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Where Europe Draws The Line

By Josef Joffe

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Does "Bill and Monica" play in Pisa? You bet, every night and every day. Lowbrow or high, glossy or dull, the media between Lisbon and Lodz are doing exactly the same as their counterparts in the United States. If the European newspapers and news shows don't feature the collapse of Russia or the slow death of Congo, Kenneth Starr's 36 boxes of evidence and the President's lip-biting apologies are sure to fill the space. Except that *Le Monde* or *The Times* of London doesn't devote 19,000 lines per week to the story.

Europeans like the story not only as an inexhaustible source of titillation; hanky-panky in high places, after all, has an even greater universal appeal than the tales of the Brothers Grimm. Europeans also relish the saga because it allows them to crow a bit.

They may suffer from low growth, high unemployment and movies that do not sell. But at last there is something to burnish their ancient sense of cultural superiority toward their upstart relatives across the sea. If Americans aren't crass and money-grubbing, they are blue-nosed Puritans, always ready to convulse with collective hysteria when their politicians paw somebody who is not their spouse.

Never mind that "Puritanism" has been out in America since Hollywood's Hays Office, the self-censorship board that allowed only simulated kissing between fully clothed adults, closed up shop in 1966. Europeans love to think that they are wise to the ways of the flesh, and prudently forgiving where Americans let their prurience run riot.

It is true that Europeans are — or used to be — more relaxed when treated to the eternal drama of sex and power. But that is where the free ride ends. When sex leaves the bedroom and collides with the public trust and high affairs of state, Euro-

peans have been just as relaxed as was Savonarola. Retribution, in fact, has come more swiftly than in the case of Bill Clinton, who is only now, eight months into Monicagate, facing the prospect of impeachment.

Remember John Profumo, the British Defense Minister, and his affair with Christine Keeler, who had also pleased a London K.G.B. man? He lied about it to Parliament in 1963 and was immediately sacked. His German colleague Franz Josef Strauss overstepped bounds when he sicced the police on a hated news-magazine and lied about it to the Bundestag in 1962. He, too, was forced to resign posthaste.

Willy Brandt, German Chancellor from 1969 to 1974, presumably could have said about himself what Lyndon B. Johnson was said to have sputtered when treated to yet another report of Jack Kennedy's sexual prowess: "I've had more women by accident than he did by design." Yet when it turned out that Günther Guillaume, the Brandt aide who knew most about his extracurricular activities, was an East German Stasi spy, it was "goodbye" to Willy and "hello" to Helmut (Schmidt, that is, not Kohl).

The point is, If you lie, you go, and if you are stupid enough to philander your way into a blackmail trap, you fall even faster. Americans, who are more pragmatic than Puritanical, in fact have been more lenient with Bill Clinton, both before and after the Big Lie.

While holding a low opinion of his morals, they continue to give him good grades on performance. In Europe, he would have departed for the Abruzzi by now, the continental version of Arkansas. In the United States, he is still protected by a Constitution that turns the firing of the chief executive into a long-drawn-out and traumatic process.

(It has been tried only once, in 1868, and then in vain.)

Europeans don't really understand the exotic tribal habits of their cousins from across the sea — but, then, how many Americans can fathom this daily soap opera revolving around Ken, David, Monica and Bill? If Europeans crow, they crow softly. They take pride in their worldlier ways, in their premier crus and their magnificent museums. But they know that the fate of the world, now rattled by too many crises large and small, rests on the shoulders of Mr. Big. As they watch his agony, they wish that it were over swiftly — in one way or another. □

To dally is
human; to lie,
unforgivable.