Non-fiction: "The Death of American Virtue: Clinton vs. Starr, by Ken Gormley"

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

Time magazine named President Bill Clinton and Kenneth Starr its "Men of the Year" in 1998.

The president and the special prosecutor had been chosen, the editors indicated, "for rewriting the book on crime and punishment, for putting prices on values we didn't want to rank, and for fighting past all reason a battle whose casualties will be counted for years to come."

Now Ken Gormley, interim dean and professor of law at Duquesne University, draws on never-before released records and interviews with more than 160 of the principal players, to provide a sweeping account of the often bizarre and always byzantine events, including Whitewater, the suicide of Vince Foster, the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit, and the Monica Lewinsky affair, that led to the impeachment of Mr. Clinton.

The book provides new and useful information about the "prolonged, bloody, undignified struggle that stripped away the mystique of public service."

A U.S. Justice Department investigation, Mr. Gormley reveals, lambasted Mr. Starr's Independent Counsel's Office for, among other sins, failing to comply with Ms. Lewinsky's request to speak with her attorney.

He discloses that Robert Ray, Mr. Starr's successor, would have sought a criminal indictment of Mr. Clinton if the president had not agreed to admit that he knowingly gave "evasive and misleading answers" in his Paula Jones deposition and have his law license suspended for five years.

Mr. Gormley succeeds, splendidly, in humanizing a Dickensian cast of characters that includes Jim McDougal, the Whitewater and Madison Guaranty flim-flammer, and his indomitable wife and former Bill Clinton lover, Susan.

But the author, alas, is addicted to adjectives and adverbs. He tells us, a lot more than once, that Janet Reno was "the six-foot Attorney General." Mr. Gormley's penchant for describing William Ginsburg as Monica Lewinsky's "bearded lawyer" seems to suggest a hair fetish.

He does try hard as well to be, as they say, fair and balanced. He can be tough, saying, for example, that the claim of Linda Tripp, Ms. Lewinsky's confidante and betrayer, that her conduct was not motivated by partisan rancor or the prospect of a book deal was "undercut by the hard facts." Too often, however, he lays out, but does not sort out, the subjective and often
self-serving interpretations provided to him.

We have a right to know, don't we, what he thinks of the allegations of prison psychologist Richard Clark that Susan McDougall was the victim of foul play at the hand of authorities at the federal facility in Fort Worth, Texas?

Most significantly, while he certainly does not give Mr. Starr a free pass, the author seems to bend over backward to defend the special prosecutor. Mr. Starr, he emphasizes, repeatedly admonished members of his staff to treat the president with respect.

He also believes that Mr. Starr wanted to send the evidence gathered by his office to Congress, without an explicit recommendation, "and let them take it over" but was "overwhelmingly outvoted by his staff."

Most interestingly, Mr. Gormley "swears in" Alice Mendell, Mr. Starr's wife, and lets her testify, at length, to his character and integrity.

Mr. Clinton, no doubt, was an architect of his own undoing. But he had plenty of help. At pivotal moments, Mr. Gormley acknowledges, right-wing "elves" appeared -- to replace Robert Fiske with Kenneth Starr, help draft legal briefs, persuade Ms. Jones not to settle and insist, as Whitewater was petering out, that the Office of the Independent Counsel seek authority to expand its inquiry into Monicagate.

No scandal like this scandal, he concludes, should ever be allowed to happen again. This scandal, it's worth adding, should not have been permitted to unfold as it did in the first place.

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