

Eyes on the lies

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

In Wim Wenders's film *Far Away, So Close*, two angels look out across Berlin from atop the Brandenburg Gate. One of the angels, Raphaela, speaks to her colleague, Cassiel: "It is so exhausting to love people who run away from us. Why do they shun us more and more?"

Cassiel responds: "Because we have a powerful enemy, Raphaela. People believe more in the world than in us. And to believe still more, they've created an image of everything. They expect images to allay their fears, until their dreams provide their pleasures, satisfy their longings. . . . People are besieged by new lies every day, ever louder, baser and more intrusive lies which dull their senses so they are unable to hear our message."

The word "lie" has become a political mantra these days. Unfortunately, as *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich points out, the lies that really matter in today's media and political culture are those that relate to sex. Rich writes that two of President Clinton's major adversaries, Senator Trent Lott (R., Miss.) and Congressman Bob Barr (R., Ga.), have both been found skirting the truth regarding their contacts with the Council of Conservative Citizens, a "white-supremacist, immigrant-bashing organization that even David Keene, head of the American Conservative Union, has labeled racist."

The council, according to Rich, is on record saying that interracial marriage "amounts to white genocide" and that Jews have "turned spite into welfare billions for themselves." Barr said his appearance before the council was "brief." It was not; in fact he gave the keynote address at the group's June meeting. Though Lott claims he had no "firsthand knowledge of the group's views," the *Washington Post* uncovered a 1992 newsletter in which Lott is quoted as telling council members they "stand for the right principles and the right philosophy."

These lies go largely unnoticed, Rich says, in a political market "in which sex is the only currency." It is in this market that President Clinton was impeached for lying under oath in responding to questions about his sex life.

The president has problems with truth-telling that are far more serious than that. During the impeachment trial he said he sent warplanes to Iraq to "degrade" Saddam Hussein's capacity to wage war. What could the word "degrade" possibly mean? How were the air strikes going to eliminate weapons that United Nations inspectors could not uncover on the ground?

When the president announced the bombing strikes he promised that in deference to the followers of Islam the bombing would not continue into the Muslims' sacred month of Ramadan. This claim was sheer sophistry. Only a White House speech writer tone deaf to human suffering and a stranger to honest language could have persuaded the president that halting the bombing before Ramadan would sound merciful to a people who were to suffer four days of air strikes.

Meanwhile, an ineffective and debilitating economic blockade remains in force, and an even stronger Saddam Hussein remains in power. All we accomplished with the bombing was to add to Iraqi suffering and virtually eliminate future UN inspections.

Lies also slide into the public debate when politicians protest that they are serving the public when, in fact, they are responding to groups that fund their campaigns. Take, for example, the man likely to be the next speaker of the House of Representatives, J. Dennis Hastert (R., Ill.). According to the Associated Press, Hastert has previously written "health-care overhaul legislation with the industry's concerns in mind." In return, Hastert's campaign coffers received at least \$171,455 from the health care industry, an amount that accounted for \$1 of every \$5 he raised for his 1998 campaign.

Hastert is a member of the House Commerce Committee's subcommittees on health, energy and telecommunications, which would account for the fact that his campaign also received \$49,099 from electric utilities and \$43,480 from telephone companies. "He knows how to parlay political positions into campaign positions," said Larry Makinson, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics. "He has been very adept at that." Adept enough in his past three campaigns to receive the maximum contributions allowed by law from the American Medical Association (\$30,000) and BellSouth (\$31,000).

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, a complex tale of lies and deceit can be resolved only by an honest response from the duke after he hears this plea: "Oh worthy prince, dishonor not your eye by throwing it on any other object till you have heard me in my true complaint and given me justice, justice, justice, justice!" What

justice can be found when damaging lies about our true complaints are ignored, and when we dishonor our eyes by focusing our attention exclusively on sexual misconduct?