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Purple Nation

February 23, 2012

The PBS Clinton Series' Lack of Proportionality

By Lanny J. Davis

<http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/lanny-davis/212005-the-pbs-clinton-series-lack-of-proportionality>

<http://dailycaller.com/2012/02/22/pbss-unfair-look-at-the-clintons/>

To watch four hours of the so-called documentary on the eight years of the Clinton presidency gave me the sensation of a report about a glass of water that is 75 percent full and 25 percent empty. The PBS presentation, I am guessing, spent 75 percent of the four hours reporting on 25 percent of the story, i.e., the issue of “scandal” in the Clinton presidency, omitting the substance and policy achievements of the Clinton presidency, i.e., issues that affected the lives of most Americans and that they care about most.

But the problem with the presentation wasn't just my view of disproportional emphasis on the “scandals” versus the substance. It was about accuracy. The writers and producers simply got it wrong. They failed to report the fact that every single “scandal” that so preoccupied the media, the punditry and partisan Republicans over the eight years — save for the final one, the Lewinsky matter — was 100 percent bogus, rabbit holes seeking to prove wrongdoing by the Clintons and leading nowhere.

Here's a fact omitted from the four-hour “documentary” (I put quotation marks around the word because normally that word is used when there is accuracy, but that is not the case here):

Over the eight years of the Clinton presidency, and eight independent counsels, who collectively spent over \$116 million investigating President and Mrs. Clinton (over \$50 million of which was Kenneth Starr on the rabbit hole called Whitewater), five Cabinet secretaries and two senior administration officials, there was not a single conviction of any administration official for conduct that occurred during the president's time in office.

Here's another fact about the “scandal” that led to everything bad — Whitewater: Despite all the headlines and thousands of column inches, especially in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, and breathless TV coverage on broadcast networks and cable news, leading to the decision of President Clinton to appoint an

independent counsel, ultimately leading to the appointment of Starr, who spent approximately \$50 million — at the end, Starr announced that no criminal charges would be filed against either President or Mrs. Clinton. None.

Even when Starr's successor, Robert Ray, finally imposed a penalty on President Clinton, it was about his false deposition testimony in the Paula Jones case, not about Whitewater. And the penalty was a civil one, not a criminal one, for testifying falsely under oath in a civil deposition (a deposition, I must add, in a civil case that was ultimately thrown out of court as being so frivolous it could be decided on "summary judgment" without a trial).

As to the Lewinsky matter, which took up at least half of the second two-hour segment, Clinton was not truthful about a personal relationship that embarrassed him and for which ultimately he suffered great pain and humiliation, apologized to his wife, friends and the American people, and asked to be forgiven as a sinner with personal weaknesses.

That being said, let us not forget that had the scandal machine that existed in the 1990s existed in the 1790s: Alexander Hamilton's affair with a married woman and his payment of hush money to her and her husband would have ended his career; Thomas Jefferson's affair with a slave and his fathering at least one, if not many children out of wedlock would have deprived him of the presidency in 1800; and what would have happened to Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and other presidents who allegedly had extramarital relationship(s) had they been subjected to this media-partisan scandal machine?

Of course the impeachment vote needed to be included, but again, it seemed to lack perspective and facts. Unreported was the fact that the impeachment vote of President Clinton was done by a lame-duck House, with the difference in two counts succeeding votes cast by defeated incumbents. And the vote in the Senate was a dramatic repudiation of the House Republicans — out of 55 Republicans, only 45 voted for one count, and 50 (less than a majority) voted for the second.

Maybe PBS would argue there wasn't enough time? But there was enough time for an interview of Lucianne Goldberg, the individual who egged Linda Tripp on to secretly tape Lewinsky's conversations, when Lewinsky, a frail and vulnerable young woman, was trusting and confiding in Tripp. And PBS decided to use a clip of Goldberg describing why "we hated" Hillary Clinton — something about her being too "pushy" and that she "couldn't decide on her hair."

Yes, Lucianne Goldberg on a PBS documentary on Hillary Clinton's hair.

And what did the PBS producers and writers decide to de-emphasize or entirely omit?

Only one mention of 22 million jobs created during the Clinton presidency — a 60-second or so interview of then-Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin.

No mention (as far as I can remember) of Clinton inheriting a \$300 million deficit and converting it, eight years later, into a \$1 trillion surplus.

Only passing reference to welfare reform — which has proven over time to have benefited the poor dependent on welfare more than anyone else — and even that reference was framed by emphasizing that liberal leaders had resigned from his administration in protest.

And no reference (again, as far as I can remember) to the American people's verdict on all the so-called scandals over the eight years of the Clinton presidency, including the tragic Lewinsky matter. That verdict was quantifiable and dramatic: On his last day in office, Clinton had a 65 percent approval rating, one of the highest for a second-term president since polling was invented.

The American people got it: While they disapproved of Clinton's personal conduct, what was far more important was the good job he had done improving their lives. Should PBS have thought about that verdict in determining the proportion of time to devote to "scandal," especially knowing that they were almost all bogus, versus substance and issues that led to the 65 percent approval rating?

I would have thought so — since it is, after all, PBS, not the E! network. At least I thought so.

How sad. How unfortunate, in my view, for PBS's reputation and the integrity of its "American Perspective" series on the presidency.

And how unfair to Bill and Hillary Clinton.

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Mr. Davis, who served as Special Counsel to President Clinton and a White House spokesman on various congressional investigations from 1996-98, is the author of "Scandal – How 'Gotcha' Politics Is Destroying America (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), from which some of the data in this article is drawn. He is the principal in his own law firm that specializes in "legal crisis management" and is the author of a forthcoming book, to be published by Simon and Schuster this spring, called: "Crisis Tales – Five Rules for Handling Scandal in Business, Politics, and Life."

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