

Only in America... The Media's Coverage of "Sexual Harassment of Women by Powerful Men"

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While the Yemenis wonder whether the Saudi Crown Prince will ever stop bombing them with American weapons, and the President threatens to take on North Korea, the US media mainly talks about the sexual harassment of women by powerful men.

It all started with testimonies that a judge running for the US Senate from the fiercely Republican state of Alabama, had tried to seduce teenagers in the past. His accusers were rapidly followed by a complaint against a famous Democratic comedian turned Senator, followed by similar revelations about a famous television personality, Charlie Rose. Like broken records, the testimonies of women who were molested years or even decades ago, alternate with opinions as to the offenders' proper punishments, superseding everything else going on in a world that the United States claims to lead.

The only mitigating factor is that the back story is more complicated than in other cultures, touching on both religion and politics. In the nineteen fifties, in boys' fathers' spacious cars parked in secluded places, American teenage girls allowed themselves to be 'petted', and the onus was on them not to 'go too far'. In the sixties, the women's liberation movement and the hippies brought 'free love' to communes and suburbia. Although the women's liberation primer, *The Second Sex*, published in 1953, was written by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, it produced a much more robust feminist movement in the US than in Europe.

In Europe, a tradition of extra-marital sex had been immortalized in nineteenth century 'boulevard theatre', and pre-marital sex owes more to the pill than to reactions against religious strictures. In France and Italy, Catholicism famously 'forgives' while in Lutheran Scandinavia, the films of Ingmar Bergman deftly revived a pre-Christian paganism.

While in Europe, feminism was associated with the socialist tradition, in the United States, sexual liberation has been largely a reaction against the Puritan religious tradition that excluded sophisticated love-making. During the years when I lived in various European countries, many women were attracted to the tall, athletic build of American men, however they were never viewed as great lovers. The predatory behavior of the Bill Clintons and the Roy Moores are just as surely a response to Protestantism's emphasis on sin which, among today's young has led to an excessively casual attitude toward sex.

Combining this hamstrung ethos with the traditional of being 'a nation of laws', in America, the law's representatives are expected to be above reproach when it comes to sex. It's ok to allow lobbyists to help write laws, but a sex scandal spells the end of a political career, as it nearly did with Bill Clinton over a dalliance with an intern. When he was impeached (but not condemned) my European friends were in hysterics at the lengths to which the United

States goes to subject both sex and politics to the law, and I would bet that our latest sex scandal has them rolling in the aisles. It's true that several European women have joined the 'me too' movement with accusations of sexual harassment, but I like to think it's more 'Who the hell do you think you are?' than 'How disgusting!'

After ten days of non-stop talk about 'unwanted sexual advances' and 'sexual assaults', I'm amazed at the righteousness of it all. The mature woman who came forward to accuse Judge Roy Moore of trying to seduce her when she was fourteen is referred to as having been 'a mere child' at the time. Yet in 2015, women aged 15 to 19, had a birth rate of 22.3 per 1,000 compared to the mean average across all age groups of 16 per thousand in 1990.

As for the sophisticated, witty comedian turned Senator, Al Franken, his sin was to have kissed a former newscaster for real during an act for US troops, and to have groped her while she slept. Although Franken photographed the gesture as an obvious prank, and is known as a defender of women's rights, not only did he feel compelled to apologize profusely, he requested that the Senate ethics committee 'investigate' him.

Once over the shock of that 'auto-critic', I naively thought Franken's female colleagues would forgive him, but every congresswoman interviewed called for him to resign, in a lack of both Christian spirit and sensuously motivated indulgence — not to mention political judgement. As the nuclear clock reaches two minutes to midnight, like their male counterparts, female lawmakers focus on peccadillos rather than on the fact that our nuclear suitcase is in the hands of a president declared unfit by a team of psychiatrists. How can these women consider themselves 'liberated', if they are still mainly concerned about sex?

That said, it will be more difficult for America to shield unwanted sexual behavior from a ubiquitous recourse to investigations. The scandal over Judge Moore's refusal to quit the Senate (race even though he was removed twice from the bench for questionable sexual behavior and early in his career was banned from a local mall for soliciting teenagers), promoted the media to rerun a 2005 tape of Donald Trump bragging to a newsman about how easy it was for a celebrity to grab women anywhere on their body.

For days, the president insisted he was 'leaving it to the people of Alabama' to decide whether to support Moore's run. Finally, knowing that Alabamans respect him for his public religious gestures, such as insisting that the ten commandments be displayed in front of his courthouse, he prioritized having enough votes to pass his tax and health care reforms. A few black pastors condemned Moore's behavior, while one white pastor claimed that since Mary was a teenager when she became the mother of Jesus, whose father was an adult, to fault an adolescent girl for having sex with an older man was tantamount to blasphemy.

Twinned with the country's religious zeal is the legacy of the long-time head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover, who used America's legacy of suspicion to keep compromising files on every American politician, (including JFK), creating a culture of investigations that views sexual harassment in legal terms, even if the perpetrators cannot easily be 'proven' guilty in a court of law.

During forty-some years living in half a dozen other countries, I never witnessed either a religious obsession with legality or a political obsession with foreign countries. While 'Russiagate' (so named after the Watergate scandal that cost Richard Nixon his

presidency), centers on the prohibition against candidates receiving anything from a foreign country, when various French presidents were accused of receiving campaign funds from African dictators, it was they who threatened to sue their accusers....

As I have written elsewhere, it was America's founding as a revolt against another country that resulted in the US psyche becoming permanently suspicious of foreigners. When Russians offered Donald Trump Jr. 'dirt' on Hilly for his father's presidential campaign, according to the law, echoed by the media, he should have righteously alerted the FBI so it could pounce on the foreign sinners!

Perhaps it was inevitable that five hundred years later, a country founded on draconian religious principles should view the law as an all-embracing crusade...

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