Girls and Guise

My friend Nancy recently had a minor foot surgery, and afterward was advised to stay off her feet for a while. After a few days her household food supply dwindled, until one night she had only a can of soup for dinner. The next day she found her husband at work, and, in her usual cheerful manner, mentioned there was nothing in the house but soup. "No problem," her husband said. "I'll eat it." This provoked one of the most common fights between many women—the fight about women never coming out and saying what they want. (Or, if you’re a woman, the fight about how men are totally insensitive bastards.)

Her husband reacted like any man would, with self-satisfaction and sympathy. He heard her say there was nothing in the house, she was laid up with a bad foot, he didn’t want her to go to any trouble. So she said, "Honey, I’ll eat out."

Presumably, if there was anything left over, he would bring it home for her.

Seems reasonable to me! But I am a woman. Men are not brought up to say what they want. They only hint at it. It’s stupid to hint to men. Men don’t understand it. So why don’t you test them to move forward, you have to hit them in the balls, you have to hit them where it hurts.

After all these years how could women understand not understand this? (Women are not too subtle, but a man should know this.)

TONY KORNHEISER

The Other Woman


By Florence George Graves

It was shortly after midnight three years ago this week that Angela Wright came home from work, clicked on her television and saw movie star Anita Hill. The story was breaking that a University of Oklahoma law professor had accused Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, prompting overnight an appointment that had seemed all but lost.

Wright had never heard of Anita Hill. "Oh, sorry, she’s the one who accused Justice Thomas of harassment, isn’t she?" she was not unlike herself? young, black, beautiful, accomplished, attractive, poised. As she listened to Hill’s allegations that Thomas had pursued her for dates and made explicit sexual remarks that she found demanding, Wright remembers thinking: I believe her.

People all over the country were watching the same events and drawing similarly strong conclusions. The Hill-Thomas affair was a defining moment for relations between the sexes in the American workplace, the focal point of what Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Joseph Biden (D-Del.) would later call "a fundamental power struggle going on in this country between women and men." Many women who had silently suffered sexually harassing behavior by male colleagues intuitively believed Hill. Many men saw in Thorn a symbol of their own vulnerability: to character assassination. Here was a man of substance being publicly humiliated by unskilled attempts at discrediting his record that did not, even if true, seem to fit all that. This was very much the case: for women the testimony changed the balance between the sexes.

But there was nothing theoretical in Wright’s reaction to what she was watching on TV. Nothing intuitive about her assumption that Hill was telling the truth. Angela Wright remembers thinking: I believe her because he did it to me.

For four days, rumors circulated among reporters at the Thomas-Hill hearings about the existence of "witness woman," a reluctant witness who would testify on Clarence Thomas’s sexually inappropriate behavior in the workplace.

It was true, Angela Wright, a journalist from North Carolina and a former employee of Thomas when he was chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, had been subpoenaed to appear. She was flown to Washington, where stories in The Washington Post and elsewhere reported her presence and summarized some of her allegations. For three days, she waited in her lawyer’s Washington office, and then . . . she went home.

The hearings concluded without her testimony. By bipartisan agreement, the 27-page transcript of her interview with Senate investigators was released to the press in the wee hours of the morning, and was essentially buried in the avalanche of more compelling televised events. In The Post the following day, it was mentioned on Page A17. To this day, few people outside the Beltway could have been aware there was another woman, that the great "He Said, She Said" showdown was at one point, shaping up as "He Said, They Said."

Many of the key participants in the hearings—Democrats and Republicans alike, ten years later, are still incredulous that they always wanted Angela Wright to testify, to hear the word. Several say that in retrospect they believe her testimony might have reversed the results of the narrow 52-48 Senate vote on Thomas’s confirmation. Others say he continued with it would have detailed the nomination. Committee member Paul Simon (D-Ill.) says it wasn’t until after Thomas had succeeded in the high court that he learned that Wright’s account had been corroborated by another co-worker. He now believes their testimony, taken together, "could have supported Thomas." Harvard Law School Professor Charles Ogletree, one of Anita Hill’s lawyers, says he believes Wright’s testimony "literally would have changed the course of history."

Instead, history judged on. So why didn’t Angela Wright testify? It’s a simple question that she 

Angela Wright in a 1991 photograph, did she back out or was she? Find out in our next issue.

Teutonic for What Ails Us

By Rich Atkinson

BERLIN—The Kiev Parliament Speaker looked at me as though I had just demanded the keys to the hospital pharmacy. I had never held such an important position in my life. "Why do you want to know?" he asked in Russian. "You're not supposed to have a serious injury, it’s my opinion that you are not ready to be discharged yet." He gestured at the two-inch cast encircling my right leg, the consequence of surgery to repair the Achilles’ tendon I'd snapped a Saturday morning soccer game.

"My experience," the Kiev Parliament Speaker continued, "is that this patient was injured in the hospital for 12 days but has only been here four hours."

He meticulously reviewed his treatment plan. Ten days in, and then a visit to see the cast for the hip for two weeks, then another cast, for the knee for another two weeks. At six weeks, the cast would be removed. As I pointed to the cast to check if this could be catastrophic, he

To the patient with injuries

"LAME COUNTS!"

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To the patient with injuries
It was shortly after midnight three years ago this week that Angela Wright came home from work, clicked on her television and first saw Anita Hill. The story was breaking that a University of Oklahoma law professor had accused U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, jeopardizing overnight an appointment that had seemed all but certain.

Wright had never heard of Anita Hill. There on the screen was a woman not unlike herself: young, black, headstrong, accomplished, attractive, poised. As she listened to Hill's allegations that Thomas had pursued her for dates and made explicit sexual remarks that she found demeaning, Wright remembers thinking: I believe her.

People all over the country were watching the same events and drawing similarly strong conclusions. The Hill-Thomas affair was a defining moment for relations between the sexes in the American workplace, the focal point of what Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Joseph Biden (D-Del.) would later call "a fundamental power struggle going on in this country between women and men." Many women who had silently suffered sexually belittling behavior by male colleagues intuitively believed Hill. Many men saw in Thomas a symbol of their own vulnerability to character assassination: Here was a man of substance being publicly humiliated by unsubstantiated charges of misconduct that did not, even if true, seem to them all that terrible. The expression "You just don't get it" entered the lexicon, a measure of just how profound was the chasm between the sexes.

But there was nothing theoretical in Wright's reaction to what she was watching on TV, nothing intuitive about her assumption that Hill was telling the truth.

Angela Wright remembers thinking: I believe her because he did it to me.

For four days, rumors circulated among reporters at the Thomas-Hill hearings about the existence of "another woman," a reluctant witness who would testify to Clarence Thomas's sexually inappropriate behavior in the workplace.

It was true. Angela Wright, a journalist from North Carolina and a former employee of Thomas when he was chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, had been subpoenaed to appear. She was flown to Washington. News stories in The Washington Post and elsewhere reported her presence and summarized some of her allegations. For three days, she waited in her lawyer's Washington office, and then ... she went home.
The hearings concluded without her testimony. By bipartisan agreement, the 37-page transcript of her interview with Senate staffers was released to the press in the wee hours of the morning, and was effectively buried in the avalanche of more spellbinding telepic events. In The Post the following day, it was mentioned on Page A17. To this day, few people outside the Beltway recall that there ever was another woman, that the great "He Said, She Said" showdown was at one point shaping up as "He Said, They Said."

Many of the key participants in the hearings, Democrats and Republicans alike, say today for the record that they always wanted Angela Wright to testify, to clear the air. Several say that in retrospect they believe her testimony might have reversed the results of the narrow 52-48 Senate vote on Thomas's confirmation. Biden says he is convinced it would have derailed the nomination. Committee member Paul Simon (D-Ill.) says it wasn't until after Thomas had ascended to the high court that he learned that Wright's account had been corroborated by another co-worker. He now believes their testimony, taken together, "could have toppled Thomas." Harvard Law School Prof. Charles Ogletree, one of Anita Hill's lawyers, says he believes Wright's testimony "literally would have changed the course of history."

Instead, history trudged on.

So why didn't Angela Wright testify?

It's a simple question that should have a simple answer. But interviews with dozens of participants in the hearings produce no clear explanation, and several disparate theories:

She did not testify because she got cold feet. That's what Sen. Alan Simpson (R-Wyo) recalls.

She did not testify because the Senate ran out of time. That's what Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) recalls.

She did not testify because Republicans feared her testimony would hurt Thomas and Democrats feared that because she had been fired by Thomas, her motives could be assailed. That's what Sen. Simon recalls.

She did not testify because of a compromise. Democrats and Republicans had agreed to limit their witness lists, and she just didn't make the cut. That's what Sen. Hank Brown (R-Colo.) recalls.

She did not testify because she was not called to testify. Contrary to their public statements, no one in power really wanted her to testify. That is what Angela Wright recalls.

In fact, she did not testify because of all these things, but there's more to the story. Her failure to appear before the senators perhaps could have been predicted from the first moment a reluctant witness with assailable motives was reluctantly summoned before a bipartisan panel reluctantly investigating a distasteful issue that most everyone privately hoped would disappear. What happened on Columbus Day Weekend in 1991 underscores an unpleasant truth about Washington and its political marketplace, where truth itself often becomes the most expendable commodity.

The Case Lives On

Three years after the hearings and Clarence Thomas's uneasy ascension to the Supreme Court, the Hill-Thomas case remains very much alive. Sen. John Danforth (R-Mo.), Thomas's principal champion at the hearings, has written "Resurrection," a book about the case in which Thomas's struggle is cast almost in messianic terms, as a biblical test of faith. Hinting at significant new disclosures, Houghton Mifflin will release next month "Strange Justice: The Selling of Clarence Thomas," by Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson.

The account below is based on interviews with participants in the Thomas-Hill hearings, including repeated conversations over the past two years with Angela Wright. As he has done since his confirmation, Justice Thomas maintains a silence on the case. He declined to be interviewed for this article.

The Surprise Call

Wright loathed the spectacle that was unfolding on TV that Monday night in October 1991. An expert in publicity and public relations, she says she sensed that the cartoonish media event would get much worse in the days ahead: an unfair ordeal, she remembers thinking, for everyone associated with it. The last thing she wanted was to get involved.

But the following day, she says, the story was developing in a way that disturbed her. She didn't feel Anita Hill's charges were being taken seriously. People were calling her hysterical. People were saying she wasn't believable. She remembers one senator saying that Thomas denied Hill's accusations, and that was good enough for him. She remembers another saying...
that if there was no touching, there was no offense.

Wright was outraged, and she did what outraged journalists often do. She went to work the next day -- at the Charlotte Observer, where she was an editor -- and wrote a column.

Wright was not only venting her anger and frustration, she was being pragmatic. She had been talking to her editors about a job as a columnist. Here was a chance to show them what she could do, on a timely topic about which she held forceful opinions.

The draft column she sketched criticized Thomas, for whom she had worked at the EEOC in the mid-1980s. Wright believed that Thomas did not have the judicial experience or the temperament for a seat on the Supreme Court. She wrote, as she recalls it, that it was "insulting" to black Americans to conclude he was the most qualified black person for the job. But mostly the column was a criticism of the Senate, which she believed was cavalierly dismissing Hill's allegations. Wright argued that she believed Hill's charges were credible because she herself had been subjected to similar sexist treatment by Thomas. She was not much more explicit than that.

Wright says she never intended to have the column published; she intended it as a sample only. She showed it to some co-workers. She planned to polish it, and eventually submit it to editors, but she never got the chance. The next day, she was at work when a clerk yelled across the newsroom that she had a phone call.

It was the Senate Judiciary Committee. Its members wondered if she would be willing to talk to them about Clarence Thomas. They had heard that she'd written a column on the subject.

Someone at the paper, she realized, had betrayed her.

Something had begun that might be unstoppable.

Conference Call

On Thursday, the day before Hill's riveting testimony, eight Senate staffers and a court reporter huddled around a speaker in a Senate Judiciary Committee office to interview Angela Wright by telephone. Wright had decided to talk to them after consulting with her publisher. She had been concerned about a journalist getting in the middle of a public debate. He told her, she remembers, that he was not concerned and that she needed to ask herself if she could live with herself if she did not say what she knew.

She called the Senate staffers back.

When the conference call came, she was sitting in her Charlotte apartment alone with her dog. She thought she would be one of many women interviewed by the Senate. It never occurred to her, she says, that she would turn out to be the only "other woman."

In the next hour and 52 minutes, the substance of Angela Wright's allegations would spill out for the first time. The transcript of the questioning is an intriguing document. Time and again, Wright scolds her questioners -- Biden's counsel Cynthia Hogan and Sen. Strom Thurmond's counsel Terry Wooten -- when they suggest that she had "come forward." Wright emphasizes that she was approached by the committee, not the other way around.

"I cannot answer the questions," she snaps at Wooten once, "if you are going to insist that I decided to come forward."

Wright briefly summarizes her history with Thomas: In March 1984 he had hired her as director of public affairs for the EEOC. She was 29. For a year, she worked closely with the chairman, seeing him or speaking with him nearly every day.

Hogan asks whether Thomas, who was unmarried at the time, ever made any statements to her that she considered inappropriate.

"Yes, I can tell you that during the course of the year that I worked for Clarence Thomas, there were several comments that he made. Clarence Thomas did consistently pressure me to date him. At one point, Clarence Thomas made comments about my anatomy. Clarence Thomas made comments about women's anatomy quite often. At one point, Clarence Thomas came by my apartment at night, unannounced and uninvited, and talked in general terms, but also ... he would try to move the conversation over to the prospect of my dating him."

She estimated that one of every four or five times she saw her boss, he tried to get her to date him, or said something
sexually inappropriate.

Asked to elaborate, Wright says:

"I specifically recall being at a seminar, I can't even tell you which seminar, because we had many of them, when Clarence Thomas commented on the dress I was wearing and asked me what size my boobs were."

Hogan asks if there were other such instances where he commented on Wright's or other women's physical attributes.

"I remember specifically him saying that one woman had a big ass."

Wright confirms that Thomas had fired her in 1985 under circumstances that she considered demeaning -- she had found out through a memo placed on her chair, and when she confronted him, she says, he treated her contemptuously. She makes it clear that she felt mistreated by him. But she emphasizes that she never believed at the time that her firing was attributable to her refusal to date him. And she takes pains to distance the substance of her comments about Thomas from any negative feelings she has about her dismissal.

"I can assure you," she said, "that even if I left there under better circumstances, if he had thrown me the biggest party in the world, I would still be of the opinion that Clarence Thomas should not sit on the Supreme Court."

She says she has genuine, serious questions about his character, in part because of his sexist behavior and in part because of insensitive remarks she says he often made about other people. She remembered him derisively calling another employee "old," saying the man had "one foot in the grave and the other one on a banana peel."

Several times in the transcript Wright seems to go out of her way to limit or qualify the negative impression she is creating about Thomas's behavior. She volunteers that the time he came over to her house unannounced was the only time he had ever done so, or had even been in her apartment; she corrects herself to say that "boobs" was her word. She offers this clarification: While walking down a hallway at an EEOC seminar, Thomas had asked her not what size are your "boobs," but what size are your "breasts"?

And finally, without prompting, she says this:

"I am not sitting here and saying to you that I was sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas. I am a very strong-willed person and at no point did I feel intimidated by him. Some other woman might have, but these were not situations that I ran home and ruminated on and wrote down in my diary."

So why is she willing to speak now?

"I saw Anita Hill on television Monday night and my conscience started bothering me because I knew I felt from my experience with Clarence Thomas that he was quite capable of doing just what she said."

The interview began at 10:43 a.m. and ended at 12:35 p.m. according to the record. Angela Wright had seemed forthright, self-assured, articulate, opinionated, indignant, undeniably angry at Clarence Thomas, but hardly reckless. She had not contradicted herself. She had shown restraint at critical moments. She had seemed at the least a reasonably credible witness.

If Angela Wright had any doubts that the committee was pursuing this aggressively, those doubts would have been erased the next day.

At one point during her questioning, she had been asked if there were any corroborating witnesses, friends of hers at the EEOC whom she had told about Thomas's behavior. She said there was one, a woman who was at the time seriously ill in the hospital and whom she would not want disturbed. She said she would need to contact the woman, whom she declined to identify, to ask whether she would mind talking to the Senate staff.

Some time later, she telephoned her friend, Rose Jourdain, in the hospital.

She was too late.

The Senate staff had already found her.

Though her recollections had differed slightly from Wright's, Jourdain -- who had worked for Thomas as a speech writer and was fired the same time Wright was -- had confirmed the basic elements of Wright's account, including Wright's anger at
Thomas for what Wright had said was overtly sexist behavior. Jourdain had mentioned "comments [Wright] told me that he was making concerning her figure, her body, her breasts, her legs, how she looked in certain suits and dresses."

Moreover, Jourdain's daughter, Jacqueline Hayes, then a Harvard Law School student who was visiting her mother in the hospital, volunteered to the Senate staffers that she, too, recalled Wright talking about Thomas's overtures.

Wright was asked if she would testify voluntarily at the hearings the next weekend.

Absolutely not, Wright said.

Within hours, federal marshals were at her door, with a subpoena.

Things were moving along with bewildering speed.

By this point, Angela Wright had become so cynical about politicians that when she boarded the plane in Charlotte the Friday Anita Hill testified, "the thought crossed my mind that maybe I should switch planes, because it's quite possible this one is not going to make it," Wright says. "But then I said the 23rd Psalm a few times, and I went on to Washington."

She would testify that very afternoon.

Or so she thought.

At the Eleventh Hour

It is instructive to recall the mood of Washington on that Columbus Day weekend, 1991. The Thomas-Hill hearings were not the result of a methodical, relentless congressional march to the Truth. The hearings were a late-breaking event, an excruciating public embarrassment to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which had found itself, fairly or unfairly, accused of participating in a coverup.

Just days before, there had been no public charge of sexual harassment at all. The conventional wisdom was that Clarence Thomas had a lock on the nomination -- that there would be predictable partisan bickering, mostly around the issue of the nominee's judicial conservatism, and about whether he was being honest in denying that he had ever discussed with anyone the merits of Roe v. Wade. Ultimately, a majority of senators were considered unlikely to oppose the nomination of an apparently qualified black man. The committee had already held its official hearing, and reported the nomination to the floor.

These extraordinary follow-up hearings were being held because, in the meantime, political disaster had struck. A leak to the press disclosed that there had been a credible charge of sexual harassment brought by a woman law professor, charges the Senate committee had looked into. Why the committee had not initially acted on those charges was a matter of debate, but the fact was, it hadn't until it was forced to by public pressure.

Into this caldron of recrimination entered the sudden possibility of a second accuser.

No one was about to ignore this. They might fight it desperately, even ruthlessly, but they could not ignore it.

Why Now?

Angela Wright eats only when she's hungry, and that's not often, she says. She's having coffee -- black, thank you -- and a cigarette for lunch as we sit in the restaurant of a Charlotte hotel in her native North Carolina talking about a time she says she'd like to forget.

"I don't know why I'm talking to you," she says for the umpteenth time. At this point she has successfully avoided most of the dozens of media inquiries she's received in the years since the 15 minutes of fame that brought her "love cards from lunatics" and "marriage proposals from prisoners."

Her short-term fame also brought her a valentine of sorts from David Brock, the conservative reporter who wrote the "The Real Anita Hill." Wright thinks Brock defamed her in that bestselling book, which argued that Anita Hill might have been more believable had there been a credible second woman. And then he went on to dismiss Angela Wright as vindictive, incompetent and untrustworthy.
So that's one reason she's talking, and she doesn't relish the attention she knows she's going to get for speaking out now. She's concerned about the impression her remarks could leave about black men in general, who she thinks are under siege in the media. And she's also concerned about her story being included among "sleazy" accounts of women like Clinton accuser Paula Jones and "the Cisneros woman" -- who in her view are trying to "extort" money.

"I constantly get irritated at people who say, 'You came forward to tell people that Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed you.' " She says she was not speaking as a victim, but "strictly as someone who had evidence to support" Anita Hill.

Wright says she believes it's unfortunate that questions about Thomas's character focused only on sexual harassment instead of on how he treated people in general.

"I just think he's one of those people who has never been very happy with himself and never really learned very good social skills. ... He was never able to believe anybody could actually just care about him as a human being, so consequently he ends up trying to squash others."

Passion and Fire A public relations professional for most of her career, Angela Wright seems to have found a professional peace of sorts in journalism. "I don't belong in the political arena. I don't compromise principles. I'm not a brown-noser," she says as she sips her coffee and checks her watch to make sure she isn't late for work.

People who know her also observe that she has another trait that often lands her in trouble: She tends to say exactly what she thinks, a quality not always valued in Washington political circles.

Now 40, Wright came of age during the civil rights revolution, and as race riots raged in the South, she made local history when in the early 1970s she was elected the first black homecoming queen of her newly integrated Wilmington, N.C., high school.

When she had a choice between working as an airline flight attendant or as a congressional aide, she chose the latter. Wright readily acknowledges that she has "passion" and "fire." Some might call it, and have called it, abrasiveness. Whatever it is, she says, it has been tempered with age and experience.

In 1976, at age 22, she brought these qualities and her '70s idealism to Washington when she went to work for Rep. Charlie Rose (D-N.C.). She remembers storming out of his office 18 months later because she felt she had been unfairly accused of mishandling a constituent request, and being fired two days later. "I deserved to be fired," she says now, explaining that like many of her contemporaries, she was poised to challenge any perceived injustice.

Before going to work for Thomas at the EEOC in 1984, she served as director of media relations for the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), where she worked successfully until she clashed with her last boss there, Kate Semerad. She quit that job, leaving behind a scathing letter, calling Semerad a "fool" and charging her with incompetence and racism. "I will not be your lackey," she wrote.

Wright says she still believes her feelings were justified, but that she immaturely and unprofessionally put them on paper and sent carbon copies to several officials at places including the White House. It's a letter she says she gave to Thomas before he hired her.

"He liked it, and he even felt I was justified in behaving the way I did." She says he told her it was the kind of letter most people wished they had the nerve to write to a bad boss.

It's also a letter that was floating all over Capitol Hill that Columbus Day weekend, to the delight of Republicans who planned to use it as evidence that Angela Wright was a vengeful woman who might say anything.

If revenge had been her motive, says Wright, "I don't think it would have taken a subpoena to get me there." And as for saying what she thinks, Wright says, "People may agree or disagree with who I am or what my style is, but they'll never call me a hypocrite."

Looking for Dirt'

Actually, they called her a lot worse. When she arrived in Washington, Angela Wright was already news. Her testimony had not been scheduled yet, but already she was at the center of a controversy.

In her lawyer's office, she turned on the TV to see Clarence Thomas under questioning, and he was talking about her.
Sen. Simpson asked him whether he had ever heard of an Angela Wright.

Yes, Thomas said. He had fired her.

Why, Simpson asked.

Because she was "ineffective" and because, Thomas said, he'd been told she once called a fellow employee a "faggot." That, said Thomas, was the "last straw."

Wright says she was flabbergasted. She says she had never used the term "faggot," ever, and that, in fact, she has several close gay friends.

"All I can say is that never happened in any way, shape, form or fashion. I didn't call anybody a faggot. I didn't get fired for calling anybody a faggot. That whole scenario was plucked out of the clear blue sky to save Clarence Thomas's rear."

True or false, it was just the beginning of the assault.

At her newspaper colleagues' insistence, Wright had enlisted the aid of a Charlotte attorney, Gil Middlebrooks, whose firm represented the Observer. Middlebrooks remembers getting a call from Charlotte informing him that "Bush administration folks" were calling up, "looking for dirt on Angela Wright."

The Republicans let the Democrats know unambiguously that if she testified, they were going to go after Angela Wright. Key parts of their case against Wright would have been damaged by scrutiny, but it appears no one -- not Republicans, Democrats or the press -- bothered to investigate at the time.

Wright would be portrayed as a woman seeking revenge for her firing by Thomas more than six years earlier.

"I felt that when you are assassinating someone's character, you bring your own to the fore," Simpson said in an interview. "All I know is that if she wanted to expose herself to the committee with damaging information about Clarence Thomas ... I was fully ready to damage her character in the process."

Simpson says Wright was going to tell about some very crude things that "she alleged that Clarence Thomas had done to her" because "he canned her butt. Because she called a person in the office a 'faggot,' and he said, 'You're out of here.' And she was embarrassed, aggrieved and victimized and just wanted to tear his butt off. That is my personal view."

Does he know whether Wright's allegations about Thomas were true?

"I have no idea," he says.

Simpson says the Republicans would have tried to bolster the revenge argument by using Wright's angry letter to her former AID boss, Kate Semerad, to try to establish that she had a history of being vindictive.

"That was an astonishing letter," says Simpson.

Middlebrooks had expected all of this. But as they reviewed her testimony, he concluded Wright was "well-prepared" to handle the fire. He believes she would have been very credible because she had not sought publicity and had been careful not to "sensationalize or overstate what had happened to her."

Says Wright:

"I take full responsibility for all my actions. I haven't broken any laws. I've shown bad judgment at times, but who hasn't?"

In her view, "they came up with a bunch of exaggerations and lies."

The Republicans' Plan

How credible was the Republican case against Angela Wright? Was she a chronic malcontent who was ready to perjure herself for vengeance? Was she a bigot?

Undeniably, she was a controversial, outspoken individual. Her diplomatic skills in the workplace were not always finely honed. A lot of people liked her; some seemed to dislike her. At the Agency for International Development, where she
worked before going to the EEOC, she receives high praise from two of her former bosses. "She did an excellent job for me," says Mary Catherine English, a former AID supervisor. "I doubt you would find people who would say she is hostile."

To bolster the charge that Wright was vindictive, the Republicans had planned to call Kate Semerad, who had been interviewed by the FBI and was prepared to testify that she thought Wright had sought revenge against her. Semerad said in an interview that although she can't prove it, she knows "through the grapevine" that Wright joined forces with Sen. Jesse Helms's aide Christopher Manion to try to stop her 1984 Senate confirmation as AID assistant administrator for external affairs.

Wright responds that she never tried to stop Semerad's nomination but that she did speak one time to Manion about Semerad when he called her to ask about her resignation letter. In an interview, Manion said Wright was not an instigator, or even a factor, in Helms's opposition to Semerad's nomination, and he is amused Semerad thinks she was. He also is amused that a conservative Republican like himself is in the position of bolstering Wright's credibility.

And last, there is the disturbing matter of the alleged slur against gays.

Thomas had testified that Wright was fired in part because he had been told she called someone a "faggot." He did not say where he had heard this, or from whom. But one of Thomas's close friends, radio personality Armstrong Williams, says he himself heard Wright use the disparaging expression when they both worked at the EEOC. And worse, Williams said, he knew for a fact that she said it not only to him, but to the person in question, right to his face.

Pressed, Williams surrendered the name of the individual, a former high-ranking EEOC executive.

The man, who is now working elsewhere, is not a particular fan of Angela Wright. But he said he had never heard her utter the word "faggot," not to him and not to anyone else.

Charlotte Observer projects editor Mary Newsom, who called Thomas for a reference when the newspaper was considering hiring Wright, says Thomas told her that Wright was an "excellent employee" whom he had asked to resign because he had "overburdened her with a shop that couldn't be reformed."

Newsom says her notes from the conversation indicate that Thomas said Wright's departure "had nothing to do with Angela. I owe her an apology." Thomas volunteered high praise for Wright's job performance, Newsom said, and never mentioned her having made any prejudiced remarks.

Informed of this, Sen. Simon thinks the discrepancy reflects badly on Thomas, and that it "certainly casts additional doubt on his credibility."

EEOC Vice Chairman Ricky Silberman, a close friend of Thomas, says she had been lobbying Thomas to get rid of Wright for some time. While she says she does not recall any allegation that Wright had called anyone a "faggot," she does not find it all all surprising or inconsistent that he would praise Wright to a prospective employer -- even someone like Wright, whom she says he often called "worthless."

"That's vintage Clarence Thomas." Thomas, Silberman says, always "tried to help people along in life."

"When Can We Testify?"

Following Thomas's testimony on Saturday morning, in which he decried a "high-tech lynching," Biden publicly assured him that the presumption of innocence "is with you, judge." He went on to explain that there is usually a pattern of behavior in sexual harassment cases. "If there's not a pattern, to me, that's probative," Biden said.

In his Washington office, Gil Middlebrooks paced the floor. Angela Wright's attorney believed his client could have helped establish a "probative," -- or legally meaningful -- pattern, of behavior. As the three days began to run together, he remembers repeatedly pressing Biden counsel Cynthia Hogan for the time when Wright would testify.

"In every conversation" with Hogan, he says, he asked, "When can we testify? We want to do this; we want to get it over with and go back to Charlotte where she can resume reporting the news as opposed to making it."

Hogan has not returned phone calls, but she told Harvard Kennedy School of Government case study researcher Jillian Dickert that she thought Wright was "a very credible witness" and conveyed that to Sen. Biden. But she said Wright's attorney told her Wright didn't want to testify after seeing what had happened to Anita Hill, but didn't want to say so publicly.
Biden, too, said he believes this.

In an interview taped not long before the first anniversary of the hearings, Biden said that he really wanted Angela Wright to testify because he thought her testimony would have changed the course of history, "I wanted her to come in the beginning, in the middle and in the end." But he says she didn't want to. He said that if she had wanted to testify, she could have been on in prime time.

But, he said, she and her advisers demurred. He said he was told she wanted the subpoena lifted.

Middlebrooks denies this: "If anybody told you she wanted out," he says, "they weren't sitting there with Angela Wright like I was for three days." He says there was "absolutely, positively" no talk of prime-time testimony. He says she never asked for the subpoena to be lifted.

Biden said he understood that Anita Hill's supporters also wanted Wright's subpoena lifted because they feared she would undercut Hill's stellar performance.

But one of Hill's lawyers, Charles Ogletree, says he doesn't know who those supporters could be, and if the implication is that any of Hill's team didn't want Wright called, that is "absolutely, unequivocally, categorically and positively false." He adds that whatever "backdoor maneuver" might have been used to shut out Angela Wright's "highly relevant" testimony was "shameful."

Hogan told the Kennedy School's Dickert that Biden was the only senator who wanted Wright to appear. Another Biden aide has told reporters that the senator could do little with the other 13 senators united against him.

But Sen. Simpson says, "I'm the one that was very anxious to call her. ... I was saying, 'Bring her on. I'd love to ask her some questions.'"

Sen. Simon, however, says he doesn't recall any Lone Ranger insisting that Wright had to be heard. "If any one member of the committee had insisted on calling her, she would have been called."

Instead, he remembers a meeting of the Judiciary Committee members in Sen. Ted Kennedy's office on Sunday -- it was about 5 p.m. after a recess in the hearings was announced -- where there was a discussion ("I don't know if it came to a formal vote") leading to a consensus among Democrats and Republicans not to call Wright. He recalls that the Republicans felt she "confirmed the sexual harassment side of things," and the Democrats feared that because she had been fired by Thomas, Wright might appear less credible. He says no senator argued that Wright had to be called.

Because so much was going on, Simon says, he did not read Angela Wright's testimony until after the hearings. That's when he was "stunned" to learn that Rose Jourdain had corroborated Wright's account. Had he known this when the senators caucused Sunday, "I would have insisted that she be called." Simon says he thinks Wright's account, buttressed by Jourdain's, "would have turned the situation around."

"First, the Senate shouldn't be approving that kind of conduct," he says. "But the second factor was the truthfulness factor. [Thomas] was under oath. Anita Hill was under oath. And when you add the Angela Wright dimension to it, I think it is fairly clear that the person who was not telling the truth was Clarence Thomas."

So what really happened?

Middlebrooks makes an intriguing point.

It is true, he acknowledges, that Angela Wright did not want to testify. From the very beginning she made that clear. She resisted repeatedly, from the first moment she was approached by Senate staffers, any suggestion that she had "come forward." She came to Washington only because she had been subpoenaed.

But Angela Wright, Middlebrooks says measuredly, was always willing to testify. She made that clear too.

It was a small semantic point, perhaps, but it had huge consequences. It was the point around which the whole affair would hinge. It would give all those in power what they so desperately wanted. It would give them an out.
A No-Win Situation?

It was in the early evening Sunday, as Wright and Middlebrooks recall, when they began a series of conversations initiated by Hogan that lasted until 10 or 11 p.m.

"The effect was that if I wanted to back out," Wright says, "then there would be no problem with that. And we both said: This is not an issue of her backing out; this is an issue of a woman being here under subpoena because you guys sent her one. ... If you guys decide that you don't want to call her, then that's up to you. ... But she is fully prepared to do what you all have insisted she do by way of subpoena."

Hogan told Kennedy School researcher Dickert that as the final arrangements were made for an ambulance to bring Wright's corrobator, Jourdain, from her home to the hearings, "out of the blue, the Republicans - who were clearly terrified of Angela Wright -- said, "We don't want her to testify, and we will accept the transcript of her deposition unrebuted." To a lawyer, she explained, this means "they are accepting it as basically true, so we thought this was a tremendous victory."

She said she was "horrified" when no major news outlet picked up on the significance the next day. They had "misjudged the way it would be perceived by the press and other senators."

Middlebrooks says Hogan then presented "a concept from Senator Biden of a letter essentially releasing her from the subpoena," and stipulating that transcripts of the interviews with Wright and Jourdain would be part of the written hearing record. Wright, tired of being "jerked around for three days," said that when the letter was presented, she decided, "If that's the way you guys want to handle it, fine."

She felt she was in a no-win situation: If she demanded to testify, Republicans would cast her in the role of a vengeful woman. If she did not testify, she'd be accused of getting cold feet.

And she says that not long after that, Biden announced to millions of Americans, who had been anticipating her testimony for several days, that Angela Wright would not testify.

And then he read the letter he and Wright had signed.

It withdrew the subpoena. It mentioned Biden's continuing "preference" to have her testify, and then it closed: "I wish to make clear, however, that if you want to testify at the hearing in person, I will honor that request." Biden says he was so concerned about revisionist history that "I insisted she sign the letter." Simpson agrees: "We didn't want her ever to be in a position to say that she wasn't invited to testify."

If Sen. Simpson so eagerly wanted Angela Wright to testify, as he has repeatedly said, why didn't he force her to do so?

Exasperated, Simpson gives in.

"Because," he says, "she had an attorney who chose to tell us she didn't care to come. And Joe Biden said he didn't care to have her. And I didn't care to have her. She was going to say some vicious things about Clarence Thomas."

Ogletree, who calls the committee's treatment of Wright "despicable and unforgivable," says the question should never have been "Does Angela Wright want to testify," but "Does Angela Wright have relevant testimony that should be heard?"

"She shouldn't have to beg" to testify, he says of the position the senators put Wright in. "She's a material witness who had facts to present."

Sen. Specter says, in retrospect, that he agrees. Angela Wright's testimony was a matter of "public interest."

"My feeling is we rushed to judgment. ... We should have taken more time" to investigate Anita Hill's allegations, he says. In fact, he says he and Sen. Brown alone voted to extend the hearings.

And if someone wanted to convene a congressional committee now to try to get to the truth, as was done with the Kennedy assassination?

"I wouldn't object," he said.
But Specter won't be spearheading such an investigation. "I've got too many other things I have to do at the moment."

Another Call

Angela Wright had never spoken to Anita Hill, but several weeks after the hearings, during the Thanksgiving holidays, she decided to call her.

"I kind of felt like I left her hanging -- or that she might have felt that I left her hanging. ... And even though I didn't get to testify, I wanted her to know that I tried to and that I didn't get scared because of what happened to her. I told her she was a very brave woman.

"She was glad that I called. She was wondering what had happened."

Florence George Graves is a Radcliffe Public Policy Fellow at Harvard University and a former Alicia Patterson Foundation Journalism Fellow.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, THE SCENE THREE YEARS AGO: ANITA HILL AND CLARENCE THOMAS ON EITHER SIDE OF A MYSTERY. AP, PHOTO

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