

Fourth of six parts

The story so far: *Journalist Thomas Blunt's visit to the North Pole has been full of surprises. First, a tour of the futuristic, high-tech operation that makes Christmas happen. Then a chat with a burnt-out Santa Claus who doubts the value of his life's work.*

Blunt's gloomy interview with St. Nicholas having ended, he was escorted by a young elf back to Phineas Galadriel's office.

"Well, then," Phineas said, looking up from a stack of printouts. "How did your little chat go?"

Blunt hesitated: "Morosely. Are you sure The Boss doesn't suffer from seasonal affective disorder or something?"

"Hmmmm . . . well, 'tis the season to be stressed, as the saying goes up here." A chuckle died in Phineas' throat. "There's a sight more to making Christmas happen than ho-ho-ho, and it feels a burden to him sometimes, I'm sure. Very much so lately, it seems."

Phineas stared into space a moment, then slapped his desktop.

"Tell you what, Mr. Blunt. Come the morrow, The Boss makes his annual trip to Macy's in New York, he does. Stands in for the stand-ins, so to speak. Gets to dandle many a child on his knee, chat with 'em. Always perks him right up. Stay over with us, and I'll get you back in to see him in two days time."

So Blunt did. There was plenty to keep him intrigued the next day: the reindeer training barn, the toy design lab, the Itchy Dwarf (the elves' noisy off-hours hangout).

At 9 a.m. sharp the following day, Holly ushered Blunt back into The Boss' spartan sanctuary.

The saint, clad this time in traditional red, indeed seemed transformed, his cheeks pink, his eyes merry, his voice a hearty rumble.

"Ho-ho-ho!" he roared. "And who might you be?"

"Thomas Blunt, sir. The visiting writer? We spoke day before last?"

"Well, sure, sure. But call me Santa, son. And how might I make you merry? Ho-ho-ho!"

Blunt stared at the chortling man. Was this some practical joke? Where was the troubled saint of two days before?

"I wanted to ask some follow-up questions to our talk."

"Well, fine, fine, fine. Ho-ho-ho. And what can I get ye for Christmas?"

It was like a corny tape playing inside the red suit; the gestures were jerky, overdrawn.

Blunt clicked his tongue against clenched teeth, nodded curtly, turned on his heel, stormed down the hall to Phineas' office.

"What's the big idea, Phineas?" Blunt glowered at the elf across the low tabletop. "Keep me cooling my heels for two days, then pawn me off on some cheap Santa clone!"

"What foolishness are you babbling, lad?"

"That clown in the office down the hall is a clone, not the real Nicholas, that's what."

"Impossible, Mr. Blunt. By law, it's two weeks yet until the clones can be unfrozen, and only The Boss has the codes."

Phineas stared at Blunt. Blunt stared at Phineas. "Oh . . . my . . . Lord," the elf whispered.

"What, Phineas, what?"

Without a word, Phineas swept from the room, Blunt trailing.

"Hello, Boss," Phineas was saying by the time Blunt, panting, reached the doorway of St. Nicholas' office. "Had a chance to review the Central American Trip-Tick yet?"

"Come again, little fella? Ho-ho-ho!" Santa's eyes darted about.

"Excuse me, Boss," Phineas said, edging toward the desk. "You've got a feather or something on the collar of your suit."

The elf hopped nimbly onto the desk, grabbed the collar behind the neck, then tugged sharply down. A silver chain came visible along the base of the neck. Phineas yanked at the chain, rotating it until he grasped a dog tag in his thin hands.

Santa looked quizzically at Blunt.

"Holy eggnog and mistletoe," Phineas murmured.

"What is it, Phineas?" Blunt gazed at the engraved dog tag.

"This is not The Boss. This is Clone No. 63453."

"Then where is St. Nicholas?"

"I . . . have . . . no . . . idea."

■ **Tomorrow: Olivetti and Eureka!**



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A true political hustler: Larry Flynt for speaker

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

So the recently impeached President has called for an end to the "politics of personal destruction." Having encouraged or at least acquiesced to the demonization of Kenneth Starr, Newt Gingrich, Dan Burton, Henry Hyde, Kathleen Willey and Bob Livingston — to name just a few — Clinton resembles the youth in the Abraham Lincoln joke who, after having murdered both his parents, pleaded for leniency because he was an orphan.

Still, Clinton, the first perjurer, who, running for plea bargainer in chief, has an opportunity to start the "healing process" his defenders say is necessary. He can begin by hosting a White House dinner honoring the people named above.

As the Senate weighs Clinton's fate, the House of Representatives could make a goodwill gesture of its own. It could elect Larry Flynt as speaker. That would give new meaning to the term *bipartisanship*.

The King of Sleaze, now the surreally strange bedfellow of the religious right, can become chief enforcer of its moral code. All who behaved like Clinton, save for Clinton, would be forced from public office. Accused perjurers and obstructers of justice would stay.

The staff at Flynt's flagship magazine, Hustler, are working on a special edition, preliminarily titled "The Flynt Report," which will dish more details on former Speaker-designate Bob Livingston, and perhaps damaging information on up to 11 more Republican congressmen.

Flynt has already shown much political deftness. He has brought "outing" to new heights. The term *outing* entered the language when gay activists — borrowing the tactics of their former tormentors — revealed the sexual orientation of politicians who did not endorse gay-friendly policies. Flynt and his ilk now out straights who espouse family values but have strayed from marriage vows.

Few obstacles stand in Flynt's way to the nation's third highest office. Ethics questions haven't stopped others. Neither the Constitution, nor the rules of the House, require that the speaker be an elected member of Congress. Flynt would enter the post sharing Clinton's penchant for war-room politics and his interest in elevating the national discourse. The cover of February's Hustler carries a photo of a naked woman on a toilet seat.

The man would have an instant impact on policy. Not a career politician, Flynt would bring his valuable perspective as the head of a leading American industry and export. A free-trader, Flynt could help Clinton pass "fast track." Flynt might even increase the charitable deduction allowed in the U.S. tax code so he can donate more of what he produces to convicted sexual offenders. In the interest of greater sales, Flynt might favor allowing trash of all kinds to flood the Internet with few or no restrictions, regulations or parental prerogatives.

The first speaker to have had a movie made about him, Flynt would surely favor generous funding of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The hallmark of the Flynt era might be in the area of public health. One controversy swirling about his "network" is whether porn stars should be required to wear condoms. Civil libertarians may oppose Big Brother poking his head into the bedrooms of an industry that records and markets bedroom activities to mass audiences. The Justice Department will either refer the matter to OSHA or the Centers for Disease Control, or name an independent counsel. Clinton, after some waffling, could propose having the government provide safe-sex props in the name of "bringing the branches together."

Promising though a Flynt speakership may be, the GOP is determined to deny him his opportunity. It is poised to name Rep. Denny Hastert (R., Ill.) speaker in January.

A former teacher and wrestling coach, Hastert stands accused as a politician who is a worthy role model for young people. He enjoys friendships on both sides of the aisle. Colleagues describe him as "low key," "conciliatory," "unassuming" and "effective."

If that were not enough, Hastert actually enjoys working his way through complex issues and legislating. In the "age of Clinton," such a man does not stand a chance.

Alvin S. Felzenberg writes and lectures about the American presidency.

It's not easy to remove a president, but in this case, it must be done

By Anthony P. Schiavo Sr.

Unlike everyone else, I am no expert in constitutional law.

But it makes sense to me that the framers of the Constitution knew that removing a president would be a huge challenge. For one thing, it would be dangerous to make removal of the executive too easy a matter. For the sake of stability, and to ensure this measure is undertaken only when absolutely necessary, they made removal extremely difficult.

They knew it would be a huge political challenge as well.

A president does not get elected alone. A large number of friends get elected with him, almost certainly more than the one-third of the Senate needed to prevent removal. Add to this the pressure of the interest groups and voters who elected him, and the immense power of his office, and you know why there have been so many hated presidents but so few attempts to remove them.

Despite the difficulty of the process, it's nevertheless clear that, in practice, a president may be removed from office for any offense — provided the prosecution can get over the enormous obstacles blocking the process. Past those obstacles, the range of charges you could base impeachment on are wide indeed. In fact, they are left undefined in the Constitution, by design.

Let's leave the legal arguments over the removal of Bill Clinton and concentrate on two main questions: How badly has he behaved? And in light of that behavior, can we ever again trust him to execute the duties of his office in the way becoming to a president?

When you phrase the issues this way, suddenly you realize that, in answering these crucial questions, you can and must consider anything touching the character of Bill Clinton — including sex. With the field thus cleared, let me collect some of the evidence for the prosecution.

Let us ask to what extent we should condemn the President's sexual affair with Monica Lewinsky. The Republicans have fled from the Democratic cry of "it's only sex" into the shelter of "the rule of law." I believe they gave up this ground too easily. Monica Lewinsky was a young lady of 21 when the affair began. What she had with Bill Clinton was not a love affair, nor was it sex between equals. She came in and serviced him at his pleasure and by his rules (convenient for later questioning) — a partner with no say and no pay except for the honor of it.

Add it up: recklessness, perjury, military and political weakness.

True, she was no innocent. But her adoration of Clinton allowed him to take her to degrading lows of sexual conduct. I doubt that many Americans have heard how low. So before us is the spectacle of the President's corruption of a young woman, little older than his daughter — and disrespectfully near to the Oval Office.

The President, so far, has behaved terribly — and we haven't even gotten to perjury yet. Clinton's defense against perjury and obstruction of justice is technical. He says that according to most legal definitions, he did not commit perjury, nor did he specifically ask anyone to lie. Such claims make him a clever rogue — but still a rogue. And they still weigh heavily against him. He has said that he made his misleading statements in the Paula Jones deposition to save him, his family and Monica Lewinsky embarrassment. But had it not been for the semen stain on Monica's dress, those lies probably would also have saved him the embarrassment of a damning settlement with Jones and $850,000. Technical perjury and obstruction or not, more than once he deliberately misled under oath and deviously coached others to make statements that effectively misled others for his benefit. We have those.

It isn't just Republicans who have condemned Clinton's sexual escapades and lying. Heavy fire has come from his own party, most of the media and the public.

National disgust? We have that.

Most Americans believe that Clinton can't be trusted to tell the truth about anything. His enemies were not alone in wondering whether he unleashed strikes at Afghanistan, the Sudan and Iraq for political benefit. Whether or not this was his true motive, he has earned this distrust and any effect it has on the armed forces and our allies. In his present hedged-in state, he has only half a military strategy available. That is liable to make any action taken ineffective, as just happened in Iraq. And there must be no body bags. A dangerous weakness from lack of trust. We have that.

And now comes a bombshell, courtesy of Mike McCurry, Clinton's former press secretary, one of the inner circle, a man who covered and made excuses for him and at least unwittingly lied for him. On the eve of the impeachment, he said in the course of an interview with the BBC that Clinton's recklessness in the Monica Lewinsky affair left him with enormous doubts that Clinton is fit to be President. Reckless and probably unfit — we disregard this warning at our peril.

Tallying it all up — disgraceful behavior; perjury; military and political weakness; recklessness that may make him unfit for office — we see that Bill Clinton should resign or be removed from the presidency. That would not be a nullification of an election. Nobody voted for *this* Bill Clinton.

Anthony P. Schiavo Sr. lives and writes in Lafayette Hill. His e-mail address is ant31415@aol.com

■ **Wednesday columnist** Trudy Rubin is on assignment.
■ **Tomorrow:** "The Nick of Time," Part Five; The shopping information superhighway.

Holiday Watch: Fourth Day of Ramadan

. Oh, Allah, for you have I fasted, in you do I believe, and on you do I rely, and with your bounty I break my fast.

Saheeh al-Bukhaari

Quotation courtesy of Anas Muhaimin, Ustaath, Quba Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies.

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