.C.), who habitually wears the curdled expression of a Puritan elder who has come upon someone having a good time and keeps grumping that Hillary Clinton should be called to the witness stand.

Why was Mark Gearan, the president's communications director, called? He's a man with apple cheeks and an excellent reputation. His connection to the point of inquiry was strikingly tenuous. He had a conference call with Philip Heymann, at the time deputy attorney general, and David Gergen, Clinton's Republican guru of the moment. They were discussing the mess that Nussbaum, the big-time Manhattan litigator, had made of the tragedy. He had stiffed the Park Police who came to search, agreed with Justice to let them take over and then reneged, had stalled in releasing the suicide note.

Sen. Richard Shelby, the newly Republican senator from Alabama, questioned Gearan closely about notes he had made at the time, all of which spoke for themselves. Gearan was doing what communications directors are supposed to do, that is, try to arrange awful facts in a better light. Shelby, who fancies himself as an interrogator, leaned back and smiled complacently each time Gearan confirmed what he had obviously written.

Gearan has appeared before half a dozen inquiries. He has had to hire a lawyer. The Republicans want him preoccupied. And, of course, there was the chance that they could muss up Clinton's nominee for Peace Corps director.

So far, all the new Whitewater committee has done is to validate Vincent Foster's bitter lament in his suicide note: "Here ruining people is considered sport."