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Thank you Chris for that generous introduction, you've clearly got a great future in public service and if I can ever be helpful with that please let me know.

I also want to thank Nikolai DiPippa for running a great speaker series here at the school.

And Skip, our paths crossed once upon a time, although we've never met. I'm happier to be meeting you under these circumstances than in the bad old days. It's an honor to be here and to be part of the fantastic program you run here at the school.

I would also like to thank the Clinton School of Public Service for inviting me here today.

And most importantly I want to thank all of you folks in the audience for coming out today...in what I hope will be an informative and enlightening conversation about the right-wing's twenty-year obsession with the Clintons and how in their zeal to try and destroy an American President... conservatives up-ended many of our long-held cultural values, and have fundamentally reshaped how we all engage and experience politics – and life – in today's America.

I'll also suggest how we might come together to change these dynamics, and if we don't, how history may repeat itself once again.

Finally I want to ask your forbearance a bit at the beginning as I tell a personal story. It's my story, a cautionary tale, but I hope for all of you here who plan to make a career in public service, to actually make a difference, you'll find something meaningful in it.

It's great to be back in Little Rock, in what I have to say are very different circumstances than when I was here last.

For starters, if you told me 22 years ago that there'd be a Clinton School of Public Service located on President Clinton Ave., just down the street from the William Jefferson Clinton Presidential Library, I would have had a stroke.

Back then I was still in my 20s staying just down the street at the Capitol Hotel, drinking at the bar – plotting a campaign of dirty tricks – all in the service of one goal: to make sure that Bill and Hillary Clinton would never make it to the White House.

Seriously, that's the guy I was back then. I was part of what Hillary Clinton would later call “the vast right-wing conspiracy.”

When Mrs. Clinton made that remark about the political opposition in the late 1990s, insiders scoffed. But she was right. The people I was working with then -- they were after the Clintons. We were. I was.

Despite our best efforts, the American people didn't buy what we were selling, and they sent the Clintons to Washington.

And in a democracy like ours, that should have been the end of it. But this time something was different.

The conservative powers-that-be wouldn't accept the legitimacy of the victory by a young, dynamic, progressive couple who threatened the established political and social order. They were serious agents of change.

So the conservatives defied 200 years of American history and set the stage for a coup.

The conservative magazine where I worked, The American Spectator, started "The Arkansas Project," a dirt-digging operation into the Clinton's past that eventually encompassed a kitchen sink full of preposterous allegations, from financial fraud, to drug-running, and even murder.

As the tall tales rolled in, The Spectator disguised them as investigative journalism and fooled people into taking them seriously.

The Spectator's primary benefactor, billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife, heir to a banking fortune, understood something that others didn't: That if you were going to hijack democracy and destroy a Presidency, you needed a lot of money. Long before the advent of SuperPACs allowed big money to dominate politics, he was willing to shell out millions to propagandize the nation and wreck the Clintons.

At the time, of course, all this was way above my pay grade. My job was to get a good story. And I soon thought I had something that would please the boss.

I was tipped that Arkansas state troopers who had served on then-Governor Clinton's security staff wanted to go public with stories scandalizing Bill and Hillary Clinton.

As a young reporter on the make, I jumped on the next plane, heading here to Little Rock.

I learned more than I bargained for. Getting to know the troopers and their handlers exposed me for the first time to the reality of Clinton-hating, which I could see had its origins in Arkansas among racists who resented Bill Clinton's early embrace of civil rights. The anti-Clinton animus deepened when Hillary Rodham, an accomplished professional woman, came on the scene.

As you can imagine, I quickly became suspicious of the troopers' motives in speaking out. To make matters worse, there was no way to tell if what they were saying was true or not. But I knew I was expected to deliver. I took them at their word and printed it all anyway.

What I wrote became national news, and the ensuing scandal was dubbed “Troopergate.” One of the goals, turning the mainstream media against the Clintons, was beginning to work. The troopers took their stories straight to CNN and The Los Angeles Times. The press now had license to chase all sorts of news, even news that was not fit to print.

You see, the conspiracy to upend the Clinton Presidency could only work if the mainstream went along. The New York Times was already on to the story of Whitewater – an old land deal in which the Clintons lost money – that set off a partisan special prosecutor investigation led by Ken Starr. In the end, it would prove nothing but the Clintons’ innocence.

Few seemed to notice that under scrutiny almost none of the troopers’ stories turned out to be true. But I noticed.

I later learned something else that I found particularly disturbing and that warrants special emphasis. A political partisan close to would-be House Speaker Newt Gingrich had paid off the troopers to talk – a revelation that exposed the whole experience as a set-up, a sham, a fraud on the public.

I’d become a conservative back in college because I was attracted to the ideals of Ronald Reagan. I’d wanted to make a positive impact with my journalistic advocacy. Now, legitimate ideological and intellectual opposition to liberalism was giving way to destroying people for partisan gain, with the ends justifying any means. And somehow, despite growing hesitation, I found myself leading the charge.

After the trooper story broke, a book publisher commissioned me to write a political hit-job on Hillary Clinton, to be published on the eve of the 1996 elections. The hope was it would be the silver bullet that would finally stop the Clintons.

So I spent two years researching and writing, retracing every step in Hillary Clinton’s life, doing more than a hundred interviews, and collecting virtually every piece of paper that had Mrs. Clinton’s name on it going back 20 years.

What I found, I knew my audience didn’t want to hear.

As I did my reporting, I came to see what Hillary Clinton’s admirers saw in her, what we all see in her today – a steadfast commitment to public service and a deep desire to affirm the good and virtuous in politics all too rarely seen in her generation of politicians.

So I had a choice. Twist the facts to give the conservatives what they wanted. Or, stick to the facts, and reclaim my integrity. Which actually was no choice at all.

The Right, meanwhile, doubled down in their war on the Clintons. Having lost the enemy they needed to win elections when the Soviet Union collapsed and struggling to compete with Clinton’s positive agenda for the country, they had nothing but scandal politics to fall back on as the means to gaining power. Setting the tone of conservative politics for years to

come, Newt Gingrich was radicalizing the party and demonizing all those with whom he disagreed. Gingrich would later pursue the impeachment of a president based on the same behavior in which he had been engaging.

Little did anyone, least of all me, know that the lies of Troopergate would lead to years of politicized litigation against the President, further enmeshing him in the ever-overreaching Ken Starr investigation. The Republican Congress saw an opportunity to open an impeachment inquiry.

At that moment, I decided to blow the whistle on what I knew about the wrongful scheme to thwart a twice-elected President by throwing sand in the gears of progressive governance. I apologized for my role in it. And I opposed impeachment as an unconstitutional power grab.

At its root, I realized, Clinton-hating had nothing to do with what the Clintons did or did not do. It had everything to do with fear of the change they represented on the one hand -- and on the other a newly brutal form of partisan power politics.

Those same reactionary forces are still at work today, abetted at times by the mainstream. "The Arkansas Project," it turns out, was in some ways just a rough model of things to come.

There used to be a respected intellectual conservative movement in this country that contributed to a healthy discourse. That movement has been gutted by assorted billionaires and shock-jocks who realized that they could use fear and sensationalism to undermine honest debate and buttress their bottom lines.

Every day, Rush Limbaugh and his legion of imitators tell their lies and spew their angry rhetoric. Arguments and allegations that should never see the light of day, manufactured in a well-financed network of think tank and advocacy organizations, poison our national debate.

The money behind it all comes from the likes of the Koch Brothers, Charles and David, two billionaires with a seemingly bottomless treasure chest who have displaced Richard Mellon Scaife as leading financiers of the far Right. The Koch Brothers view their donations not as investments in their country, but as investments in special favors for their company.

Already this year, a tidal wave of false Koch-funded advertising against the Affordable Care Act is misleading voters. The Kochs believe that conservative control of Congress – through which they will try to dismantle ObamaCare and stage endless investigations – is a critical step to taking back the Presidency in 2016 – perhaps with their own man at the top of the ticket.

In the meantime, the political, economic and social progress that has made our country great seems all but ground to a halt, blocked at every turn by a recalcitrant, backward-looking conservative movement that has been co-opted by its right-wing fringe.

I happen to believe Hillary Clinton represents the best chance of breaking this stalemate, and I think her opponents know it, too.

Perhaps that's why a bumper sticker "Run Hillary Run" is popular with some on the right – they affix the sticker to the front fender.

Or why the website of one anti-Hillary group features a game where the winner gets to slap her across the face.

Or why Rush Limbaugh wannabe Pete Santilli says Hillary Clinton should be "shot in the vagina."

Like the conservatives who once savaged Bill Clinton personally, the conservatives of today have no program to offer the vast majority of Americans. So we see them running scared, and once again, cultivating a culture of Clinton hatred, in Hillary's case -- as you can see -- with a heavy dose of misogyny.

Of course there is no Clinton candidacy or campaign, and there may never be one. Yet no fewer than eight conservative organizations have set up shop to tarnish Hillary Clinton's record and reputation before she even has a chance to make her own case, should she choose to do so.

The groups include the Special Operations OPSEC Education Fund, a group of former special forces and intelligence operatives with conservative political ties who are dedicated to turning the tragedy of the terrorist attack against U.S. facilities in Benghazi into the new Whitewater. Their false insinuation – that former Secretary of State Clinton is complicit in the murder of four Americans – strikes me as a faint echo of the most outlandish charges surfaced by "The Arkansas Project" twenty years ago.

Even the most venerable news networks have been taken in. Last fall, the CBS broadcast "60 Minutes" jumped on the Benghazi bandwagon, airing a story suggesting that the Obama administration could have done more to save lives on the night of the attack. Within days, the source on the story was exposed as a liar who made it up out of whole cloth.

Another conservative group, Citizens United, is planning to make a movie about Hillary Clinton, for release in 2016. Back in the 1990s, the group's leader was fired by a Congressional committee after he doctored and leaked to the media a taped phone conversation to falsely implicate Mrs. Clinton in scandal. A prior movie from the same group described Hillary Clinton as a "congenital liar," "not qualified," and "the closest thing we have to a European socialist." That film features a woman suggesting the Clintons had her cat assassinated.

Some of these efforts, of course, are business, as well as political, propositions. Anti-Clintonism has always been good for ratings, click thrus, book sales, and campaign cash. As

internet provocateur Matt Drudge told New York Magazine in 2007, “I need Hillary Clinton. You don’t get it...that’s my bank.”

Today’s right-wing Noise Machine is far more sophisticated and far-reaching than in Matt Drudge’s heyday. Back in 1995, a White House memo laid out what most people in the Clinton administration already knew – that there was a well-funded and organized group of right-wing extremists who figured out how to use the media so that, as the memo said, “fantasy can become fact.”

The memo was written before the launch of Rupert Murdoch’s Orwellian Fox News Channel and the broader misinformation revolution on-line.

Fox News has changed the game for the Right. In 2009, Fox’s vice president for programming called Fox “the voice of the opposition.” That’s what we’re dealing with here. A major news outlet that has made defeating one political party its highest priority.

Fox has accused Hillary Clinton of murder; compared her to a murderer; and suggested she commit suicide.

Successor websites to Drudge – Breitbart.com, The Daily Caller and the Washington Free Beacon – have as their sole goal slandering their political opponents. Their function in the media eco-system is to launder dirt fed to them by right-wing operatives and dress it up as real journalism – all in the expectation that the mainstream will be goaded into following along.

We’ve seen this sort of sordid checkbook journalism before.

In this environment, anyone in public life who gets in the conservatives’ crosshairs, it seems, is vulnerable to having his reputation ruined. In an effort to slander Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel as anti-Israel during his confirmation battle, Breitbart.com accused him of belonging to the radical group “Friends of Hamas.” No such group exists. The Daily Caller accused Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey of cavorting with prostitutes who, it turned out, were paid to lie about him.

Fox picked both stories up from the web, further spreading the slanders and forcing them into more mainstream circulation.

The slander sites are already key players in the broader right-wing strategy to create a negative environment that encourages Hillary Clinton not to run, or to ‘soften’ up her image the same way a meat tenderizer softens a steak.

The strategy is attempting to recreate the scandal-obsessed press corps of the Ken Starr era. Only this time presenting recycled pseudo-scandals from twenty years ago as if they’re somehow new or relevant. For the conservatives to succeed, they’ll have to reactivate the old anti-Clinton mental constructs of our media elite.

The market is big. Unprecedentedly, virtually every major news outlet has assigned a reporter to the Hillary Clinton beat 2 and ½ years before Election Day, and while she is still a private citizen. One study found that in a recent one-week period, cable news channels aired 80 segments on Clinton despite the fact that she had made no public appearances or statements. That's one segment every single hour around the clock for more than three days. Then the media turns around and blames Mrs. Clinton for being over-exposed, for creating an aura of inevitability around her candidacy, and laments so-called Clinton fatigue.

This, then, is the central dynamic in which events are now unfolding: On one hand, a voracious news media hunting for any Clinton crumb; and on the other, well-funded anti-Clinton mudslinging operations that feed the beast. This is the troubling new order of American media and politics.

It's also troubling that more than twenty years later, given her long and exemplary record of public service acknowledged on both sides of the aisle, that the Right's sexist caricatures of Hillary Clinton still have mainstream currency. Back in the day, at *The American Spectator*, she was cast as "The Lady MacBeth of Little Rock."

A few weeks ago, one of *The Spectator's* progeny, the *Washington Free Beacon*, published a breathless account based on the notes of a friend of Mrs. Clinton's that are now archived at the University of Arkansas. Reporters over the years, including Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame, had gone through these archives and found nothing newsworthy in them.

But using a familiar sexist trope as a marketing tool, the *Beacon* story lit up the sky with the false claim that her own friend had described Mrs. Clinton as "ruthless." Sadly, even the most esteemed news organizations in the country felt obliged to file their own stories chasing the right-wing website.

They ought to know better. Should she run, Hillary Clinton would be the most vetted candidate for that office in modern political history. Reince Priebus, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, has threatened Mrs. Clinton with "the rough stuff," and a "truckload of opposition research" while conceding much of it is "old," and, I'm quoting here, "some things might be new."

I doubt it.

The poster boy for this retro strategy is Senator Rand Paul, who, in a series of bizarre made-for-cable TV news outbursts, has sought to bolster his own potential Presidential candidacy by making a political issue now against Mrs. Clinton of a long-ago private indiscretion by President Clinton – even as Paul grossly mischaracterized it.

It's not surprising that Rand Paul is obsessed with something that happened long ago. His general mindset seems stuck in the past. Paul may pretend to stick up for women, but at a time when women in America are still fighting for basic rights, he leads a movement that wants to take women back to the 19th century.

For starters, Paul has voted against the Violence Against Women Act;

Against the Paycheck Fairness Act;

He wants to amend the Constitution to criminalize abortion;

And he's considered limiting government funding for single mothers who have more children.

Paul also defended fellow Republican Herman Cain against sexual harassment charges by telling the National Review that sexual harassment lawsuits damage workplace relations because they discourage men from telling jokes.

But put this dismal record aside for a minute. Because those who want to throw stones ought to be very careful about setting the rules of the game in such a way that a candidate is responsible for the behavior of those closest to them.

Because by that measure, Rand Paul should answer for the secessionist rantings of a former top aide who is a cult worshiper of John Wilkes Booth.

And Rand Paul also should answer for the anti-Semitic and racist material published by a newsletter his father Ron Paul oversaw -- a newsletter that was the megaphone of a movement Rand Paul has now inherited.

There's probably no better place than Little Rock for me to say: I know from personal experience that the best efforts of the right-wing to market political smut did not defeat the Clintons, the truth won out in the end, and it will again.

If the conservatives want to nominate Ken Starr for the 2016 Presidential ticket, I can only quote a philosopher who once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Now, I'm sure the vast majority of Americans don't want to go there again -- and rightly so. They will find such a campaign more repugnant than persuasive, just as they rejected the empty scandal politics of the 1990s as a distraction from real issues facing the country.

So whether or not you feel as I do -- even if you're not a Clinton supporter, even if you're a conservative -- I have a novel idea.

We're here today at the Clinton School of Public Service. In the spirit of true public service, let's challenge our political parties:

Call off the political smutmongers.

Agree to have a thoughtful debate about our conflicting philosophies of government and society.

Give the American people the Presidential campaign they deserve, one based on real issues and on the public record.

Ask – is it relevant to someone’s performance in public office? – before attacking.

Acknowledge, as I do, that our democracy functions best if the truth isn’t strangled by powerful interests.

Know, as I’ve learned the hard way, that real power is comprised of a coalition of dedicated Americans - of every ideological stripe – Americans who care about our future and won’t take a lie for an answer.

Thank you.