

Going Public About Packwood

Why His Abuses Were a Fair Pursuit for the Press

By Florence George Graves

THE CALLER to a Washington radio show put the question about Bob Packwood bluntly: Why does the press keep knocking good people out of public office over private behavior?

Such questions take me back to the last days of October 1992, after I had interviewed almost a dozen women who acknowledged unwelcome sexual advances by the Oregon senator. Another Washington Post reporter, Charles Shepard, and I flew to Portland to interview Packwood, who was then locked in a tight race for reelection. In a soft, almost wounded voice, he flatly denied the allegations.

"I am so hesitant of anything at all that I just, I don't make any approaches," Pack-

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MARY McGRORY

Mary McGrory is on vacation. Her column will resume Oct. 1.

wood told us. "It's simply not my nature with men or women to be forward."

That, as we now know from the Senate ethics committee and from Packwood's own diaries, was a lie. Sometimes it's hard to sort out Packwood's lies. For example, in a March 1993 diary entry, he recalls being at Barbara Walters' Fifth Avenue apartment and telling her about "the 22 staff members I'd made love to and probably 75 others I've had a passionate relationship with." ("I don't remember that," Walters said yesterday, explaining that she was trying to talk Packwood into doing an interview with ABC. "I truthfully don't remember him saying 'I slept with 22 women and it was very



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passionate,' which makes me sort of think he didn't. Of course it would have gotten my attention.")

But we now know for certain that Packwood told many lies. His denials to us, and his desperate attempts to discredit the women he had accosted, succeeded in delaying publication of the Post article about his sexual misconduct until three weeks after he was safely reelected to a fifth term. Only now has the sad truth about the range of his abuse of power finally forced Packwood to resign.

Implicit in the caller's question about the media's role is the notion that we print any piece of gossip we can find, intent on bringing down otherwise noble public servants.

See PACKWOOD, C2, Col. 1

The Press and Packwood

PACKWOOD, From C1

But the truth is that mainstream news organizations often withhold knowledge of private affairs that they have determined have no bearing on a politician's performance; in fact, we didn't print all we knew about what might be considered Packwood's "private" life.

The focus of the story, in my view, was whether Packwood had abused his power over women who worked for him or that he dealt with in the course of business as a United States senator. He had influence over them because he was a senator, not because he was Bob Packwood, U.S. citizen. And he was making unwanted advances. Whether it was a staffer or a hotel clerk or a Senate elevator operator, he felt entitled to work his will. They were not sharing an equal relationship; he had power, they did not.

Ironically, it was Packwood's own behavior in response to our inquiries that raised the question of whether his "private" sex life might in fact be relevant to our stories, though in the end we did not report on any such incidents.

After our interview several days before his reelection, Packwood tried to defend himself by faxing to Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. a number of statements from former or current employees that questioned the credibility of the accusers. None of the statements dealt with the disputed incidents; several included potentially embarrassing descriptions of purported aspects of their sexual histories and personal lives. Our reporting indicated that some of the information was distorted or untrue, and that most of it was irrelevant to the allegations.

When told of these statements, the women initially panicked and said they were afraid to be included in the Post article. One, Julie Williamson, a former employee who says Packwood once reached under her dress and tried to pull her girdle off, called the tactic a form of "blackmail."

The women feared that when the story was published, Packwood might try to smear them by releasing these statements to the press,

true or not, and that their lives might be destroyed. I believed that Packwood clearly and cynically saw these statements as a weapon he could wield to stop the story. I also believed we had to do something to neutralize their value to him. During our reporting, we had heard many stories about Packwood having "consensual sex" with staff members (I use quotation marks because as Packwood reports in his diaries, former Sen. John Danforth told him that sex involving people of "disparate position . . . the senator's senior, boss, [and] the junior, subordinate woman, cannot be consensual.")

None of these stories were as graphic as the diary accounts of intercourse on the rug of his Senate office after drinking wine with "a very sexy woman." Nor did we hear about her big breasts that stood "at attention," and her "ability to shift her hips." Nor did we hear about sexual relations with a supposedly lonely staffer, done as part of his "Christian duty."

But we had heard enough to know that if Packwood thought the women's private sexual behavior was relevant to their credibility, it might be germane to apply that same test to his own conduct when we interviewed him a second time a few days before our first story was published. He was no longer maintaining that he never made approaches to women; instead, he insisted, "I never made a pass to anyone who was not receptive."

Had he dated staff members? "I never had a dating relationship" with any employee, he said, defining "dating" as a "continuing social relationship." Had he ever had a romantic or sexual relationship with members of his staff? "I'm not going to get into personal relationships." What did he think of people who committed adultery? "I'm not even going to comment." Asked about a rumored affair with a top staffer, he replied: "I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer. Your charges are *unwanted*, not *wanted* relationships. And with that, I think we've finished the interview."

It was one of several times he threatened to throw us out.

By sending these statements about the women, we asked, was he suggesting that they came on to him? Or that they were the

kind of women who would welcome his advances? Was he saying women who enjoyed sex in private relationships were sluts?

When we told Packwood that some people might be very surprised that a senator with his reputation for supporting women's rights was using information about women's consensual sexual relationships to try to discredit them, he tried to place the blame on us. "You asked us to get what information we knew about the people—that's the information that came," he snapped.

Persuading a variety of women—some of them entry-level employees or volunteers—to take on a powerful senator was a long and arduous task, made even harder by the fact that most women remembered the treatment Anita Hill received during Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings. They feared—with good reason, it turned out—that Packwood might try to hurt them with irrelevant or false personal information. One woman told me she could not risk subjecting her sons to that kind of campaign.

Fear of becoming another Anita Hill is what kept a former congressional intern, then 17, from allowing us to use her name when we reported her allegation of unwanted sexual advances in 1993. (Her belated complaint to the ethics committee this summer helped build political pressure for Packwood to resign.) She said that when Packwood arranged to deliver a reference for her application to Yale, knowing she would be home alone, she was shocked and "unbelievably shaken" when he hugged and kissed her in a sexual way.

Most of the women who allowed their names to be used had distanced themselves from Packwood financially, professionally and emotionally. In fact, those were the kind of women I focused on when pursuing the story, for it was clear to me that women with strong professional ties to Packwood or the Washington political scene would be especially reluctant to be named. They had too much to lose. I know of only one woman currently involved in Washington politics who was among the 17 included in the Senate ethics committee's bill of particulars. She told me that in his Senate office one evening, Packwood grabbed her by the shoulders, pushed her down on the couch, kissed her on the lips, and repeatedly pushed her back on the couch as she fought to get up. She said she burst into tears as she left, feel-

ing "extremely vulnerable. I felt I was in danger."

Interestingly, one high-ranking female staffer who said she had never heard about "Packwood's problem" complained that if The Post published such a story, it might taint all the women who ever worked for the senator. But the "problem" was no secret for much of the staff. Brad Stocks, a former 1980 campaign worker, said a high-ranking aide warned him that Packwood "is going to try to get you to pimp for him. Don't do it!" Stocks recalls Packwood telling him and a colleague that they should "be out there getting young, good-looking women working for me" on the campaign.

I now know of more than 40 women who say the senator made improper and unwanted sexual advances to them. The allegations, spanning the years 1969 to 1990, range from awkward kisses to aggressive touching that created fear. Nearly half these women would not agree to formally cooperate with Senate investigators. These include women making some of the most serious allegations—including several who said they left their jobs because of Packwood's repeated sexual advances. One was a staffer who said Packwood approached her several times in the office, the last time reaching into her blouse as she was typing her resume to look for another job.

People often ask me, How did you ever persuade the women to tell their stories on the record? The question suggests an understanding of the tacit code of silence psychologists say many women in this culture accept, which makes them reluctant to talk about all forms of abuse involving sex: not just harassment but also incest, battering and rape. Perhaps women's adherence to the cultural code of silence is even stronger in the male-dominated Congress, where employees are traditionally expected to offer unquestioning loyalty to the senator or representative for whom they work.

But in fairness to Packwood—and the readers—we knew we needed to have a significant number of women speak on the record. We also knew we were asking them to take an enormous risk. But one thing seemed clear: The more women we had on the record, the more credible the story would be. I also prayed there would be safety as well as credibility in numbers.

During our interviews, Shepard and I did not pressure the women unduly; instead, we gave each of them time to reflect on whether they would go on the record. This go-slow approach meant that by the time we arranged our first interview with Packwood, we had not yet obtained the women's permission to use their names when confronting him with their allegations. It was literally moments before we left our Portland hotel to meet the senator that the last woman agreed to be identified to him.

Despite the efforts to discredit them after this interview, the women decided, after a very emotional process, to continue cooperating with us. They had come to believe that Packwood had engaged in a long pattern of abusive behavior and to understand the role silence plays in perpetuating sexual misconduct. The women felt that by telling their stories, they would be encouraging other women who had been victims of harassment to speak out.

Julie Williamson and the other women have watched with astonishment as Packwood's diaries have been made public, with their tales of sordid and compulsive "consensual" sex in his office and power plays for money for his ex-wife. "The character flaw I saw in Bob Packwood when he attacked me ran deeply through all his life," Williamson said Friday. "It is absolutely incredible to me that it took however many of us it took—who were [considered] nobodies from the hinterlands—to blow the whistle on Bob Packwood. So many people must have known and conspired and been part of all of it. It took those of us who were too naive to know that his power was too great to be challenged, to challenge him."

After the senator announced his resignation last week, my voice mail was overloaded with callers offering their congratulations. But the past few days have been bittersweet for me, and the notion of congratulations made me uncomfortable. At last, Bob Packwood had been forced to take responsibility for his years of seriously abusing his power. I find no joy in the pain Packwood and his friends must be feeling. But I keep reminding myself of the tremendous pain his behavior has caused so many others over so many years.