

## Thoughts on the Backlash and Anita Hill

• BY GLORIA KAUFMAN •

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he backlash against women described by Susan Faludi in her 1991 bestseller,

*Backlash: The*

*Undeclared War Against American Women*, has been a constant part of our culture in the 1970s, the 1980s, and now the '90s. To take one example, it was dramatically evident in the treatment of Anita Hill during (and after) her reluctant testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Prior to Hill's appearance, the Clarence Thomas nomination to the Supreme Court was uncertain, not only because of his weak judiciary credentials but also because some senators doubted his response to some of their questions. For one thing, they found it hard to believe his testimony that he had never discussed *Roe v. Wade* with anyone, even in private conversations. Moreover, his past misleading statements about his own sister (suggesting she was a lazy welfare recipient) raised questions about his personal integrity and general character.

Yet when his testimony conflicted with Anita Hill's, these suspicions miraculously evaporated. The media immediately, spontaneously and irresponsibly characterized the contradictions as a dispute between two equally credible people. That patently false characterization was an exhibit of the backlash in action.

The failure of substantial numbers of media women immediately to protest the equating of Hill's credibility with Thomas' demonstrates how deep, pervasive, and powerful the backlash is. Women journalists knew that for the culture at large, it was still permissible to treat

women shamefully, and that their own positions were not sufficiently secure for them to correct their male colleagues--especially not in an area as murky as sexual harassment.

Even senators who opposed Thomas did not want to see him defeated for a kind of conduct (sexual harassment) they had traditionally and tacitly accepted. They joined the backlash. Senators who had previously questioned Thomas' verity said the conflict was one between two equally credible people.

When one of Thomas' character witnesses let it slip that he and Thomas had discussed *Roe v. Wade*, no senator picked up on it, and no reporter pointed out that those words indicated Thomas had earlier lied under oath about *Roe v. Wade* and had thus committed felonious perjury. In the backlash mindset, to soil Judge Thomas' reputation by talking about his harassing conduct was much worse than his having harassed Hill and also much worse than his apparent lying.

In the prevailing backlash thinking, Hill's reputation counted for nothing, and Thomas' for everything. In the prevailing backlash mindset, his harassing conduct was not something for which he should be held accountable ("men will be boys").

Once it was understood that Hill's charge was merely a "woman's" issue,

there were no bounds placed upon the illogic in which her testimony was attacked. Thus no one guffawed at Orin Hatch's elaborate speculation that Hill could have learned about a euphemism for the male anatomy by reading a particular trashy novel, even though there was no evidence Hill even knew such a novel existed! Hatch's imaginative and ridiculous scenario, nevertheless, was

respectfully and soberly absorbed by his fellow senators and by the media in general.

The grave, sober tone of such backlash behavior must surely be called into question. The absence of laughter at Hatch had to shock many a TV viewer into amazement that senators would allow each other to be so irresponsible in maligning their own witness.

But the rationale of the backlash allows for the most extreme twists of logic and pernicious fancy. As soon as a woman displays what is perceived as "uppity" behavior, backlashing is allowed. According to the backlash dynamic, all negative statements about such a woman are not only allowed, but considered plausible and then acceptable, regardless of facts.

Like Anita Hill, Hillary Clinton became fair game for the backlashing effect as soon as she was perceived as

"uppity," and she was trashed by attempts to distort her work on behalf of children. In backlashing, the good that people do is made to look harmful.

When backlash goes too far, it reinvigorates the forces it opposes. Thus, women's anger at the treatment of Anita Hill continues to grow and to become increasingly consequential. It has already been a significant factor in political polls and it will operate in the November elections. Public reaction is promoting positive change.

Backlashes will continue as long as people judge others not by what they do or say, but by the lies their enemies invent to discredit them. Feminism will persist in struggling for human dignity, for social justice, for ecological sanity, and for truly humane government.

My own Pollyannish hope is that eventually even the backlashers will see the light ahead, stop pushing us back into the dark, and join us in moving forward for the benefit of all.

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Director of women's studies and professor of English. Gloria Kaufman last spring was chosen to receive the coveted Lundquist Faculty Fellowship—the highest honor possible to an IUSB faculty member. She has received numerous honors in her career and for her work on social and feminist issues. She is author of several scholarly papers on literature and feminism, as well as a play and four books, including the most recent, *In Stitches: A Patchwork of Feminist Humor and Satire*.



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