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The Margaret Chase Smith Essay

WHAT WOULD MARGARET CHASE SMITH HAVE MADE OF BILL CLINTON'S TRAGI-COMEDY?

by Charles Calhoun

Among the few bright spots in President Clinton's impeachment trial were the occasional historical footnotes. For example, when both parties caucused in the Old Senate Chamber some journalists wrote of Charles Sumner's near-fatal beating there, 143 years earlier. The Massachusetts senator was sitting quietly at his desk, writing letters, when South Carolinian congressman Preston Brooks walked up behind him and beat him senseless with a cane. Southerners hailed Brooks as a hero; Northerners declared Sumner a near-martyr in the anti-slavery cause. Brooks' assault (intended to avenge an alleged insult to a kinsman) confirmed New Englanders' suspicions that Southerners were vicious, violent and totally lacking in self-control.

Today, a Southerner of quite a different sort is being condemned, even within his own party, for lack of self-control in quite another circumstance. (But again there is talk of the Senate Chamber's being "sullied"!)

While parallels between the cultural wars of

the 1990s and the sectional conflicts of the 1850s are overdrawn, the mood has been just as nasty.

What would Margaret Chase Smith have made of Bill Clinton's tragi-comedy?

A faint image remains in my mind of the student Bill Clinton at Oxford: large, friendly, talkative, transparently ambitious, and just a little goofy (or was that a populist touch?). There were half a dozen other Americans on the scene who were more obviously "presidential"; Clinton, we thought, would probably be a long-term Arkansas senator, in the Fulbright mold. Looking back, what strikes me—given the charges of lack of character on the president's part—is how gutsy it was for a young Arkansan in 1970 to have taken any stand against Vietnam or for civil rights. The earnest, Boys' State side of Clinton is hard to reconcile with his current demonization as the symbol of "all that went wrong" in the 1960s. As someone who rather enjoyed the '60s, this rewriting of history perplexes me.

Of course, I don't think Senator Smith enjoyed "the 1960s" very much at all. What she would have made of Washington in the late 1990s strains the imagination (she probably would have thought we were living on another planet). The assaults on civility and privacy would seem intolerable; the meanness and innuendo, only too reminiscent of her unlamented Wisconsin colleague.

As Senator Smith said in her "Creed," a public servant must recognize "that every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration, that constructive criticism is not only to be expected but sought, that smears are not only to be expected but fought..."

Yet I'm not sure Senator Smith would be entirely immune to Clinton's charm; after all, she got on famously with LBJ. For one thing, small-town Maine has more in common with small-town Arkansas than with the Sunbelt suburbs of the new Republican majority. And the Senator would be shrewd enough to figure out that Clinton is one of the most

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Republican presidents we've had. He's balanced the budget, courted Wall Street, shrunk welfare, thrown money at the Pentagon, and presided over the biggest boom since Harding's 1920s. His progressive poses are just that—weighty in symbolism, light in results.

I think the Senator also would have a certain sympathy with the assaults—the late twentieth-century media version of a caning—on the presidential family's privacy. There must have been many Washington insiders who knew of Senator Smith's long-term, quasi-marital relationship with her chief aide, General "Bill" Lewis—but you would not have heard a word about it on the radio from Walter Winchell, much less read about it in a respectable journal. Not that she was immune to scandalmongers. Despite her hawkishness, she was attacked by the far right in the 1950s for being "soft" on Communism!

If Senator Smith were to find any bright spot in Clinton's trial, it might well be the role played by Senators Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe; their moderating influence was much remarked upon—and all the more remarkable in that television could not help reminding us how much a rich white male enclave the Senate remains.

It is too soon to know what the real legacy of the Clinton case will be; I suppose it will discourage anyone with

too interesting a past from venturing into politics for a long time to come. Yet, having grown up in Louisiana, I find the notion of looking up to politicians as moral exemplars a bit quaint. As leaders as different as Lloyd George, Franklin Roosevelt, Nehru, Kennedy, and Mitterand have shown, there is little connection between one's private life and the ability to govern.

As for Senator Smith, I think she would offer us one piece of advice. She was a constitutionalist who understood the Madisonian concept of the balance of power and of the dangers posed to a republic by obsessive, power-hungry men. Rewrite that independent counsel law, I think she would tell us. 🐉



Charles Calhoun studied history at the University of Virginia and law at Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar. He is author of A Small College in Maine: Two Hundred Years of Bowdoin. In 2001, Beacon Press will publish his biography of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—Charles Sumner's closest friend.