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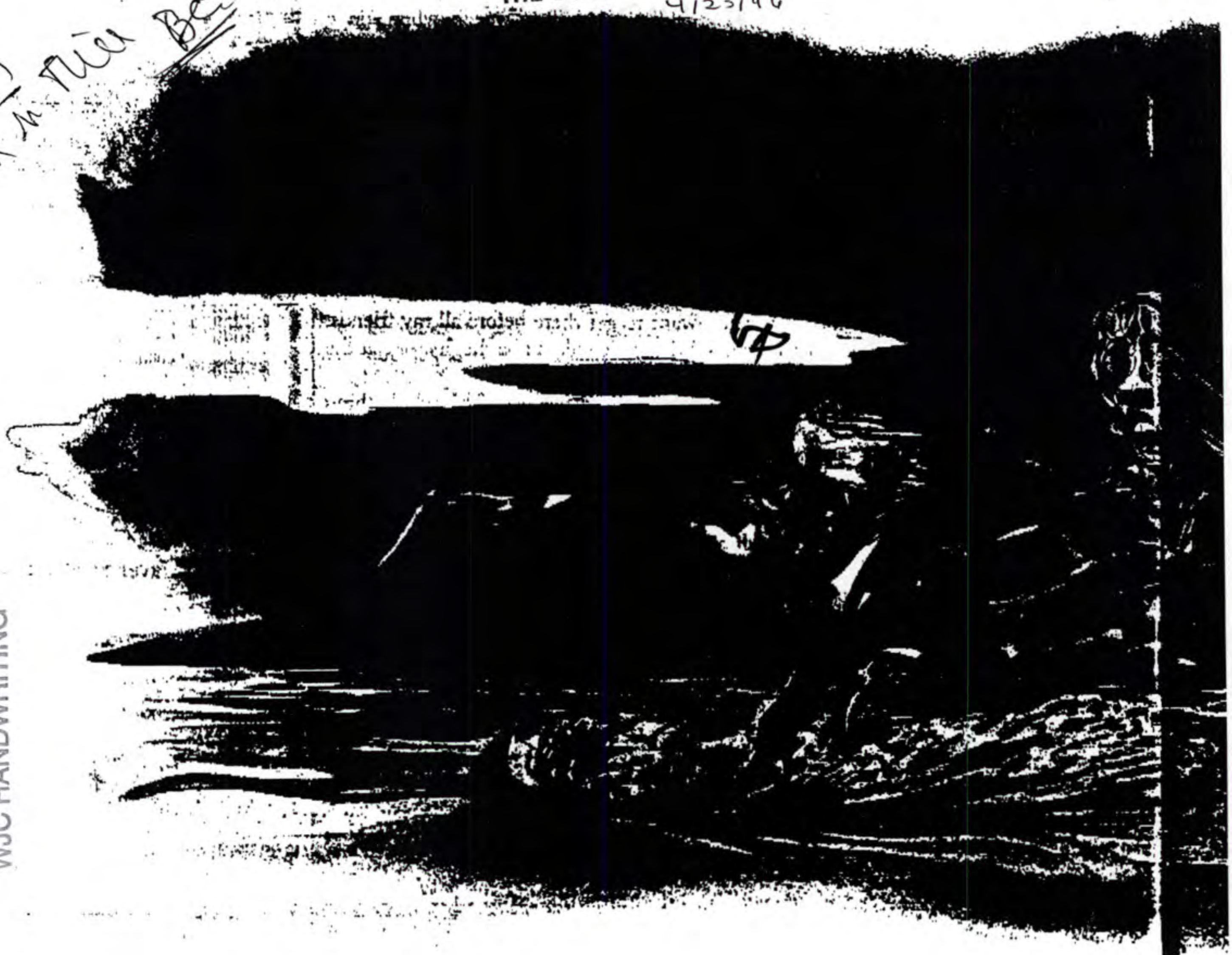

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

A FEVER IN THE WHITE HOUSE

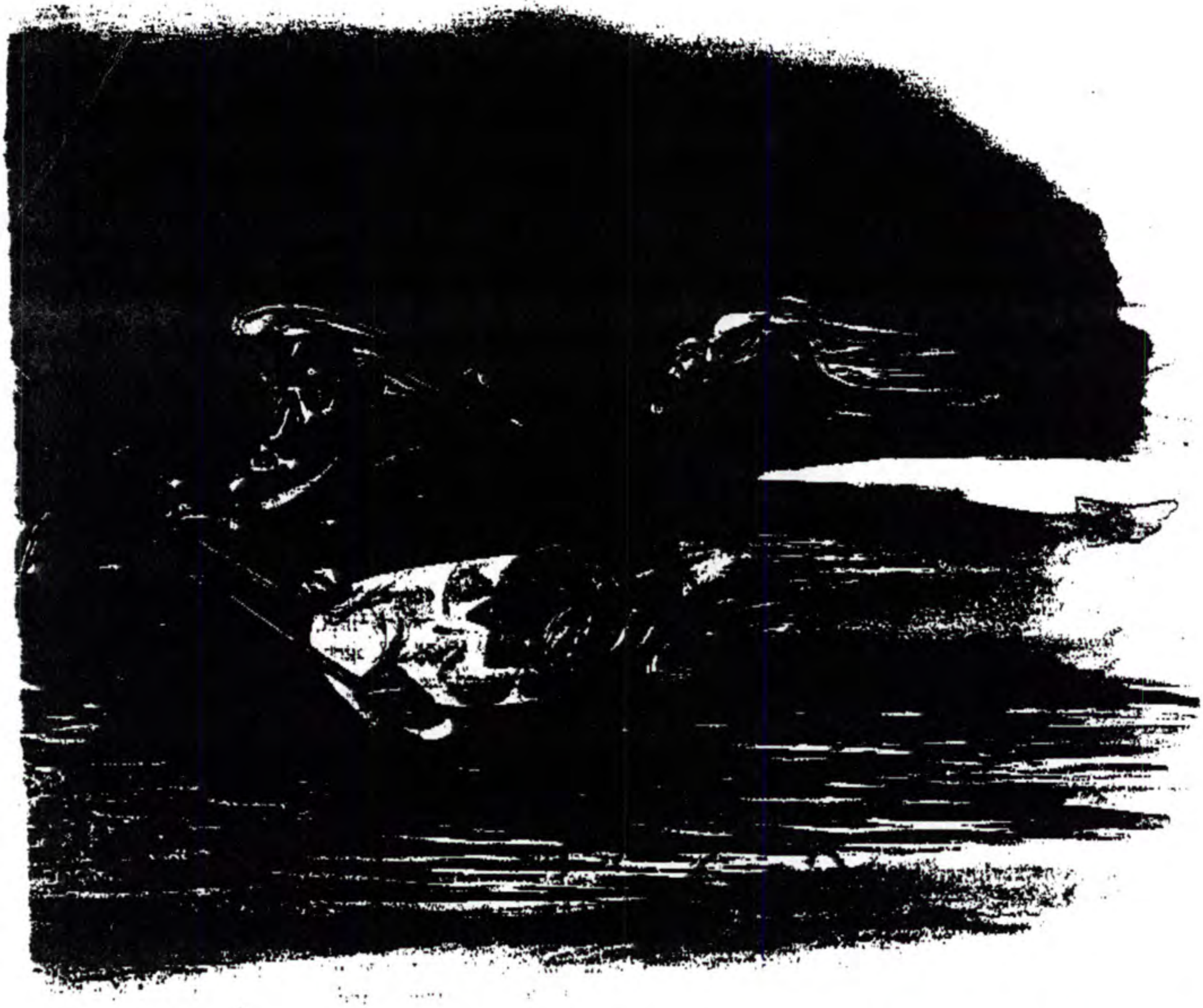
How, exactly, did members of the Clinton team lose it at the White House, where their bungling in the travel office led to a scandal that won't go away—and that only Vincent Foster saw coming?

BY PETER J. BOYER

THE series of events that has come to be known as Travelgate began on an October day in 1991, when a young woman named Catherine Cornelius walked into the converted paint store in Little Rock that was serving as the early headquarters of Bill Clinton's fledgling Presidential campaign. Cornelius, a twenty-three-year-old marketing major, had just graduated from Texas A. & M. and wasn't yet ready to go home to Houston, so she decided to volunteer for Clinton. She had roots in Arkansas, but what was known to few at the time (and would subsequently loom large) was that those roots included a blood relationship to Bill Clinton: she is a distant cousin on his mother's side. The campaign was brand-new, but it was already attracting a group of young, eager volunteers like Cornelius—"muffins," in the parlance of "Primary Colors"—whose job was to perform whatever tasks, most of them menial ones, needed doing. Cornelius got lucky right away: the man running the campaign in those early days put her on staff, in charge of the volunteers.

That man was David Watkins, who was in charge of the campaign headquarters. Watkins, like Clinton, was from Hope, Arkansas. Handsome and friendly, he'd been the quarterback of the football team at Hope High School and the student-body

STEVE BRODNER



president, and then he had gone off to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. After serving as a lieutenant in the Army, he entered the advertising business in Little Rock, starting his own agency, and soon made a success of it. But, unlike other members of the remarkable Hope cluster—Clinton, Thomas F. (Mack) McLarty III, Vincent Foster, Jr.—he wasn't part of the élite crowd. Foster was the chief litigator in the Rose Law Firm; McLarty ran Arkla, the powerful utility company; and Clinton was the bright comer in the Arkansas Democratic machine. Most of that crowd lived in a select Little Rock neighborhood called the Heights, adjacent to the exclusive Little Rock Country Club, membership in which was, for many, a life's ambition. But Watkins, then a bachelor who had never quite shed his suntanned-jock persona, was of the town's entrepreneurial class: he belonged to the glimmering new Chenal Country Club, on the city's far west side, which was regarded by establishment Little Rock as a meeting house for the town's grasping nouveaux riches.

Watkins was never attentive to politics—was indifferent to it, really—until the Clinton era began in Arkansas. He later described Clinton as "the greatest seducer who ever lived," and he found himself so charmed that he gave Clinton his first-ever political donation—five hundred dollars—and then determined to work for him. After Clinton lost his first reëlection attempt for governor, in 1980, he decided to put his next campaign in the hands of a local advertising agency, and Watkins got the job. It was a fruitful match all through the nineteen-eighties, earning for Watkins Clinton's lasting gratitude when he helped rescue the Governor from a couple of electoral frights. On the Saturday night before the 1990 election, the campaign consultant Dick Morris gave Clinton some stomach-turning poll numbers: his opponent, Sheffield Nelson, had drawn within five percentage points. The Governor called Watkins, and, in an all-night session, they produced ads that countered Nelson's portrayal of Clinton as a tax-and-spend compulsive. Clinton beat Nelson by fifteen points.

A year later, Watkins became one of the first Arkansans in the Clinton-for-President campaign, joining before it officially began. By July of 1991, Senators Jay Rockefeller and Albert Gore had decided not to run, and a host of others were hesitating, leaving only Senator Bob Kerrey, of Nebraska, as a serious contender. Clinton was finding it increas-

Top: Vincent Foster, Hillary Clinton, David Watkins, Harry Thomason, and Catherine Cornelius. Strangely, Travelgate was rooted in their very efficiency.

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ingly tempting to enter the race. Officially, he remained noncommittal, partly because he had promised Arkansans that he would serve his full four-year term, but that July the Clintons convened a secret planning session attended by the pollster Stanley Greenberg, the consultant Frank Greer, the Clinton aide Gloria Cabe, and Watkins; the meeting was held in Watkins's office, so as to avoid detection by statehouse reporters. The Clintons discussed the mechanics of establishing an exploratory committee, and by August they were ready to move. They asked Watkins to help gear up a campaign that could be ready when Clinton made the official announcement. Just before Labor Day, Watkins rented an office, had phones installed, hired operators, and coördinated volunteers. When the campaign began, Watkins was named deputy campaign manager and was put in charge of operations.

Though Clinton's candidacy may have seemed like a movable crisis with placards, the Clinton campaign was one of the best-run campaigns in history, disciplined and tightly efficient. At the low ebb of New Hampshire, when Clinton was reeling from Gennifer Flowers and equivocations about the draft, even some of the campaign aides who would one day become political stars were getting edgy; with money tight, some demanded payment for services rendered, but Watkins held them off, and the campaign stayed on track.

Every Presidential campaign leaks cash in gobs, and the biggest money hole is travel. "Travel is so expensive and so dangerous . . . it's the biggest risk to a campaign," one financial expert and veteran of a handful of Democratic Presidential campaigns says. "People just jump on jets, saying, 'Oh, I've gotta be in San Diego,' 'I've gotta go to Fargo,' 'Oh, my God, I've gotta go to New Hampshire.' And what you have is this phenomenon where everybody gets on a plane and goes to wherever the action is. And you find yourself paying these bills for people who never should have been on planes going to New Hampshire, or wherever. And, of course, once they get there they charge hotels and food, and it becomes a sinkhole of expense." This phenomenon posed an acute risk to the Clinton campaign, especially after it began to catch fire, because of the hordes of Clinton advisers, pals, and hangers-on who insisted that their presence on the campaign trail was essential. The travel corner of the campaign coined the term F.O.B., for Friend of Bill. "Oh, the F.O.B.s!" one senior campaign staffer recalls. "We got so tired of these people calling up and saying, 'I was a roommate of his at Georgetown'—he must have had four hundred thousand roommates at Georgetown—'and he really *wants* me to be with him at the Victory Night.' "

David Buxbaum, the Clinton campaign's budget director—"the budget Nazi," as Hillary Clinton called him—imposed strict limits on travel, devising a system that controlled costs up front by denying travel to nonessential campaign people. He and Watkins installed an on-site travel agency at campaign headquarters, and no plane ticket was issued until the agent got approval from a senior campaign staffer. Buxbaum was the no-man until things got too hectic, when he handed the crucial job to Catherine Cornelius, who proved quite able. "If somebody said, 'George Stephanopoulos wants me to go, I'm a very important person,' she'd sweetly say, 'Fine. I'll check George's office, and a ticket will be waiting for you, if everything's O.K.,' " the senior staffer recalls. "What was good about Catherine is she had nerves of steel if people fought her. She would dig in."

The campaign also received invaluable help from a Clinton admirer named Betta Carney, an adopted Arkansan who had made her World Wide Travel Service, Inc., one of the biggest in the country. Gambling on Clinton's chances, she put agents in the campaign headquarters before there was enough business to warrant the expense, and then, later, when the campaign expanded and was in need of cash, she helped develop a billing system that is likely to become the model for all campaigns. By far the biggest expense in campaign travel is the cost of chartering planes. Media exposure is a candidate's oxygen, which means that transportation must be found for every news-media person asking to follow the candidate's completely irrational travel schedule. Accommodating that need means chartering an airplane, which, when the entourage reaches the stage requiring jets, can cost as much as half a million dollars a week. Charter services require that money in advance, and the standard procedure had the campaign paying the cost and then trying to collect from the news organizations. A month's delay in payment could mean two million dollars out of the campaign treasury. But Buxbaum and Carney streamlined the payment system, by having Carney act as billing agent and requiring advance credit-card payment from reporters and TV-crew members before they stepped on the plane. The turnaround time practically vanished, and the press money flowed back to the campaign just a few days after each trip. This freed millions of dollars to be spent on TV ads in crucial primary states. As a Clinton supporter, Carney also gave the campaign corporate-account status, which meant, among other things, some slack time on payments for commercial-ticket purchases. (Travel agencies have been known to simply stop issuing tickets—effectively shutting down a campaign—if payment is late.)

Strangely, this very efficiency held the seeds of subsequent disaster. A key lesson of the campaign was that even so mundane a matter as arranging travel could yield enormous benefit to the larger cause. It was a lesson perhaps overlearned by some, who would later focus on travel efficiency as a way of helping President Clinton—and themselves, as well. This unlikely motif—travel management as a political asset—played itself out through the ambitions, misjudgments, and even the good intentions of several people in the Clinton sphere (some on its outer edge), and produced the political bungle that became Travelgate. Its unfolding was the stuff of farce, involving ham-handed covert sleuthing, rumormongering gone amok, and dumb decisions by a quaking White House staff fearful of disappointing Hillary Clinton. As a result, seven government workers of long standing lost their jobs and reputations, and that was only the beginning. The fiasco acquired a tragic aspect after landing in the lap of the deputy White House counsel, Vincent Foster, deepening the despair that finally led to his suicide.

But Travelgate didn't die with Vince Foster, or even with the advent of a more compelling Clinton controversy, Whitewater. Travelgate reasserted itself dramatically earlier this year, with the discovery of a lost memorandum written by one of the principal protagonists in the affair, the former top White House aide David Watkins. In the "soul cleansing" memo, as he described it, Watkins laid the blame for Travelgate directly at the feet of his "client," the First Lady. Any discrepancies between that account of her involvement and earlier accounts now fall within the purview of the Whitewater independent counsel, Kenneth W. Starr.

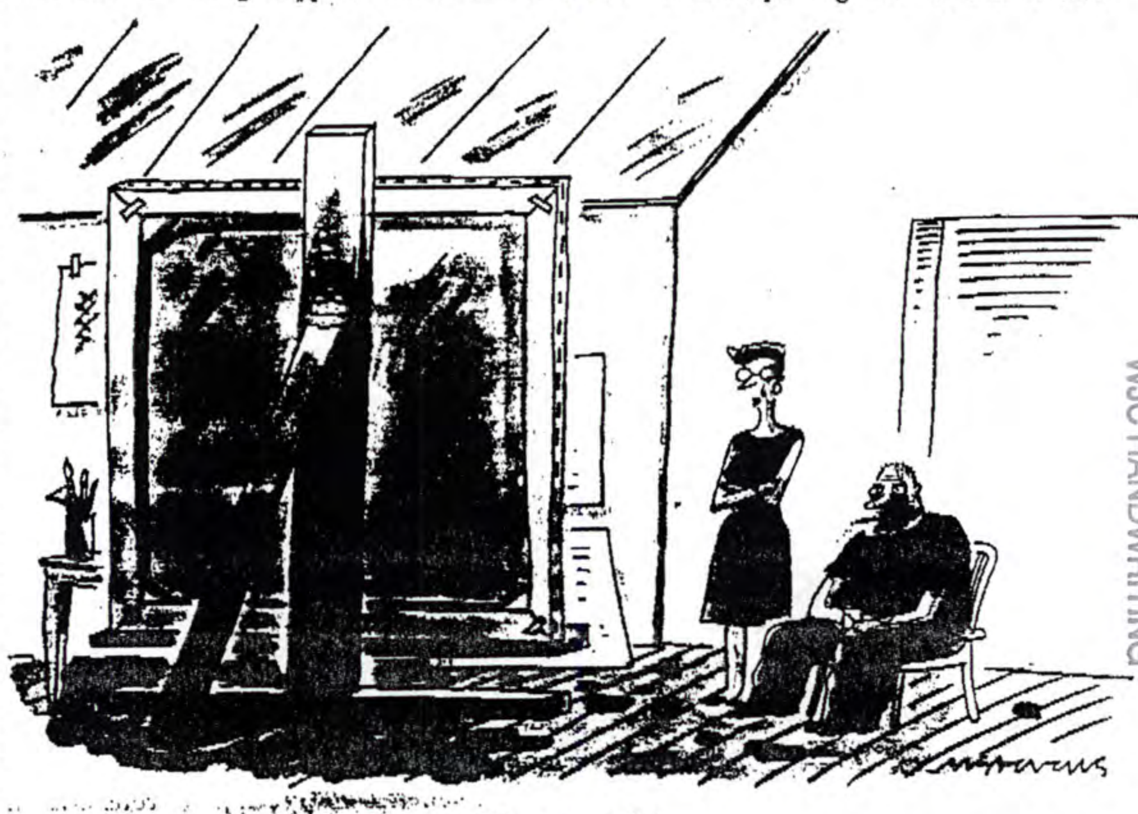
ANOTHER member of the Clinton-campaign entourage, the television producer and director Harry Thomason, also had travel-related expertise. Thomason, an F.O.B. of the first order, was a lifelong flying buff who rented his own plane to the campaign. When the enterprise outgrew his small craft, Thomason suggested that the campaign use an aviation consulting company, TRM, Inc., in which he had a one-third interest, and this proved to be an arrangement of incalculable benefit to the campaign. Every campaign veteran has a horror story about chartering planes. (There is, for example, the one about Michael Dukakis's plane being grounded during a big Labor Day swing because a surprise Federal Aviation Administration inspection found, among other infractions, an inoperative exit light.) Staff members were concerned about such things as whether a charter service out of Texas might want to sabotage the Clinton campaign on the instructions of Ross Perot's son, who controls much of the aviation industry there. But one of Thomason's partners at TRM, Darnell Martens, handled the arrangements for the Clinton-Gore charter jet (nicknamed Air Elvis), and they were flawless.

Thomason became a free-floating presence in the Clinton campaign—a sort of roving adviser who dropped into and out of the schedule at will. A native of Hampton, Arkansas, he and his wife, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, were at the peak of their lucrative television-production careers, producing three sitcoms on the CBS roster. The Thomasons had known the Clintons for twenty years, and, in the vast concentric circles of Clinton acquaintances, they travelled in the very nearest orbit. After Clinton's disastrous nominating speech at the 1988 Democratic Convention, Harry and Linda arranged for Clinton to make an appearance on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show," where he won the crowd by playing "Summertime" on the sax and telling self-deprecating jokes, written by Linda. In the hope of heading off any possible Billy Carter problems with Clinton's free-spirited half brother, Roger, the Thomasons acted as his minders, getting him work at their production company.

Thomason brought to the campaign his true expertise, which was staging. At Clinton's bleakest moment, Thomason flew to New Hampshire and threw himself into what was beginning to seem a lost cause. He quickly identified the TV-call-in-show format as Clinton's natural métier; he picked out the chairs used in the debate with other candidates, and even helped lay the carpet. Mostly, Thomason was an uplifting presence for Clinton, who invariably brightened when he showed up. He seemed to have an instinct for what would make Clinton comfortable, as when the candidate had grown fat after gorging away his despair on late-night junk-food runs and looked as if he were bursting out of his clothes; Harry caused new suits to appear. He was a producer, he made things happen; Clinton was the talent.

The Thomasons' greatest campaign triumph was the Democratic National Convention, which Harry helped stage, culminating in the showing of Linda's twenty-minute paean to her friend, "The Man from Hope." After Clinton won, Harry also produced the Inauguration. The Thomasons were now the First Friends, and they were the Clintons' first overnight guests at the White House. Linda was so exhilarated that she jumped up and down on the bed in the Lincoln Bedroom.

Thomason returned to California, but in a couple of weeks he was back, this time to help out with Clinton's first speech to Congress. The high profile of First Friendship inevitably subjected the couple from Hollywood to some caricature (Maureen Dowd and Frank Rich, writing in the *Times*, referred to Linda as "the neo-Dogpatch sitcom tycoon"), but the Thomasons worked hard at nurturing an anti-Hollywood image. They lived in the San Fernando Valley, not Beverly Hills, and eschewed the show-biz money-worship culture, spending lavishly on charity projects. Harry, in particular, would have denied getting any special thrill from the nearness to power. Still, he did keep a hand in. He could often be seen around the White House, popping his head into the offices of senior staffers, passing ideas to this or that



"It's very male."

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aide. Once, Watkins asked the chief of staff, Mack McLarty, what, exactly, it was that Harry did at the White House, and McLarty, after pausing, had to allow, "I don't know."

One of the things Thomason did was act as a conduit between his partner Darnell Martens at TRM and top people in the White House, including the President. Thomason had met Martens when he went shopping for a plane, and Martens, an aviation expert, helped him find the right one. Thomason liked the younger man; when Martens told him that his mother was an enthusiastic fan of Thomason's "Designing Women," Harry arranged for her to see the show and meet the cast. Darnell was hungry, and Thomason, a millionaire, was plainly able to help a young man with ambitions, and he did. In 1991, Thomason invested twenty-five thousand dollars and induced his agent, Dan Richland, to do the same. Martens set up T(homason) R(ichland) M(artens), Inc., the aviation consulting company that proved so useful in the campaign.

Martens knew that he had helped the campaign and, now that Clinton was in the White House, he apparently believed that, with Thomason's help, Clinton could help him. On January 29, 1993, nine days after Clinton's Inauguration, Martens sent Thomason a memorandum outlining ways that TRM could "pursue Washington opportunities." He suggested a name change for the company, to Harry Thomason & Associates, in order to "capitalize on 'Thomason' name recognition." Then, to get a foot in the door, he suggested that TRM should "obtain some form of official status as advisors to the White House for general aviation policy matters," and he also proposed a TRM review of all nonmilitary government aircraft, as a way of identifying possible cost savings. He suggested that TRM be empowered to determine who controlled scheduling of White House press aircraft, and noted, "This can be done by TRM much as the campaign aircraft were handled."

Two weeks later, in a Cabinet meeting that was televised, President Clinton said that a "staff member" had told him there were big savings to be had in a review of government aircraft. Encouraged, Martens sent another memo to Thomason describing his latest research. Now that the President seemed to him to be on board, Martens pointed out that TRM had coördinated all the Clinton-Gore travel and was perfectly suited to the job of auditing the government fleet, which operated on budgets totalling hundreds of millions of dollars. "This is the project for which I have trained for nineteen years," Martens wrote his partner. "I know the aircraft—I understand the budgets. Put me in front of the right person at the White House and I will prove the value of both the project and Thomason's capabilities."

Martens sent that memorandum on February 11th. Five days later, Thomason had a meeting with the President, went bowling with him in the White House bowling alley, and spent the night. The next day, Martens's "Put me in front of the right person" memo was stamped "The President has seen" and was sent to senior staff for "action," with a handwritten note from the President in the margin: "These guys are sharp."

"You'll find our Boulevardier Department on six, the Dandy's Department on seven, and our Fop's Corner on eight!"

DAVID WATKINS had been rewarded for his role in the campaign with the offer of a top White House job—assistant to the President for management and administration—which roughly paralleled his job in the campaign: running operations. The position not only would give him something to tell his grandchildren one day but could lead, it was easy to imagine, to something quite rewarding after he left government service. He and his wife, Ileene, talked it over, and quickly decided to accept. "Gosh, we had so much promise," he recalls. "I wanted to be part of history."

Just as Watkins had been one of the first in the campaign, he was one of the first to arrive in Washington. During the transition, while hundreds of other job aspirants were going to Little Rock, Watkins set up in the Old Executive Office Building and began to organize the new Clinton White House—planning office space, assessing the communications system, and so on. It was a particularly challenging task, for Clinton had promised in the campaign—rashly, many staffers later came to believe—to cut White House staff by twenty-five per cent, and it was a promise he meant to keep. Part of Watkins's job was to discover places to make those cuts.

Soon after Watkins arrived, he got

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a call from Little Rock on behalf of Catherine Cornelius. It seemed that she had been left out of the patronage distribution. Cornelius believed she had done a good job in the campaign, and she now had a particular expertise—managing travel—that she was not inclined to keep hidden. Even before the Inauguration, she wrote a memo to Watkins suggesting ways that the White House travel office, which fell under Watkins's range of responsibilities, could be better managed. Indeed, she met twice with Watkins in Little Rock to discuss the matter, and at the second meeting, with Betta Carney present, the idea of "outsourcing" White House press travel was discussed. (Carney's World Wide Travel was an obvious choice to receive the business.) Watkins listened without making a commitment. But, because of Cornelius's help in the campaign, he felt obliged to find a slot for her in the White House. It wouldn't be the travel office, he told her, but, if she would agree to work as his assistant ("an awful job . . . not a big paying job") for six months, he would find her a more accommodating position. Cornelius agreed, and went to Washington on Watkins's terms. Within a week, she made a move on the travel office.

To Cornelius, the White House travel office must have seemed—as it would have to any of the others who had served on the tight ship of the campaign's travel operation—an appallingly inept, if not malfeasant, operation. The office had a staff of seven, and was run by a man named Billy R. Dale—a personable, soft-spoken Virginian who had been there for nearly thirty-two years—in a casual manner that approached recklessness. Dale had no particular accounting system, he kept no general ledger, and he guessed at the cost of each White House press journey, adding to or taking from the office's reserve of funds as needed, depending upon the accuracy of his estimate. Money collected from the press for Presidential trips—hundreds of thousands of dollars—was sometimes kept in drawers (or even, it turned out, in his personal checking account, if that happened to be convenient). Cornelius had no specific knowledge of any of this yet, but she seemed to have a strong notion that the office was sloppily managed. She may have picked up the notion from a man with whom she was involved in a personal relationship: Jeff Eller, a lawyer working with the press (he eventually became director of media affairs at the Clinton White House), who had heard tales of Dale's laxity. In December, Eller had gone as far as to tell a reporter that there were problems at the White House travel office.

Watkins planned to make changes in travel as part of Clinton's mandate for twenty-five-per-cent cuts. However, he didn't intend to address the issue until the summer of 1993, and he certainly didn't expect to put Cornelius in charge of the office. He considered her bright and hardworking, but he also thought her naïve and too inexperienced for a management position. So when, after a week as his assistant, Cornelius sent him a memorandum about the travel office, Watkins paid it little regard, and when he wanted a travel-office report shortly thereafter he assigned the task to another of his aides, Matthew Moore. This angered Cornelius, and she said so; Watkins, relenting, invited Cornelius and another assistant, Clarissa Cerda, to prepare their own travel-office report. In mid-February, Cornelius gave Watkins an eight-page "Briefing Book and Proposal"—a blueprint for completely reorganizing the travel office, with Cornelius and Cerda installed as co-directors. Watkins skimmed the document until he reached the organizational chart, with his two young assistants at the top, whereupon he put it aside and forgot about it.

Cornelius, after being on the White House payroll for little more than a month, pronounced her assignment unbearably menial, even "abusive," and asked Watkins for a better job. He tried to transfer her to the White House military office, but that fell through, and in April, relenting again, he transferred Cornelius to the travel office.

Watkins told Cornelius to keep her eyes open in her new assignment. She then began an undercover investigation. In her first several weeks at the travel office, Cornelius spent her spare time sleuthing, which is to say snatching files and copying records and eavesdropping on office chatter. Detecting was not one of her talents, however. While she was secretly copying checks, she managed to jam the duplicating machine, and on another occasion she found herself locked out of a filing cabinet when she tried to return some documents she had secretly taken away for study. On being discovered, she was isolated by the rest of the travel-office staff—a fact that became another indictment in the "case" she was building against the seven travel workers.

Cornelius's hapless career as a whistle-blower might have played itself out harmlessly if her preoccupation with the travel office hadn't intersected with Harry Thomason. But it had, momentously.

FOR the Clintons, the first months of the Administration had been disastrous, what with the dispute over gays in the military, the failed nominations of the President's first two choices for Attorney General, the Waco disaster, and a number of lesser missteps. Clinton seemed a rudderless, and even a confused, leader, and his approval rating reflected it, plunging from seventy-one per cent to fifty-six per cent during his first hundred days. The President had an image problem, and Thomason was there to help. Rahm Emmanuel, the White House political director, put Thomason in charge of something called the White House Project, advising staff members on ways to better stage Presidential events, among them little things like positioning the President in photo ops in a manner that didn't make it seem that houseplants were growing out of his head. After an urgent directive from the First Lady's office, Thomason was given a White House pass, with wide-ranging access, and was allowed temporary use of an office in the East Wing. But his broader purpose was to lift morale, to try to raise the Presidential spirits, just as he had during the campaign.

Meanwhile, Darnell Martens, Thomason's aviation partner, had been continuing his effort to land some government business. In February, Thomason had told Martens to talk to the White House press secretary, Dee Dee Myers, about having TRM determine who controlled the scheduling of White House press aircraft. Myers had suggested that Martens speak with Billy Dale. Martens had telephoned Dale but found him much less accommodating than the other White House people he had met through Thomason's good name. According to Martens, Dale told him stiffly that there was no combination of prices and service which could earn White House business for TRM, and advised him not to "waste his time discussing the matter." Martens said that when he tried to persuade Dale that TRM could provide much more efficient air travel for the White House press, Dale had responded, "I have been here thirty-one years and no one has seen fit to replace me with a commercial operation yet. So until they do I will continue to handle this without your help."

In a March 5th memorandum to Thomason—marked "Confidential"—Martens reported this apparent lack of interest in opening the travel office to competitive bidding, and suggested that he might have uncovered a disturbing circumstance that could explain Billy Dale's hostility: the White House travel office did business primarily with "a Republican-operated charter airline" that was motivated by "a decidedly anti-Clinton philosophy . . . inconsistent with the current Administration." Billy Dale, Martens wrote, had full knowledge of this supposed political bias—indeed, had been a party to it. (The political charges have never been verified.)

Martens's report apparently had the desired effect: it excited Thomason's outrage, and he remarked to someone that "this guy at the travel office is the most arrogant guy I have ever encountered." Thomason determined to do something about this unacceptable situation, as a good deed for his friends in the White House, where he appeared more and more frequently throughout the spring.

While Martens pursued his personal investigation, Thomason mentioned in a conversation with the President that there was trouble in the White House travel office. Thomason also called David

A SLAVE TO LUST

Nathan Lane, as the Roman denizen Pseudolus, stands surrounded by courtesans in the revival of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," the Sondheim-Gelbart-Shevelove musical opening April 18th at Broadway's St. James Theatre. The temptresses are: the Geminae (Susan Misner and Lori Werner), Gymnasia (Stephanie Pope), Tintanabula (Pamela Everett), Vibrata (Mary Ann Lamb), and Panacea (Leigh Zimmerman).

Photographed by Chris Callis, New York City, April 2, 1996.

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"The wrangler within wants pancakes."

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Watkins, and told him that the travel-office employees were crooks and should be fired, and that it would make a good story. Watkins had known Harry Thomason since the days when both men were just starting their careers—Watkins as a young advertising executive, Thomason as a striving filmmaker who would occasionally come by looking for film work. More significant, Watkins knew how close Thomason was to the President and the First Lady, so his call registered with him.

The week of May 10th was a particularly busy one for Thomason at the White House. On the tenth, which was a Monday, he arrived before nine-thirty and stayed all day. He asked Martens to fax his memorandum to the White House, and he also dropped in on Watkins and chatted about the travel office. He asked Watkins if he had done anything about the problem, and Watkins said yes—he had assigned Catherine Cornelius to the office with instructions to observe the staff. Watkins suggested that Thomason should meet with Cornelius, and he set up the meeting. Thomason left the White House at six-twenty that evening.

On May 12th, Thomason began his day at the White House with a meeting with President Clinton at eight-thirty. Later that morning, he went to see Vince Foster, the deputy White House counsel, in his office. Thomason had called Foster saying that he wanted to see him about "family issues," which turned out to involve the President's mother and his brother, Roger. Thomason made a good impression. Foster didn't know precisely what Thomason was doing at the White House, but he wrote in his notebook, "He is obviously motivated to pick up morale, keep up advance team, even train." At the end of their conversation, Foster also noted, Thomason mentioned that he "may have learned of some graft," and promised to let Foster know when he learned more.

On leaving Foster, Thomason walked to the East Wing to see Catherine Cornelius. They talked about the travel office for the better part of an hour, and Cornelius showed Thomason some of her copied documents. Fired up, they headed for Watkins's office, where they were joined by Darnell Martens (who that day received his own White House pass) for a session on the alleged wrongdoing in the travel office. According to a chronology put together by the congressional committee investigating Travelgate, Thomason said, "These guys are ripping us off," and he suggested again that decisive action would be "a great press story, Bill Clinton cleaning house." The meeting turned to Watkins. He hesitated. "Well, let me think about what to do," he said, and the meeting broke up.

Thomason then stopped in to see the First Lady, and here, too, one subject was the travel office. Bill Clinton had promised that his relationship with Mrs. Clinton would be "an unprecedented partnership," and although she had no formal authority over the travel office, she did wield great authority in White House operational and personnel decisions. Mrs. Clinton is said to have urged Thomason to "stay ahead of this," and agreed that uprooting corruption in the travel office would generate some positive press. By now, all these converging voices had pushed the travel-office issue from a matter of efficiency to one of wrongdoing; the seven employees had become suspects, and no one had yet asked any of them for an explanation.

After lunch, Thomason returned to Watkins's office, popped his head in, and, according to Watkins, said he had seen Mrs. Clinton "and she's ready to fire them all."

THAT decided it for Watkins, but he was not about to act on his own. He felt he had to see Vince Foster. Foster was Hillary Clinton's close friend and adviser. If anyone could read her, Foster could; he would know what to do.

When Watkins called, at about two-forty, asking for an urgent meeting, Foster said, "I don't have long," and explained that he had a barber's appointment outside the White House at three-thirty. "Let's get started," Watkins said. He gathered Cornelius and Thomason, and they headed for Foster's office, on the floor above the Oval Office.

Knowing that Foster was pressed for time, Watkins gave a quick overview of the situation. He told Foster he had planned a reorganization of the travel office eventually as part of his long-term review of White House operations, and he introduced Cornelius. She said that she had been "isolated" by the travel staff, and that that move had prompted her covert investigation and the discovery of, among other things, checks totalling seventy-two thousand dollars made out to "Cash." Thomason said he had heard from a source in the aviation business that the travel office solicited kickbacks from charter companies wanting White House business, though Foster, apparently, didn't find the allegation convincing. ("HT related very vague conversation relating to friend," he later noted, and in fact nothing ever came of it.) Watkins asked Foster for his advice. The White House lawyer wanted to know if Watkins had the capacity to audit the travel office, and Watkins said no. Foster could see that further discussion was required, and before leaving for his haircut he asked Cornelius to fetch her file and for everyone to meet again later that afternoon.

After his appointment, Foster met up with the White House associate counsel, William H. Kennedy III—another Rose Law Firm hand—and asked him to sit in on the second meeting. Cornelius showed Foster her copies of travel records and the checks made out to "Cash," and told how she had been "isolated" in a "soundproof room." She said that the men in the office "used racist and sexist language" (but noted that they had not sexually harassed her), and that some of them seemed to be living well beyond their means. They owned racehorses and lakefront vacation homes—things that she couldn't see how they could afford on their salaries. Watkins had heard this before from Cornelius, and had discounted it as youthful speculation. Foster, too, seemed dubious, noting later that Cornelius had made these observations "despite the fact she'd been isolated."

Significantly, Thomason, who had impressed Foster that morning as being keen on improving the President's image, offered his opinion that "it would be a great story to replace the old staff with new staff who could save money." Watkins noted that the travel staffers could be fired "at will" without cause, because they served at the pleasure of the President. But firing people of long service without cause could be dangerous public relations, devaluing the "great story," and, as someone in the meeting pointed out, Billy Dale and his staff seemed to have good relations with the press. (Dale was, in fact, beloved by the travelling press corps, although the president of the White House Correspondents' Association had recently complained about the rising costs of press travel.) Foster conceded that he and Kennedy couldn't ignore such serious charges, but he later noted, "There could be nothing there." How to find out? With no auditing capability, there was the problem of getting information that "will show cause and possibly criminal conduct," Foster noted. But Kennedy, who handled White House security issues, said that he regularly spoke with someone at the F.B.I., and would seek the Bureau's advice on how to proceed—an impulsive decision that would prove extremely unfortunate for the Administration.

The issue was now clearly posed. On the basis of the speculations of a young former campaign worker (none of the people at the meeting yet knew she was the President's cousin), which she had deduced from her amateurish investigation, and the vague allegations of a Hollywood pal of the President's, whatever his good intentions, should the White House senior staff, under the direction of its counsel's office, seek to establish wrongdoing on the part of the in-house travel agents in order to produce a "great story"? Everything about Vince Foster—his instinct for caution, his innate decency—dictated a course of thoughtful restraint. But the move to act against the travel staff already had powerful momentum, and it soon gained more.

THE next day—Thursday, May 13th—Foster had a late lunch and then went to see the First Lady. They discussed her health-care project—an operation over which she did have formal authority—and then she brought up the travel office. "Are you on top of it?" she asked. Later, trying to describe her mood, Foster wrote "general impatience" and then, seeking a better word, chose "general frustration." As for his answer to her question, he wrote, "I responded we just heard about it yesterday," and he assured the First Lady that Kennedy was already looking into it.

There is little doubt that Mrs. Clinton's interest intensified the sense of urgency that was now driving the travel-office matter. Dealing with the wishes of a First Lady is a tricky matter for any White House staff, and Mrs. Clinton's power was not merely inferred. She had been an influential adviser to her husband throughout his political life, but in Arkansas she had had a separate career, practicing law at the Rose firm. She wasn't in and around the Governor's Mansion all day, involving herself in daily business, which some Clinton people thought was just as well. As patently smart as she was, and as much as her discipline and fierce will to prevail made her an asset, the pure political talent in the family belonged almost entirely to Bill. Hillary was infinitely less apt than her husband at sensing what the public would countenance, as she showed in the image she projected during Clinton's first term as governor, when she insisted on keeping her maiden name and was studiously indifferent to such trivial matters as personal style. John Brummett, an Arkansas journalist who covered the Clinton era in the state, says, "She has no willingness to adapt to circumstances. It's her way or no

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"I forget—did we decide to see something life-affirming or something mind-numbing?"

way. You're either for her or against her."

If in Little Rock Mrs. Clinton did not routinely involve herself in everyday management matters, in the White House she not only was in charge of her husband's biggest policy initiative—health care—but also exerted a presence that had to be reckoned with on other matters. This had been demonstrated very early, in the matter of the White House press corps. Mrs. Clinton was deeply distrustful of the news media, and shortly after the Inauguration she was behind the decision to end reporters' access to certain parts of the White House press office—a move that naturally created considerable resentment among the reporters. It was a bad start with the White House press, and it may have exacerbated an extremely awkward situation that had developed with the First Family in the early weeks of their life in the White House—the famous incident in February in which she was alleged to have smashed a lamp (or, in some media reports, to have thrown a Bible at the President). Mrs. Clinton, feeling beleaguered, assumed that the story, which she has said was false, had been leaked to the press by one of the Secret Service agents assigned to guard her and her family, and she was not entirely surprised, for she had been warned that potential trouble lay in the permanent staff assigned to the White House, whose loyalties were suspect. Prior to the leak, the First Lady had expressed particular discomfort with the Secret Service detail assigned to her family, and had asked Foster and Watkins to have it removed in favor of the detail that had been assigned to them during the campaign and the transition. Foster and Watkins went to see the Secret Service chief for the President's private security, John McGaw, who told them that he thought the Clintons were overreacting.

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When the lamp story appeared in the press, Foster, Watkins, and McLarty were called in to a meeting in the Oval Office with the President and his wife and other senior staffers, at which Mrs. Clinton suggested that they had not been responsive enough to the First Family's wishes, and that their Arkansas manners and reserve were not suited to the alley fight that Washington presented. "You are too nice, too naïve," she told them. Later, Watkins, in a draft of his "soul cleansing" memorandum, which was written to McLarty but was never sent, specifically cited that incident as a motivating factor in the travel-office affair: "I was convinced that failure to take immediate action in this case would have been directly contrary to the wishes of the First Lady, something that would not have been tolerated in light of the Secret Service incident earlier in the year."

Mrs. Clinton was pained by all the bad publicity. What's more, her father, Hugh Rodham, who had suffered a stroke two months after the Inauguration, died in April. Those family concerns forced delays on the health-care plan, which had been promised for early May. She was not one to conceal her frustrations, and Vince Foster was particularly sensitive to her mood. Once her protector and closest friend inside the Rose firm, he was now her employee, and bore perhaps more than his share of her expressed frustration. "Vince took the brunt of the Hillary stuff," one Arkansan in the Clinton circle says. "Hillary would say things to Vince about others in the White House that she would not say to them directly. I will tell you that, for every chilling that Watkins or Mack got, Vince probably got about six. If she was mad at anyone—it didn't matter who it was—Vince got it." Another Arkansan who knew the Vince-Hillary relationship well says of those difficult months, "She yelled at him all the time."

When Mrs. Clinton asked Foster if he was "on top of" the travel-office matter, on May 13th, that in itself would have motivated him to see it resolved. He and the First Lady had a second meeting that afternoon, and she again brought up the subject. Foster wrote in his notes that Mrs. Clinton conveyed "general frustration with management drift" and, later, that "HRC generally appeared less than satisfied with timeliness of decision-making, i.e. cloture." Apparently, Foster relayed those concerns more forcefully to Watkins, for Watkins's own notes covering this time mention "periodic reports from Vince Foster that First Lady had inquired about travel office + why wasn't action being taken—Report was that they should be fired immediately + out of here by the end of the day."

When, in the second meeting, Mrs. Clinton asked Foster about the travel office, he was able to give her news of some progress. Watkins had told Foster that he'd found an auditor, Larry Herman, of the firm KPMG Peat Marwick, which was already in the White House, working with Vice-President Gore on the "reinventing government" project, and that the management-review team had agreed to take a look at the travel office. "[We] will use outside auditors," Foster told her. "Let's see what's there."

Watkins's news about Peat Marwick was a welcome development, perhaps obviating the need for the F.B.I. investigation that Kennedy had been considering. The F.B.I.'s integrity resides in its independence from political pressures. Foster hadn't stopped Kennedy from making contact with the F.B.I., but Kennedy had said he meant only to seek "guidance." However, Kennedy may have been overemphatic in seeking the Bureau's help. According to the agents Kennedy first spoke to, he told them that "he was being directed at the highest level of the White House," and that if the F.B.I. couldn't help perhaps he could approach another agency, such as the Internal Revenue Service. (Kennedy disputes those agents' reports.) In any case, Foster met with two F.B.I. agents and told them, "We might have a better way"—a reference to the Peat Marwick audit—and asked them to hold off on their investigation.

By this time, travel-office fever had spread through the senior staff of the White House, and the debate was not over whether the staff should be dismissed but how, and when. Jeff Eller argued vigorously in favor of firing the staff immediately. He had been one of the proponents of the theory that the dismissals would make a good story, but he also cautioned that delay could backfire if the staff got wise and launched a counter-offensive with its friends in the press. Eller urged that the firings be announced Friday, May 14th, at 5 P.M. McLarty said that he didn't want to act precipitately—that he wanted things done "in a businesslike way"—and instructed that action be delayed until word from Peat Marwick was in.

The management review (it was not strictly an audit) began that Friday, under the pretense that the inspection was part of the reinventing-government project. Through the weekend, reports from the review team were awaited like dispatches from the battlefront. Watkins had flown South for his stepdaughter's college graduation, but he stayed in touch with the auditors. Watkins's notes record that

Foster "says he's getting more pressure from First Lady to *act.*" From Little Rock, and then from Memphis (where his stepdaughter's school was), Watkins checked with his deputy, Patsy Thomasson, nearly a dozen times for progress reports. She reported that the review team was finding sloppy records, missing cash that was unaccounted for, and general disarray—just the news that Watkins and the others expected. (The written report eventually produced by Peat Marwick was rather less dramatic in its tone than the reports that Watkins received that weekend, but all the allegations of wrongdoing were repeated in it.)

In a phone call from the White House on Friday evening, Foster had asked Watkins to report what he'd learned directly to the First Lady. As Watkins recounts the conversation, he began, "Vince has asked me to call you and tell you what's going on with regard to this review by Peat Marwick," and went on to tell the First Lady that the review team's reports were finding more than anyone expected. He said he would be in his office on Monday and would take "whatever action is necessary."

"Harry says his people can run things better," the First Lady said, according to Watkins. She said she had been told that it was a mistake to keep people held over from another Administration, and added, "We need to get those people out. We need our people in." Mrs. Clinton denies saying this. Recently, she issued a statement that read, in part, "I did not direct that any particular action should be taken, nor did I make particular comments about what should be done . . . *e.g.*, that I thought the Travel Office people 'should be out.' "

Watkins was already working on a strategy for keeping the travel office functioning once the staff was gone—an outcome that by this point no one involved in the matter doubted. The travel staff's work would be temporarily "outsourced" to World Wide Travel, and the office would be run by Catherine Cornelius. (Additionally, Darnell Martens had arranged for charter planes to be standing by. "Aircraft are being reviewed for Sun., if needed," Martens faxed to Harry Thomason. "I can be at the White House to assist 'C' as needed to begin operations.") Foster, meanwhile, had asked Thomason if he would benefit by the new arrangement, and Thomason assured him that he would not.

"Must you blue-pencil everything I say?"

By Sunday night, the preliminary report was in from Peat Marwick, showing serious mismanagement, as had been expected. Although the final written report was not yet in, Watkins decided that he would fire the employees that week. (Vince Foster later wrote that the possibility of waiting for the final report was not discussed.) The seven travel-office staff members had still not been confronted with any accusations.

That night, May 16th, Mack McLarty had dinner with the President and the First Lady. She had spoken to him a few days earlier about the travel office, and it was discussed again at supper. McLarty summarized the essence of the conversation in a handwritten note: "HRC pressure."

The next morning, while Watkins was in his office reviewing the Peat Marwick report, McLarty stopped by. He talked about his dinner with the President and the First Lady the night before, and said that the travel office was on the First Lady's "radar screen." Watkins went to work on a memorandum for McLarty (which he dutifully cc'd to the First Lady), outlining the dismissals and laying out his temporary plan for running the travel office. At midday, Watkins received word that Billy Dale wanted to speak with him; when the two men did speak, around 5 P.M., Dale offered to resign. Watkins put him off, and explained that he would be holding a meeting for all travel-office employees two days later.

The quest for favorable news seemed particularly urgent that week, for the President was again caught in the vortex of a bad spin. The Belgian-born hair stylist Christophe (who had been introduced to Clinton by the Thomasons) had given the President a two-hundred-dollar haircut aboard Air Force One in Los Angeles, triggering another round of unfavorable news stories. On Wednesday, Watkins, citing the President's efficiency mandate, dismissed the seven employees of the White House travel office. They were given until the end of the day to gather their belongings and be gone.

As it turned out, those who had advocated the firings because they would be a good story were right in thinking that Billy Dale and his colleagues had friends in the press. Dale had

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somehow obtained a copy of Catherine Cornelius's eight-page memorandum to Watkins in which she proposed a reorganized travel office with herself at the top, as well as the Martens memo pitching TRM for White House business; both memos were leaked to the Washington *Post* (Dale denies personal involvement in the leak), and the travel-office story became deliciously clear—the White House had sacked seven career employees without notice in order to benefit a Hollywood pal and a Clinton cousin. (The relationship was revealed on May 19th.) The fact that the employees served at the pleasure of the President and that there had been some dramatic mishandling of office records and funds was not unreported, but it paled next to the accusation of naked cronyism. Making matters worse was the emerging picture that the White House may have manipulated the F.B.I. in order to provide cover for the firings.

The F.B.I.'s involvement became part of the controversy through a disastrous misjudgment by David Watkins. On the day of the firings, Watkins prepared a set of "talking points" highlighting key issues to be referred to in dealings with the press—the White House line. The briefing paper posed the firings as part of the reinventing-government project, and also mentioned an F.B.I. audit, reflecting Watkins's belief that it would bolster the White House's case for the firings and generate the great story about how Bill Clinton was cleaning house. In reality, of course, the F.B.I. had become involved only at William Kennedy's insistence, and, far from having begun an investigation, it had not even participated—at Foster's request—in the Peat Marwick review. Watkins gave a copy of his "talking points" to Dee Dee Myers, the press secretary, and sent another copy to Foster. When Foster saw the reference to the F.B.I., he recognized a land mine and instructed Watkins to delete it. Watkins did, but he couldn't find Myers, who had gone to Capitol Hill and, as it turned out, had already told a reporter about the F.B.I. "audit."

Just the fact of revealing an ongoing Bureau inquiry was bad enough—such a revelation is strictly against Bureau rules—but the intimation of a White House-F.B.I. collaboration was about to become painful. When reporters inevitably began asking about the justification for the firings, the White House and the Bureau seemed to be saying two different things. The F.B.I.'s first press response said only that the Bureau was awaiting the final Peat Marwick report and "will analyze their findings and conduct appropriate investigation." That was not exactly language mandating the drastic action of firing the office workers, or even of announcing that they were F.B.I. suspects. The Bureau's spokesman, John Collingwood, was summoned to a meeting in the office of George Stephanopoulos, the White House communications director. At the meeting, which Foster attended, the White House communications people asked if the F.B.I. couldn't use stronger language, and Collingwood agreed to their request. Word of that White House meeting and the change it produced soon got out, and the result, predictably, was disastrous. The "great story" had become another sign of a White House not up to the task of governing. Editorialists scolded, and Republicans clamored for a congressional investigation.

One unforeseen consequence of all this ineptitude was the devastation of Vince Foster. He alone appeared to realize the scope of the management failure, and its potential consequences. His wife, Lisa, couldn't comprehend his reaction to what she saw as a minor dustup, especially since the firings weren't his doing anyway. "It's not your fault," she kept telling him, but Foster—so determined always to do the right thing—took the disaster personally: he had been in charge, and he surely knew that his effort to be responsive to the wishes of his "client" might now lead to her exposure.

The White House geared up for damage control. Watkins was instructed to fire Betta Carney's staff. Stephanopoulos announced that five dismissed travel-office workers, who had not handled the accounts—but had been tainted as F.B.I. suspects—would be put on administrative leave and that new government jobs would be found for them. And the White House announced that it would conduct its own thorough review of the lamentable blunder. The inquiry would be led by John Podesta, the White House staff secretary, and his assistant, Todd Stern, who were both lawyers. The First Lady's involvement was an extremely sensitive issue in the White House, raising again the matter of the famous Clinton "twoferism." Like so many of the distresses vexing the Clintons, it would seem in retrospect a puzzling case of their trying to cover up something that wasn't really much more than an embarrassment. Even if Mrs. Clinton, believing that there was incompetence or worse in the travel office, had instigated the firings, what was she guilty of? Meddling? The fact is, though, that that was precisely the perception the White House wanted to avoid. Mrs. Clinton's shared, though un-

"Hi! I'm the Bluebird of Happiness. Can I get your ex-wife's new address?"

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THE BOLT

That girl so long ago walked, as they all did, shopgirls,
Little cousins, and church friends, to the unflattering
Hack of the hem just where the calf begins to swell,
Felt ruchings of the bodice's stiff panels
Gall the flesh beside the flattening ornate
Armature of underwear (like pads and straps
For livestock, fretted by tooling and bright studs),
So she must yank her knees against
Pounds of rigid drapery in the storm of heat,

Trailing through the pestering, gray heads
Of Queen Anne's lace, wind ravelling
Her hair and sweeping through prolific
Jagged-bladed grass—a wind that pressed down
There like God with both His hands, mashing the air,
Darkening the hole where the dry mouth of the wood
Yawned to drink the stumbling travellers already touched
By the heavy sacs of rain that broke and ran
In gouts down saturated pleats of serge . . .

Here that girl ran last, so long ago, to be run through
By one long lightning thread that entered, through
A slender purple bruise, the creamy skin of her temple.

The instant that it happened, nobody remembered
How she looked or spoke, so quickly had she blended
With this evocation of her having been.

This was the past: a stroke of imagery stare-
Frozen, finished in suspension.

—MARY KINZIE

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elected, power had come to be seen as a political liability. As Bill Clinton began to define his Presidency—with executive orders protecting abortion rights and gays in the military, and with the selection of a Cabinet that "looked like America," and so on—there was a growing sense that the so-called New Democrat centrist had ceded primacy to his wife's liberal agenda. It was a partisan assumption, and, while it was only partly true, it was powerful nonetheless. (The conservative syndicated columnist Tony Snow soon picked up on the theme of Mrs. Clinton, unappointed and unelected, exercising administrative power in the travel-office matter.) The last thing the Clintons needed was Travelgate as evidence of Hillary Clinton's sway.

Foster was determined not to let that happen. When his turn came to be interviewed by Podesta and Stern, he told them, "I assume many of the conversations I had were privileged." In the interview that followed, it is plain which conversations Foster deemed privileged—those he had with his "client." He gave the interviewers a chronology of events, including even his barber's appointment, but he did not mention the First Lady. Toward the end of the session, Todd Stern seemed to be edging toward the issue of Mrs. Clinton by asking Foster if "anyone else" was "involved." Foster cut Stern off with "I think that's all I should say about that."

Watkins also tried, though less determinedly, to protect the First Lady. In his session in Podesta's office, he was asked if he had anything to say about Mrs. Clinton, and he replied "No." Later, Foster asked him about the interview, and Watkins, the former Army officer, said, "I fell on my sword"—a line he also used with Mack McLarty. In a note written at the time, Watkins mused, "Is the real story to be told?"

But Podesta was able to discern the First Lady's involvement anyway—the fact that Watkins had cc'd Mrs. Clinton on his memo outlining the firings was a pretty good hint—and it was evident that the issue would have to be addressed. Podesta went to Foster for another session. They met on June 30th in Foster's office, and this time Foster, pressed, gave a grudging sketch of Mrs. Clinton's role. He told of the two meetings he had had with her, in which she asked what was being done about the travel office, and, in a strikingly qualified concession, he admitted that "I may have had a few short, incidental, non-substantive discussions subsequently" with the First Lady.

Even at the outset of the inquiry, Stern sensed that Mrs. Clinton's role might have been significant. In handwritten notes dated May 27th, he considered the problem facing him and his colleague: "If we do any kind of report & *fail* to address these q[uestion]s, press jumps on you wanting to know answers; while if you give answers that aren't fully honest (e.g., nothing re HRC) you risk hugely compounding the problem by getting caught in half-truths. You run risk of turning this into a 'coverup.' " Stern noted almost hopefully that there was a chance that the whole thing would merely be blamed on incompetence, but he lamented that the press "will want to get to the bottom of it. It's their nature." He also posed the possibility of simply telling the truth. "We need to think seriously about whether or not it won't be better to come clean, even to point of conceding that HRC had some interest."

THE "White House Travel Office Management Review," issued by Podesta just before the July 4th weekend, was a strikingly harsh criticism of the management process that had led to the travel-office firings. Kennedy, Cornelius, Eller, and Watkins were singled out for reprimands, and the reviewers concluded that "Thomason should have avoided continued involvement in a matter . . . in which there was an appearance of financial conflict of interest," and blamed "lax procedures" for his "continued participation" and free-ranging influence. As it happened, Foster's and Watkins's wives played tennis together on the day the report came out, and when they heard the news Lisa Foster was astonished that Vince hadn't been one of those reprimanded. He had accepted blame, and had fully expected to shoulder it. Watkins, in contrast, was bitterly angry over the report, which seemed to blame him even for Harry Thomason's role. When McLarty told him about the reprimand, he sarcastically asked, "Does this mean I don't get to work in government anymore?" Watkins felt that he had done the bidding of his client, the First Lady, that he had protected her from exposure, and that his reward was a public rebuke. He stewed for a time, and finally decided to put down in writing what he called "a soul cleansing, carefully detailing the surrounding circumstances and the pressures that demanded that action be taken immediately." In it, using words he later came to regret, Watkins wrote, "It is my first attempt to be sure the record is straight, something I have not done in previous conversations with investigators—where I have been as protective and vague as possible." In the memo, Watkins also attempted to answer the offending findings of the Podesta report point by point, and recalled the Secret Service incident, noting that "the First Lady in particular was extremely upset with the delayed action in that case." He proceeded to draw a picture of her involvement in Travelgate, beginning with Harry Thomason's conversations and continuing all the way through—to "her insistence that the situation be resolved immediately by replacing the Travel Office staff." He and McLarty, he went on, "both knew there would be hell to pay if, after our failure in the Secret Service situation earlier, we failed to take swift and decisive action in conformity with the First Lady's wishes." The memorandum became public on January 3rd of this year, after it was discovered by the White House and released to the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee.

Vince Foster, for his part, had reason to find comfort in the Podesta report. He had not been reprimanded, and, more important, the First Lady had been mentioned only in passing. However, he was not comforted; instead, he slipped into a crippling depression, seized by anxiety over what might still lie ahead. His family and his close friends knew that he was deeply worried about a congressional hearing, but they couldn't fathom the depth of his despair, and their efforts to lift it were unavailing. Foster seemed obsessed with the issue, urging that the Clintons hire outside lawyers, and searching for legal representation for himself. How would he respond to a partisan probe into the matter, he asked himself. How would he answer questions about Mrs. Clinton's involvement?

Foster was gripped by a deepening emotional illness, yet among the Clinton inner circle he alone seemed able to picture the circumstances with clarity. The evidence suggests that it is likely that he glimpsed in advance the scenario that did in fact occur—the ceaseless inquiries that have placed David Watkins under investigation and led to Hillary Clinton's being hounded by congressional committees. Indeed, in addition to hearings by the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee and Senator Alfonse D'Amato's special committee investigating Whitewater, four separate organizations—the White House, the F.B.I., the General Accounting Office, and the Department of Justice—have all produced detailed reports on Travelgate.

In a spiral notebook Foster laid out the particulars of the case, and, whether he intended to do so or not, he sketched the defense that the White House has followed in regard to the First Lady: "Defend management decision, thereby defend HRC role whatever it was in fact or might have been misperceived to be."

EIGHT months after Foster's death, an official from the General Accounting Office put the issue of Mrs. Clinton's influence on the travel-office matter directly to the First Lady: "How would you describe and to whom would you attribute the origin of the decision to remove the Travel Office employees? How would you characterize your role in that decision?"

Mrs. Clinton gave her response, in April of 1994, through a White House lawyer, Neil Eggleston. "Mrs. Clinton does not know the origin of the decision to remove the White House Travel Office employees," the response said. "Mrs. Clinton was aware that Mr. Watkins was undertaking a review of the situation in the Travel Office, but she had no role in the decision to terminate the employees."

That statement served as Mrs. Clinton's final word on the subject until the revelation of the Watkins memorandum made it plain that either Watkins had lied—in a memo he never sent—or Mrs. Clinton had been less than forthcoming. The House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, now controlled by Republicans, seized on the opening and went after Mrs. Clinton again, serving her with a twenty-six-question interrogatory about her role in the travel-office firings and pointedly asking about her earlier statements to the G.A.O. The questions carried an ominous subtext—that knowingly giving false answers could be criminal. This time, Mrs. Clinton's answers, on March 21st of this year, came in a sworn statement. She stood by her answers to the G.A.O. but elaborated on them. She contradicted Watkins's account, denying that she had told him to fire the travel staff, but conceded, in lawyerly phrasing, "Although I had no decision-making role with regard to the removal of the Travel Office employees . . . I expressed my concern . . . that if there were fiscal mismanagement in the Travel Office or in any part of the White House it should be addressed promptly. I am sure I felt such action could include, if necessary and justified, appropriate personnel actions so that this Administration would not be blamed for condoning any existing fiscal mismanagement problems."

As scandal, Travelgate lends itself to the argument of Clinton supporters that there is nothing to be got at there, no blatant crimes or misdemeanors. But that is what makes it the perfect emblem of the distresses that have visited the Clintons from the start—the discovery of low impulses in high-minded people. As with the cattle-futures windfall, or with the misbegotten Whitewater alliance with Jim McDougal, the travel-office affair began as a relatively petty embarrassment, and was exponentially magnified by a determined reluctance subsequently to own up.

TRAVELGATE revealed to Harry and Linda Thomason the downside of First Friendship, and they exchanged their high-profile Washington presence for the relative calm of Hollywood. Harry's role regarding the travel office had been prominently cited in the Podesta report, and had prompted new rules controlling White House access. Before

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"Sorry, we're all cat people. The dog people are in that boat over there."

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leaving town, however, the Thomasons held forth in a series of interviews, in which they meant to make clear their take on the Washington experience. Any suggestion that the Thomasons would use their friendship with the Clintons for business gain was ludicrous, Linda said, for, "given our salaries, setting our sights on the White House travel office would be the financial equivalent of us taking over someone's lemonade stand." She declared Washington an "incestuous insane asylum," and said that if well-meaning people like them met with such inhospitality "Mother Teresa better stay out of town." And then they left. (Thomason has since been hit with an eighty-million-dollar libel suit by the former C.E.O. of a company accused of paying kickbacks to the travel office. A motion to dismiss is pending.)

The Travelgate fallout was even more traumatic for Billy Dale, whose laxity in handling travel-office funds had included parking some of the money in his own checking account. That led to his indictment in 1994 on charges of embezzlement. Although Dale never denied putting the travel-office money in his own account, he strenuously maintained that he was not a thief but merely a sloppy manager. As his legal bills mounted, he even agreed to plead guilty to putting the funds in his own account, which is, strictly defined, criminal embezzlement, but he insisted upon a statement in the plea agreement acknowledging that he had never spent a dime of the money on himself. The government refused the deal, and pressed the case to trial. A line of prominent Washington journalists testified that Billy Dale was no crook, and the prosecution was unable to establish that Dale had used any of the travel money for himself. The jury acquitted him after deliberating for less than two hours.

Catherine Cornelius was reassigned, to the White House personnel office; she is now its deputy director. According to Watkins's notes, she said that no one could ask her "to leave or be transferred" except Mack McLarty or the President. Jeff Eller later resigned as the White House director of media affairs and is currently working as a political consultant in Texas.

For David Watkins, the travel-office affair began a long, untidy process of separation from the Clintons. After reprimanding him for Travelgate, the White House had signalled that his future as a senior aide was uncertain at best, and in the summer of 1993 he began looking for a job. The White House, meanwhile, was edging him toward the door, but with some caution. Watkins presented the Clintons with a particular problem. He had been dutifully "protective and vague" in recounting his story to investigators. He had not gone public with his story—he hadn't even sent his memo to McLarty although he had given a copy to Patsy Thomasson, in whose files the memo was eventually found). But Watkins's protectiveness had its limits. In July of 1993, Watkins sketched some elements of his story for F.B.I. agents who were investigating Billy Dale, and in December he mentioned the First Lady's involvement in a session with interviewers from the G.A.O. while Neil Eggleston, the White House lawyer, was in attendance.

In January of 1994, Watkins was moved out of the White House and back into the Old Executive Office Building. Still he tarried, believing himself a faithful member of the team. Then, on May 2nd, the General Accounting Office issued its report on Travelgate, citing Watkins's account of his conversation with the First Lady in which "she urged that action be taken to get 'our people' into the Travel Office." In her written responses to the G.A.O.'s questions about that conversation, Mrs. Clinton said she did "not recall this conversation with the same level of detail as Mr. Watkins" and "had no role" in the decision to fire the employees. The First Lady and Watkins had now issued conflicting stories, and Watkins attempted to repair the damage. Perhaps hoping to reassure Mrs. Clinton of his continuing loyalty, he wrote a "Dear Hillary" note to the First Lady, saying that his memo had been misconstrued by the G.A.O. reviewers. "The G.A.O erred in stating that I said you urged me to replace members of the travel office with 'our people.' 'Urge' is not a word I commonly use. Additionally, as I know you have experienced many times, the statement was reported out of context without my complete response to their questions being reported." Watkins said he regretted the attempts to tie Mrs. Clinton in to the travel-office affair, and ended his note with a final declaration of loyalty: "I have always *known* who my 'client' is."

Shortly afterward, Watkins was forced to leave the Clinton circle, after another incident that embarrassed the White House: his use of a Presidential helicopter to check out a country club (he was Clinton's unofficial golf adviser) near the President's retreat at Camp David, Maryland.

Nevertheless, for nine months Watkins maintained his ties with the Clintons. He was paid a consulting fee of three thousand dollars a month by the Clinton-Gore campaign to help settle its financial accounts. In the summer of 1994, Watkins took a job in investor relations with Calloway Golf, and last fall he and his wife returned to Washington, and he is scouting new business acquisitions for a direct-marketing firm there. After his memo became public and Watkins was questioned again, this time by the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, he again assumed his "protective and vague" posture. The apparent contradictions between his public and private statements annoyed Republican inquisitors and prompted the Whitewater independent counsel, Kenneth W. Starr, to investigate Watkins for possible false statement. Now, therefore, Watkins finds himself in the untenable role of unwilling whistle-blower, his credibility squeezed between the interests of the Clintons and the interests of those who would facilitate their undoing. He is, at bottom, an advertising man who tried to please his client, and in doing so he grossly disserved her. A more able manager might have contained the travel-office issue before it heated up into a frenzy; a less self-serving aide would never have written the infamous "soul cleansing" memorandum. Now he is stuck, irretrievably outside the Clinton circle yet subject to criminal punishment for his attempts, however feeble, to demonstrate his loyalty. "I have really got into a lose-lose situation," he says. "I'm looked upon as a guy who, instead of being standup and protective, is a whiner and wrote a cover-your-ass memo. . . . I want it to go away. You can't believe what it costs"—in legal fees. "And this should have been a nothing story."

THE fact of Travelgate's relative triviality, made large in the hothouse of partisan Washington, lay at the core of Vince Foster's despair. He even told his wife, Lisa, that he meant to resign over the issue, though the thought of returning to Arkansas in disgrace deeply offended his high sense of honor. On the last weekend of his life, he took a short vacation with Lisa to Maryland's Eastern Shore, where they ran into Webster Hubbell, Foster's best friend. Hubbell thought that the outing did Foster some good—that he'd actually managed to get his mind off Travelgate—but one of the first things he did when he and Lisa got home on Sunday night, July 18th, was to telephone the Denver attorney Jim Lyons, whose assistance Foster had urgently sought for the congressional investigation that he was certain would come. They talked about the travel office for half an hour.

Many people have found it difficult to believe that something as banal as the White House travel office could have played the central role in the high drama of a top aide's suicide. The event itself came to be referred to as a "scandal," in quotes, to denote its lesser importance beside the Clinton controversy of tangled finance and a long-ago land investment called Whitewater. But Foster himself had been quite clear on the subject, repeatedly expressing his distress over Travelgate to his family and friends, and, most pointedly, in his famous "suicide note." "I made mistakes from ignorance, inexperience and overwork," he wrote. "I did not knowingly violate any law or standard of conduct. No one in the White House, to my knowledge, violated any law or standard of conduct, including any action in the travel office. There was no intent to benefit any individual or specific group. The press is covering up the illegal benefits they received from the travel staff."

The particular investigation by the House Judiciary Committee that was so worrying Foster in the last days of his life never took place; it was killed by the Democratic majority that then ruled Congress. But Foster knew that in the feral culture of politics the issue would not go away, and he said so to Hubbell. It turned out, of course, that Foster was right. There would be investigations, and the hounding would never end. On July 20, 1993, after eating lunch at his desk, Foster slung his suit jacket over his shoulder, got into his car in the White House parking lot, and drove to Fort Marcy Park. ♦

"Ralph has his own little microbrewery."