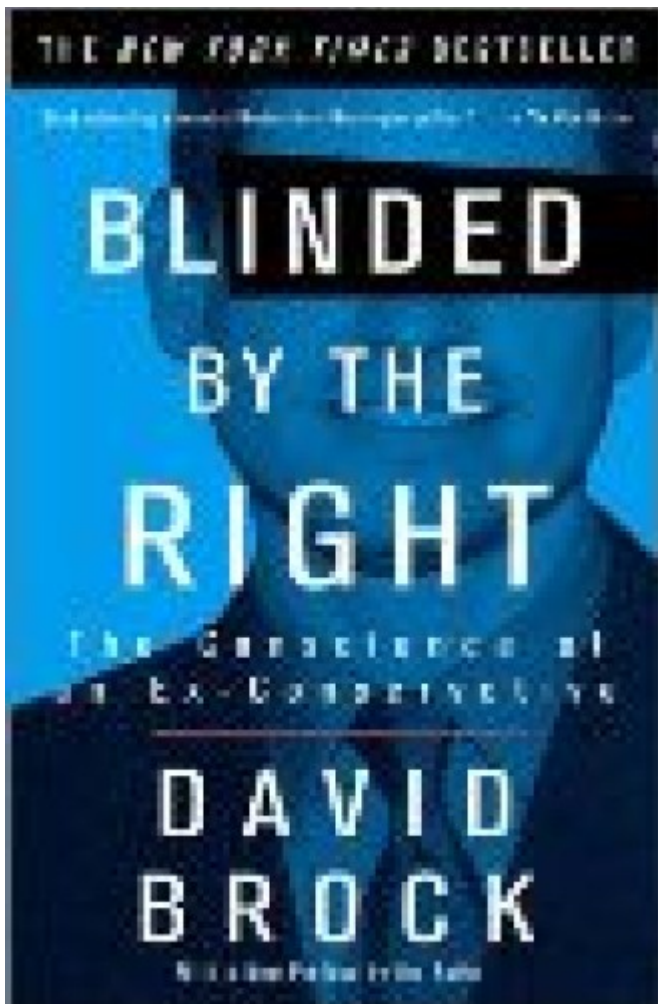


Slime-master

By [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

In Review



Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative

David Brock
Crown

Long before Bill Clinton trashed his presidency by lying about his adulterous relationship with Monica Lewinsky, the political right heaped scurrilous accusations

upon him and sought to expel him from office. The litany of charges pervaded conservative magazines and talk shows: Clinton was a drug-dealer and racketeer; he had purloined FBI files and organized death squads; he was guilty of fraud, theft and serial adultery; he raped at least one woman and arranged the murder of friend and staff member Vince Foster.

The savaging of Clinton reached an early low in 1993, when David Brock's "Troopergate" article appeared in the *America Spectator* detailing Clinton's alleged infidelities while governor of Arkansas. Brock had earlier become wealthy and famous by smearing Anita Hill. However, by the time President Clinton fell into Kenneth Starr's perjury trap which Brock and the Paula Jones case had indirectly set into motion, Brock had come to regret what he had done and become.

Blinded by the Right offers an inside report on the aggressively right-wing network of magazines and foundations in which Brock thrived for 12 years. The book describes the personalities and infrastructure of the right and gives a vivid account of youthful conservatives like himself who joined a triumphant conservative movement in the Reagan era and felt demoralized by the ideologically bland presidency of George H. W. Bush.

As a student at the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1980s, Brock was repelled by the dominant atmosphere of political correctness; the "fiery polemics" of *Commentary* magazine suited him better. He cultivated friendships with the few conservatives on Berkeley's faculty, wrote outspoken editorials for an off-campus newspaper, and found his calling: "I now viewed politics as a knife fight, my critics as blood enemies. My still-nascent ideological commitments acquired a vengeful overlay: I'll get them."

Brock had been long alienated from his emotionally distant father, who identified politically with Patrick Buchanan ("Dad was a winger through and through"). But his political conversion didn't afford much improvement in family relations, mainly because, during the same period, he informed his parents that he was gay. After college he joined the staff of the conservative *Washington Times*. He knew plenty of gay conservatives, some of whom were high-ranking officials in the Reagan administration, but all of whom were "in a constant state of panic about being discovered." While brushing aside the gay-bashing remarks of his allies, Brock joined them in cheering for Robert Bork and Oliver North, and at the age of 26 he made his first television appearance (speaking about the Iran-contra controversy), which he

viewed as “just another knife fight.”

The first Bush administration was a dreadful disappointment to the real conservatives; they called Bush a “squish,” lost their unifying enemy when the Soviet Union imploded, and cheered the ascension of Newt Gingrich. “I instinctively identified with his fanatical hatred of the left,” Brock recalls. “I thought name-calling was cool.”

The fact that Gingrich’s personal life was far from morally upright actually enhanced his appeal to Brock. Brock would not have been comfortable in a conservative movement that practiced what it preached about morality. If the culture-warriors on the right had been clean-living people, he would have been forced to take seriously their rhetoric about the culture war and, in turn, to think seriously about the problem of being a gay conservative.

But in his telling, the culture of the conservative movement was pervaded by drunkenness, adultery, profanity and brazen dishonesty; page after page of *Blinded by the Right* describes morally disgusting behavior by politicians, journalists, financiers and movement professionals. Many movement leaders were hard-drinking sexual predators; one prominent champion of the virtuous life used ghostwriters to produce his best-selling books; one prominent Christian right leader was constantly leering and vulgar. Against this background, Brock took it for granted that Gingrich’s ethical concerns were just for show: “He struck me as another member of the decadent and hypocritical conservative elite, using whatever rhetorical flourishes he thought necessary to inflame cultural animosities in the right-wing base of the party.”

The movement was short on morality but long on cash. Though lacking an advanced degree, Brock received an Olin Fellowship at the Heritage Foundation in 1991, where his writing “became so vehement it bordered on the vicious.” The following year he moved to the *American Spectator*, which, like the Heritage Foundation and many other right-wing organs, was amply funded by Richard Mellon Scaife.

Brock’s breakthrough occurred after the Clarence Thomas hearings of October 1991 at which law professor Anita Hill testified that she had been sexually harassed by Thomas. The *Spectator* received a stipend from a North Carolina heiress to fund research on the Thomas-Hill story, and Brock got the assignment. His idea of research was to interview conservative activists and friends of Thomas’s, especially

D.C. Circuit Court Judge Laurence Silberman and his wife, Ricky, who provided forceful quotes and took a lonely Brock under their wing.

Brock's sources told him that Hill was perverse, sexually obsessed, slightly deranged and a man-hater. Brock quoted them profusely and summed up Hill in the phrase "a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty." Brock writes: "Not even the *Spectator* had ever seen the likes of the sexist imagery and sexual innuendo I concocted to discredit Anita Hill. These were but two ingredients in a witches' brew of fact, allegation, hearsay, speculation, opinion, and invective labeled by my editors as 'investigative journalism.'"

"The Real Anita Hill" made Brock a movement celebrity. Rush Limbaugh trumpeted the article for several days running on his nationally syndicated radio show; conservative pundits recycled Brock's quotes; the *Spectator* advertised on Limbaugh's broadcast, and the magazine's circulation soared 300 percent to 114,000.

The book version was equally successful. *The Real Anita Hill* joined Limbaugh's *The Way Things Ought to Be* atop the bestseller list. Brock's book party was held at the Embassy Row Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where movement celebrities lined up to laud him.

Republican Party leaders and the conservative movement were estranged in the early 1990s, but Clinton's election shocked both sides into a reconciliation. Party and movement leaders vowed to ruin Clinton's presidential honeymoon, and the early confirmation hearings were especially bruising. Republican House whip Dick Armey charged that Hillary Clinton was a Marxist; Thomas protégé Clint Bolick pinned the title of "quota queen" on the nominee for assistant attorney general, Lani Guinier; Senator Jesse Helms railed that Housing and Urban Development nominee Roberta Achtenberg was "a damn lesbian," and various conservatives started a whispering campaign that Attorney General nominee Janet Reno was an alcoholic and a lesbian.

Brock emphasizes that "Troopergate" was spawned "in this savage climate." Aided by Arkansas anti-Clinton activist Cliff Jackson, Brock met with four Arkansas state troopers who regaled him with tales of Clinton's purported numerous affairs and various onetime trysts. They also portrayed Hillary Clinton as a vulgar, man-hating feminist and power-grabbing cynic, as well as, somehow at the same time, an anguished spouse who grieved over her husband's infidelities.

While exulting in this “journalistic gold mine,” Brock was at least unsettled by the wildness and vagueness of the troopers’ tales and by Jackson’s obvious vendetta against Clinton; these were not the respectable Washington insiders who had trashed Hill, and they were unable to fix any specific dates or times to the events they recounted. Moreover, two of the troopers soon backed out, the other two bargained for a sizable payoff, and Brock worried that someone else would beat him to the story. Again he wrote a story that left no smearing accusation unused: “I threw in every last titillating morsel and dirty quote the troopers served up,” including their conjecture that Hillary Clinton and Vince Foster were lovers.

On the ethics of this kind of journalism, Brock notes that his various movement employers (in this case, the *Spectator*) cared only about the political effect of his work, not its accuracy. In 12 years of writing for conservative magazines, he never published a fact-checked article. On the effect of his sensational portrait of Clinton, Brock aptly remarks: “My article depicted ‘Bill’ as a sexually voracious sociopathic cipher, while ‘Hillary’ appeared as a foulmouthed, castrating, power-mad harpy, joined together in a sham power marriage. The piece left such an indelible image in the minds of the media and the public as it led network newscasts and became a staple of Jay Leno monologues and *Saturday Night Live* skits that it would be possible in the future to say and write and broadcast any crazy thing about the first couple and get away with it. The Clintons were moral monsters.”

This time even Brock was stunned by the tremendous effect of his work. *The Real Anita Hill* was a best seller, but still essentially a movement-phenomenon, catering to the conservative market. The “Troopergate” article, “His Cheatin’ Heart,” electrified the mainstream networks and newspapers. In effect, the article made it open season on Clinton for the rest of his presidency, making it possible for pundits to assume the very worst about his moral failings with no threat of censure.

Not every conservative leader was thrilled by Brock’s work; William Kristol cautioned him against gutter journalism, and Jack Kemp worried that the article set a destructive precedent. Brock had reservations of his own; in the weeks that followed the article’s publication, it bothered him that every one of the troopers’ allegations that could be checked independently turned out not to be true. But no one offered a comprehensive refutation of Brock’s numerous errors: “Troopergate was described as tasteless and irrelevant, but it was allowed to enter the media ether as if it were true.”

One disputed detail proved especially fateful. One of the troopers told Brock a story about a “woman named Paula” who allegedly had consensual sex with Clinton in his hotel room and then offered to be his “regular girlfriend.” The name meant nothing to Brock, but six weeks after his article appeared, Paula Jones contended that the reference was to her and that the trooper’s version of the story was wrong.

Jones claimed that her encounter with Clinton was coerced and degrading. Reporters rushed to get her story, and the great Clinton debacle of lawsuits and perjury traps began. Brock worried at first that if someone were to be sued in the Jones matter, logically it would be him; but soon he realized that the cadre of movement lawyers and operatives who handled Jones’s case had no interest in prosecuting the *Spectator* or “our side’s Bob Woodward,” as Brock was called by movement insiders.

The right’s affection for Brock withered in the late 1990s, however. Brock’s talent for invective was surpassed by Ann Coulter and Laura Ingraham, who won coveted spots on the talking-head shows; increasingly he was troubled by the hypocrisy of speaking for a movement that condemned homosexuals; and even if his colleagues didn’t care whether his articles were accurate, he did. He had to believe that his liberal-bashing stories were true, not merely effective.

The publication of Jane Mayer and Jill Abrahamson’s 1994 book on the Thomas-Hill case, *Strange Justice*, struck the first blow to his self-confidence. Mayer and Abrahamson showed that Thomas was an avid consumer of pornography, just as Hill had implied, and that Hill’s version of events was more consistent with the verifiable facts than Thomas’s. The pornography issue was central to the conflicting testimonies about Thomas’s treatment of Hill.

Brock, having based his account on the Silbermans’ assurances that Thomas was a paragon of moral rectitude, was deeply shaken when Ricky Silberman called him and exclaimed, “Have you read it? He did it, didn’t he?” Brock recalls that these words “burned through my being with the force of a blowtorch.” He had never met Thomas or Hill; now he got a sick feeling that his bestselling attack on Hill might have been a complete distortion. Searching for evidence that might disprove Mayer and Abrahamson’s claim about Thomas’s addiction to pornography, Brock discovered, instead, that the Thomas camp had known all along and closely guarded the secret that he was an avid porno consumer.

With Ricky Silberman's assistance he reassembled his brief of facts and allegations, suppressed disconfirming evidence, strong-armed a hostile witness, and blasted Mayer and Abrahamson's book to the point of denying at least one claim that he knew was true: "Up to this point in my career, even when I fell short, I had always believed I was pursuing accurate information. Now, I let go of my own standards." For years he had assured himself that he was better than the "racist, homophobic Clinton-haters" that he milked for incriminating anecdotes and the movement colleagues who dissembled for the movement: "Whatever else I may have been, I wasn't a liar." Now he knew that he was a liar, too: "The strange lies were mine. All the attacks, the hateful rhetoric, the dark alliances and strange conspiracies, an eye for an eye, nuts and sluts . . . it all led right here: I lost my soul."

With no intention of saving his soul, Brock took a million dollar advance for a book on Hillary Clinton. He started acting, however, like a real journalist: "For the first time as a writer, I felt capable of analyzing facts with a degree of impartiality. I began to relish the complexity of my subject. I realized I had never known what journalism was. I had been trained as an unthinking attack dog." He felt pulled in two directions: "Be fair. Slime her." For the most part, the former impulse won out, and Brock's book proved to be a crushing disappointment to his conservative audience. The book sold poorly, reviewers wondered what had happened to him, and movement activists pointed knowingly to his homosexuality. His movement days were ending. Brock's writings for the *Spectator* slowed to a trickle, and in 1997 the magazine fired him.

Blinded by the Right paints a disturbing picture of hypocrisy, venality, abuse of power and cynicism; it confirms the worst suspicions that one may have entertained about many of our political leaders; it shows that winning politics is often about appealing to the basest human impulses; and it exemplifies the spirit it condemns.

The personal attack remains Brock's stock in trade. This time he is purportedly writing entirely from firsthand experience, but one reads his descriptions of former colleagues on the right a bit skeptically nonetheless, given his track record. Now that he can no longer write for politically conservative magazines, I hope that he will not find liberal substitutes for his slime-and-condemn style of journalism.

One of the unspoken assumptions of *Blinded by the Right* is that the political left has nothing like the network of aggressively ideological foundations, magazines, newspapers and institutes that the political right possesses. This assumption is true,

and for the most part the country is better off for that fact. There is no analogue on the liberal side for the partisan publicity machine that smeared Anita Hill and made Brock famous, and liberals should not wish for one. Liberals largely have higher education, the elite newspapers and the mainline churches on their side, as conservatives never tire of pointing out; for angry conservatives, the cultural power of American liberalism is suffocating and immense. The belligerent tone of movement conservatism is often directly connected to memories of feeling persecuted at college. For Brock's former associates, the dominant hypocrisy in American life is liberal hypocrisy, which is so enfranchised in the prestige culture that it does not appear as a partisan perspective.

Brock emphasizes that he and his movement friends were ambitious, aggressive and very angry about something, but not intellectually curious, or reflective or inclined to make sincere commitments. Unlike some older conservatives that they knew, the younger conservatives did not read books on political philosophy or even identify with the politics that they themselves espoused. They didn't believe in anything very much, Brock explains; they were short on moral concern and didn't talk about politics in their free time. What drove them was their deep resentment, even hatred, of liberals and the liberal rhetoric of openness, equality and diversity. *Blinded by the Right* is most disturbing as an account of how far those sentiments alone, backed by a well-endowed infrastructure of institutes and media outlets, can take someone in American politics and society.