

CHAPTER 1

A Wednesday in November

November 15, 1995, at first glance, was a rather eroticized day in Washington, D.C.

At 10 a.m., the Justice Department announced that fashion designer Calvin Klein and his company's ad agency had not violated U.S. law, even though they had hired inordinately youthful-looking models for a suggestive new jeans campaign.

Later that morning, supporters of Hooters—the restaurant chain known for its bosomy, T-shirt-clad waitstaff—staged a rally in D.C.'s Freedom Plaza. They had come to protest a federal sex-discrimination ruling that called for male employees to be phased into the ranks of its women-only service crew. In response, dozens of “Hooters Girls” assembled, citing political correctness run amok. Some lofted signs with such messages as “Men as Hooters Guys—What a Drag.”

Outside the capital, too, there seemed to be Eros in the air. Throughout the day, newscasts ran accounts of Britain's Princess Diana's adulterous relationship with James Hewitt, an officer in the Household Cavalry Regiment. Theaters showed trailers for the new James Bond film, *GoldenEye*, in which a sultry assassin named Xenia Onatopp crushes men to death with her thighs (and reaches orgasm as they expire). On the R&B charts, R. Kelly was rolling out “You Remind Me of Something,” with lyrics comparing his “babe” to a Jeep, which he said he wanted to “wax,” “ride,” and “get inside.” ABC-TV aired *The Naked Truth*, featuring Téa Leoni as an accomplished photojournalist who works at a tabloid where she's asked to do things like pilfer a sample of Anna Nicole Smith's urine to determine if the model is pregnant. And atop the *New York Times* Best Seller List, General Colin Powell's autobiography, *My*

American Journey, was supplanted by *Miss America*, a provocative memoir by radio renegade Howard Stern, who appeared in drag on the book's front cover.

Back in Washington, a government shutdown was in effect, a tactical ploy by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who had sought to force the president's hand in a nasty budget battle. As a result, most federal employees had not reported for work—and at the White House a scaled-down staff was on duty. Shortly after 10 p.m.—as outlined in the official report of the independent prosecutor—President William Jefferson Clinton and a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky, then twenty-two, repaired to a “windowless hallway adjacent to the study . . . off the Oval Office” and shared the first of what would be many intimate encounters over the course of the next two years. Their ensuing relationship would ultimately contribute, by the end of the decade, to the president's impeachment.

But was that particular Wednesday, in hindsight, really out of the ordinary? One could make a persuasive case that it was a fairly *representative* twenty-four hours in the nation's erotic life—a day in a decade that followed

thirty years of evolving exploration, from the sexual revolution of the '60s through the women's and gay rights movements of the '70s and '80s. The 1990s, as it turns out, were marked by several milestones that would force Americans across all sectors of society to reexamine their views on sexual politics, on physical attraction, on their tolerance for others' sexual orientation, and on innumerable other subjects related to human intimacy.

Sex had gone mainstream in, of all places, the historically puritanical United States. Long discussed sotto voce, individuals' sexual desires and hang-ups and biases were now an integral part of a larger social conversation. Indeed, the fractious debate about private sexuality and public life would begin to color many facets of the national psyche well into the twenty-first century.

Call it the Naughty Nineties.

The decade began with blaring tabloid headlines about real estate mogul Donald Trump and his inamorata Marla Maples, a young model and actress. (Over the winter holiday break, 1989, the pair had been confronted by Trump's wife Ivana on the slopes at Aspen. The Trumps would soon divorce.) The decade ended on the eve of the 2000 election with an America in suspended agitation, doubtful that presidential hopeful Al Gore could emerge from the shadow of his predecessor's sex scandal and impeachment (he couldn't) and uncertain that com-



puter programs could evade a global “Y2K” meltdown (they did, even though tech fortunes would evaporate a few months later when the dot-com bubble burst).

The decade began, in strictly economic terms, with day one of the bull market, on October 11, 1990. It ended with the inauguration of George W. Bush on January 20, 2001, after a contentious, disputed election that signaled the collapse of the high-living, free-spending, balls-out era from Reagan-Bush up through Clinton-Gore. The pivotal midpoint of the decade, one could argue, was that Wednesday in November 1995 when a president and an intern began their relationship, a week coincident with a Wall Street watershed, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average, according to the *New York Times*, “tied the 20th century record of 59 new highs in one year, previously achieved only in 1925 and 1964.” (The financial newswires that day were reporting that Netscape, the company behind Mosaic, the first major Web browser, was about to reward its shareholders with a two-for-one stock split.)

Though we hardly realized it at the time, the 1990s turned out to be a period in which significant issues related to sexual conduct and mores—and an inundation of erotically explicit stimuli—saturated the culture and stoked the Internet, reaching across age groups and demographic frontiers. This book will explore these implications through interviews, reporting, and cultural analysis. Its chapters will alternate between discussions of female and male sexuality; social change and popular culture; the ongoing culture war; and, as a sort of through line, the presidency of Bill Clinton. *The Naughty Nineties*, by focusing on the stories of well-known personalities—and accidental players caught up in decisive events—will show how our paradoxical value system helped shape the decade in ways that still resonate and confound us.

First off, the lay of the land, if you’ll excuse the expression.¹

In the 1990s, Baby Boomers had finally come of age and settled into the executive suites of Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and, for the first time, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The counterculture, around which so many Boomers had

1. In these pages, I will avoid making excuses for double entendres. As novelist David Foster Wallace wrote in his memorable 1998 essay for *Premiere* magazine about visiting a Las Vegas porn-industry awards ceremony, “It’s going to be a constant temptation to keep winking and nudging and saying ‘no pun intended’ or ‘as it were’ after every possible off-color entendre ... [so] yr. corrsps. have decided to try to leave most of them to reader’s discretion.” Policy so adopted, under the Wallace Rule. (David Foster Wallace, “Big Red Son” [1998], in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* [Boston: Back Bay/Little, Brown, 2005], 10.)



rallied in their youth, had now *become* the culture. And the “culture wars” of the 1980s and early '90s, under Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, had pitted the advocates of so-called family values (on the right) against those espousing what many would refer to as “moral relativism” (on the left). That skirmish would turn into all-out combat once a young Democrat—socially liberal and politically centrist—commandeered the Oval Office.

With Boomers now calling the cultural shots from the left and center, sexually suggestive fare became not an anomaly but a staple of music and film, the advertising and fashion industries, the tabloids and the mainstream press, as well as network and cable television, where the early-evening entertainment-news shows (chockablock with titillating gossip) segued into a nightly smorgasbord of cheese-cake and innuendo. A Kaiser Family Foundation study would determine that by the 1999–2000 TV season, 68 percent of a given evening’s lineup contained programming with “sexual content”—a 12 percent increase over the year before.

And yet popular culture was merely the outward mantle. There were seismic shifts occurring at society’s core.

On the medical front, Viagra would bestow consistent and credible tumescence on an entire generation of older men. With much fanfare and little stigma, many elderly individuals were sexually awakened over the course of less than seven months (from the FDA’s approval of the drug, in March 1998, to the announcement, the following October, that the Nobel Prize had been awarded to the scientists who’d discovered the biochemical signaling mechanism that made the medicine work). At the same time, estrogen replacement therapy was back in vogue, altering the experience of menopause for hundreds of thousands of women. Even more dramatically, fertility treatments were now allowing women to conceive well into their forties and beyond. Such methods helped recast society’s traditional definition of childbearing years and forever altered mating behavior, parenting decisions, childcare habits, and women’s workplace opportunities. (There was also a steep increase in multiple births due to assisted reproductive technology and the fact that many women were choosing to have children later in life. Some studies would suggest that the rising percentage of children born with autism may have been partly a function of the rising percentage of older men becoming fathers.)

On the other end of the age scale, many preadolescent girls were suddenly confronting their sexuality at an earlier stage than ever before. In 1997, the journal *Pediatrics* appeared to confirm a trend that had been troubling endocri-



nologists. According to a hotly debated study, the onset of puberty's "secondary signs" (such as the growth of pubic hair and breast buds) had dropped to age seven or eight for as much as 15 percent of the female population. In a relatively narrow window of time, then, genuine sexual self-awareness had become a crucial part of life for a much older and, quite often, much younger set.

Meanwhile, many men were existentially adrift. Caught in the tidal currents of second- and third-wave feminism, males of every stripe were struggling to get their bearings. They began to segregate and gather in sweat lodges, en masse (crammed into sports stadiums for Promise Keepers conclaves), and on the National Mall in Washington (for the Million Man March).

At the same time, many women felt themselves empowered, united not by a single cause but by their personal drive and a social conscience. Many began to identify with a new breed of empowerment icon: the self-assured sisters who placed their sexuality front and center. There was Madonna, the pop provocateur who scuttled sexual boundaries and gender stereotypes. And Ellen DeGeneres, who came out twice: first in real life ("Yep, I'm Gay" was *Time* magazine's cover line), and then as Ellen Morgan (in the ABC sitcom *Ellen*). And Terry McMillan, whose novel *Waiting to Exhale* became a field guide to female bonding. And Eve Ensler, whose play *The Vagina Monologues*—an "oral history" of modern female sexuality—became a '90s touchstone.

There were also figures who defied category and convention. There was Anita Hill, whose allegations about Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas would make her the face of sexual harassment. (Thomas would deny her charges.) There was Lorena Bobbitt, who after a moment of madness and rage in which she cut off her husband's penis, would become an unwitting symbol of domestic sexual assault. There was Paula Jones, who sued a sitting president, claiming he had made crude sexual overtures to her while she was an Arkansas state employee. (Clinton would deny her charges.) And hovering above them all were two women central to the president's life in the 1990s: Hillary Rodham Clinton, possibly the most powerful, most polarizing, and (according to polls) most respected American woman for much of the decade; and Monica Lewinsky, who would emerge a generation later to tell a tale of how partisan politics, tabloid journalism, and the Internet had combined to create a national contagion of society-sanctioned voyeurism that compromised civility, invaded privacy, and dashed reputations on gossip's altar.

As the 1990s progressed, new technologies would heat up the sexual climate. The World Wide Web, whatever else it did, helped usher in a digital age of erotic communication and exhibitionism, sexual inquisitiveness and role-playing, online anonymity-and predatory activity. Platforms for personal expression and interaction (chat rooms, blogs, AOL Instant Messenger, and nascent social networking services) would permit people to connect both online and off. What's more, the Internet's ability to efficiently and cheaply deliver all manner of intellectual property—including porn—would bring an abundance of unadulterated "adult content" into the hands of the newly tech-savvy, whether young or old, urban or rural, rich or poor.

Biotechnology also reshaped our understanding of humankind's genetic and sexual building blocks. The decade brought about early experiments with human embryonic stem cells to treat illness and birth defects; the first cloned animal (a sheep, named Dolly, "created" in Scotland); and the near completion of a rough draft of the human genome, which would begin to probe the mysteries of the aging process, identify genetic markers for potential disease and disability, and begin to break the code of what fundamentally makes us men and women.²

Fiscal forces entered the picture as well. The American economic boom of the 1980s and '90s—echoing the Gilded Age of the previous century, the Roaring Twenties, and the Swinging Sixties—helped spur the shift toward increased sexual exploration, allowing more and wealthier Americans to engage in leisure pursuits and in unbridled personal gain and self-expression, often to excess and with little regard for the consequences.

Global geopolitics were at a hinge moment too: the Soviet bloc was dissolving; China was suppressing dissent with an iron fist; Islamist extremism was advancing (Al-Qaeda first attacked the World Trade Center in 1993). On the home front, however, Americans were in a giddy interregnum of narcissism, solipsism, and skyrocketing mutual funds. Of that span from 1989 to 2001, historian and biographer Walter Isaacson has noted, "We had coasted

2. A series of '90s films—including *Jurassic Park*, *Judge Dredd*, *Multiplicity*, *Gattaca*, *The Fifth Element*, and *Alien: Resurrection*—fired the public imagination, warning of the potential dangers of cloning and similar advances. "These movies, some of them sci-fi horror films," science writer David Ewing Duncan reflects, "struck a similar chord to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in its day, which was then a reaction to the new science around electricity and electromagnetism." (Interview with Duncan.)

through the '90s with irrational exuberance.³ Between the fall of the Berlin Wall until the fall of the twin towers, there was nothing unnerving us.”

And then there was the pitched political battle on the home front, which helped transform society's attitudes toward sexuality, marriage, diversity, and inclusion. At the 1992 Republican National Convention, conservatives called for a “cultural war” against the left, charging liberals with contributing to the erosion of “traditional values.” And President Bill Clinton, upon taking office six months later, would begin to introduce a slate of progressive initiatives focused on reproductive rights, women's rights, domestic violence, and the family. (In an early misstep he championed the Pentagon's policy called “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” which would prove to be a myopic and much-derided attempt to allow gays and lesbians to continue to serve in the armed forces.) Meanwhile, three same-sex couples sued the state of Vermont for denying them marriage licenses, and by decade's end the state supreme court would rule that Vermont was legally obligated to accommodate lesbian and gay partners seeking civil unions. Politicians, with unprecedented frequency and candor, were beginning to speak openly of their support for the rights of what would become known as the LGBT community.

New social customs emerged, altering Americans' rites of passage. On campuses, “hooking up” took hold. Twenty-somethings were assembling in chum scrums: groups of postadolescent, irony-clad friends who hung out after work and sometimes moved in together as roomies (keenly rendered in Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X* and a rash of films and TV shows).

New trends came with new names: the booty call, the belly ring, the tramp stamp, the Brazilian bikini wax, the V-chip, the sex tape, the sex tourist, the Rabbit, the little blue pill. There was the Peter Pan complex and the man cave, the bro-mance and the metrosexual, the MILF and the cougar. Increasingly, media outlets turned tabloid, providing 24/7 scandal coverage that would spool out episodically for months at a clip. Greater swatches of everyday life became erotically inflamed. Sexual addiction counseling emerged from therapy's shadows. Pornography

3. “Irrational exuberance” is the term that Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan famously used in a 1996 speech to question whether investors' unrealistic estimates of the market had “unduly escalated asset values, which [might] then become subject to unexpected and prolonged contractions [i.e., market corrections].” (Alan Greenspan, “The Challenge of Central Banking in a Democratic Society,” [federalreserve.gov](http://www.federalreserve.gov), Francis Boyer Lecture, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, December 5, 1996, <http://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/speeches/1996/19961205.htm>.)

became, if not yet respectable, then at least consumer-friendly, slinking out of the bottom dresser drawer and into ever more visible corners of the culture.

During the 1990s, there appeared to be an increase in sexual experimentation and, among Gen-Xers, diminished levels of guilt and dread surrounding sexual activity. This change in behavior was partly a result of a heightened awareness of safe-sex practices and the more open, sophisticated, and graphic conversations—in households, schools, doctors' offices, and even houses of worship—that had come about in the '80s in the wake of the AIDS pandemic. Also playing a significant role was a shifting attitude toward reproductive rights. In the mid-'90s, for the first time, a majority of Americans, 56 percent according to one key study, supported a woman's right to choose. This pivot in opinion—along with the widespread use (and ever more aggressive marketing) of contraceptives—would alter the whole pro-life/pro-choice dynamic, further empowering *and dividing* radical activists on either side.

The changing state of matrimony was a driver as well. Although it sounds self-contradictory, couples in the '90s were increasingly cohabiting before marriage and/or delaying marriage, if they were marrying at all. Those who did marry would frequently end up separated or divorced.⁴ And the divorced, in a curiously American phenomenon, often remarried serially, as Johns Hopkins sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin would later outline in his book *The Marriage-Go-Round*.

Then, of course, there was Bill Clinton himself. The '90s were, after all, the kickoff of the Clinton years. And the public had come to regard the president, not inconsequentially, as a man of deep-seated passions—social, political, personal, and sexual. A purported extramarital affair had first threatened to shatter his candidacy, in 1992. An ongoing court case, mentioned earlier, would dog his presidency. And midway through his second term, a sex scandal almost forced him from office. Indeed, the details of Clinton's private behavior became so prevalent in the day's headlines that the news cycle began to acquire a perplexing sexual overlay.

In effect, the sex acts of the president of the United States had helped recalibrate the public's perception of what in fact constituted "sex." Many Americans began to consider oral sex as being outside the bounds of *actual* sex, claiming to have taken their lead from the leader of the free world, who

4. Though divorce rates rose to a bracing 50 percent during the 1970s and '80s, they actually settled down in the '90s. (Claire Cain Miller, "The Divorce Surge Is Over, but the Myth Lives On," *New York Times*, December 2, 2014.)



had sworn he “did not have sex” during the above-mentioned West Wing encounters—presumably because those liaisons were nonpenetrative. In a reliable yardstick of the changed tenor of the conversation, the *New York Times*, for the first time in its 147-year history, published the word “fuck” (while quoting a secretly recorded audiotape related to discussions about the president).

Nonetheless, America’s tolerance only went so far. The Republican base became incensed by the off-hours dalliances of a sitting president, the social policies championed by Bill and Hillary Clinton, and the laxity of popular culture in general. Such animus culminated in the mobilization of the conservative faithful and the eventual eight-year reign of President George W. Bush, elected in 2000 with the promise of “bringing dignity” back to a defiled White House. Neither the passage of time nor the presidencies of Bush or Barack Obama could resolve the “dignity” matter.

Presently there has been a veritable '90s revival. (Witness reboots of everything from *Baywatch* to *Twin Peaks* to *Beauty and the Beast*.) And many of the decade’s sex-charged narratives, scandal-scarred personalities, and

polarized culture clashes remain with us. Recent docudramas have revisited the sagas of Anita Hill (facing a Senate panel) and O. J. Simpson (facing an L.A. jury), reengaging audiences with the lessons of dueling agendas, values, and codes of justice. Some view this revival as harmless nostalgia: millennials attending '90s-themed parties and following '90s-inspired fashion and design trends. But the blood, red and blue, runs deep. Most telling of all, of course, has been the defeat of a '90s liberal icon (Hillary Clinton) by an '80s iconoclast-cum-reality-TV-star (Donald Trump). Indeed, Trump’s hard-right recycling of Reagan-Bush social policies and his codependence on Fox News—not to mention the resurrection of characters like Roger Stone, Newt Gingrich, and Rudy Giuliani on a sort of Golden Oldies tour—have made it plain that too many Boomers are still settling the same culture-war scores.

The Naughty Nineties, in many ways, laid the groundwork for our current age. It is evident in the voyeurism and virulence aroused by social media; in the thirst for scandal incited by tabloid news and the 24/7 news cycle; in the false narratives concocted by reality TV; in the breakdown of private barriers in the Internet age. It is evident in the social sanction to lie about personal and political conduct, and in the partisan rancor perpetuated by the culture war. This book, in this regard, can be seen as a codex for understanding how America arrived here—how, a generation after Clinton was sworn in as president, promising



“American renewal,” we have ended up in the Trump-tinged Teens, with a president promising that “this American carnage stops here.”

Yes, in 1999, Paul Weyrich, an eminence of the New Right, had decreed in a letter to the conservative faithful: “I believe we probably have lost the culture war.” The left had won—or so it seemed. But the right, as it turned out, continued to play the long game. This strategy and its ramifications were not lost on Hillary Clinton. In fact, she had offered a prescient observation a year and a half before she would lose the 2016 election (which was partly a referendum on the social values championed and institutionalized when her husband took office). “Winning the culture wars is not enough,” she had warned in a conversation with the *New York Times Magazine’s* chief national correspondent, Mark Leibovich. “It’s never final. There’s always the rear-guard actions.” The war, both sides knew, would wage on, and on.⁵

In the 1990s, Americans, as never before, confronted an expanding public encroachment on their private lives. They were entertained, and alarmed, by tales of public figures ensnared in scandal. They grappled with matters surrounding sexuality, sexual identity and expression, reproductive choice, LGBT rights, domestic violence, sexual abuse and harassment, and the cultural ramifications of porn, the Web, and social media. Sex, in ways large and small, moved to the forefront of individuals’ civic and personal lives: from the legal validity of marriage equality to new laws that criminalized anti-LGBT violence, from Riot Grrrls to the Spice Girls, from *American Pie* to *American Beauty*.

The Naughty Nineties were a fin de siècle inflection point when an array of forces aligned—cultural, social, political, legal, economic, medical, and technological—and prompted a customarily prudish nation to face its deep fascination with, and trepidations toward, human sexuality in all of its complexity and ubiquity. The decade, in sum, reconditioned Americans to accept themselves as profoundly sexual creatures.

Sigmund Freud, some say, had set the stage decades before. He argued that civilization persisted, indeed it flowered, when members of the body politic sublimated many of their primal instincts. Freud believed, as the radical

5. War terminology will be used in these pages to refer to American culture clashes at the turn of the century. Such phrases—battle, skirmish, front lines—can come off as histrionic. But given the lives and livelihoods destroyed by these clashes, they seem, for the most part, to be fitting and justified.



social theorist and leftist icon Herbert Marcuse would later put it, that “the full force of civilized morality was mobilized against the use of the body as [a] mere object, means, instrument of pleasure. . . . Precisely in his gratification, and especially in his sexual gratification, man was to be a higher being, committed to higher values; sexuality was to be dignified by love.” Imagine it. Romantic passion, followed by commitment and fidelity, devotion and shared contentment. The stuff of storybooks, perhaps.

What, then, of a “liberated” society, one that preferred a looser definition of love? Such a society, Marcuse argued, would have great potential upside: a social contract in which work would become play, oppressive toil would be abolished, and amity and love would be ascendant. This society might in time become the foundation of a utopian world. Marcuse, one of the great sages of the '60s counterculture, understood this to the very marrow. And yet he cautioned that there was a dark dimension to this idealized vision. Once the age of technology arose in the 1950s (and with it more free time)—followed by the coming Age of Aquarius in the '60s (and with it more variations on the theme of “free love”)—there arose a distinct possibility that traditional monogamous love, in Marcuse’s pessimistic assessment, would beat a fast retreat.

In his 1961 preface to *Eros and Civilization*, his mid-'50s treatise on Freud, sex, capitalism, and modern culture, Marcuse had forecast a “transition to a new stage of civilization.” He foresaw sexual emancipation and accelerated automation. But for all the benefits of these breakthroughs, he saw that they also augured great risk. These advances, he wrote, might subvert traditional culture by “the liberation of instinctual needs and satisfactions which have hitherto remained tabooed or repressed.” He anticipated that society might experience “the methodical introduction of sexiness into business, politics, propaganda, etc., [whereby] sexuality obtains a definite sales value”; he anticipated that the culture might fall prey to “the destruction of privacy, the contempt of form, the inability to tolerate silence, the proud exhibition of crudeness and brutality.” Marcuse even warned of the possibility “that instinctual liberation [could] lead . . . to a society of sex maniacs.”

It would take a generation before such seeds, planted in the '60s, would sprout. And it has taken another generation to gain a bit of perspective on that crucial decade.

To the Naughty Nineties, then.

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