

## HILL RAT: BLOWING THE LID OFF CONGRESS

John L. Jackley

Regnery Gateway / 377 pages / \$21.95

reviewed by DAVE SHIFLETT

Many voters are under the impression that their congressmen actually like them, and that their staffs (the Hill rats) are harried public servants doing their best in a tough system. But to John L. Jackley, your representative and his staff are more likely to be arrogant, cynical, and duplicitous fixers who wish that constituents—including yourself—would walk off a cliff.

*Hill Rat* is a bitter book, the more so because its author was, at one time, a believer. Jackley worked for three congressmen, finishing his tour of duty as press secretary for a nondescript liberal Democrat from Texas. Jackley's early faith in the system was perhaps responsible for his being willing to put up with more than a self-respecting person should. One day, for instance, he had this exchange with Rep. Thomas A. Luken (D-Ohio) about a bill to designate "The Merchant Marine Hymn" as the official song of, yes, the merchant marines. Rep. Luken speaks first:

"How's it go?"

I furrowed my brow, looked at him, and without thinking, stepped off the edge. "Uh, it's going just fine sir, how about you?"

"No, goddammit, how's it go go go!" he exploded. "How's it go? How does it go? Which word don't you understand? Which one? Which one?"

This goes on for quite a long time, with the congressman storming about the office, jabbing his finger at poor Jackley, trying to get his quaking factotum to

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hum the tune. Jackley is unable to, which causes Luken to grab a file from his aide's hand and throw it toward the ceiling. The reader winces, as if he were watching a man beat his dog.

The one event that disgusted Jackley more than any other was the House's reaction to the John Mack affair. Mack, as many will recall, was an aide to then-House Speaker Jim Wright. During an earlier stint as a hardware-store manager, Mack had beaten a female customer with a hammer, dumped her in the trunk of a car, and gone to the movies. That she survived was something of a miracle.

But some members were not happy about her resurrection, and when the *Washington Post* ran a large story recounting the beating, some Hill personalities defended the hammerman. Jackley was particularly outraged by Tony Coelho, who announced that "under our system of law Jack Mack owed his debt to society, not to this young woman."

Coelho had a penchant for defending his friends and political allies, no matter how horrendous their crimes. In 1981, Jackley says, Coelho had sought

a lighter sentence for David Weidert, the son of the executive director of a group called California Westside Farmers, which had contributed \$1,000 to his campaigns in 1980 and 1981. According to one press report, David Weidert had been convicted of beating a slightly retarded young man with a baseball bat, torturing him, stabbing him, and forcing him to dig his own grave before burying him alive.

Mr. Coelho was last seen at Dorothy Bush

LeBlond's wedding to a major Hill rat

Jackley's book provides many revealing tidbits. "On October 10, 1991," he writes, "House Foreign Affairs Committee aide George Warren was struck by a heart attack and had to wait eighteen minutes for a public ambulance. A block away, the ambulance reserved exclusively for members of Congress sat unused while Warren died."

Less tragic was Lou Cannon's initial response to suggestions that an obscure marine named Oliver North was providing illegal military and intelligence assistance to the Contras. "There's nothing to this s---," Jackley quotes the infallible Cannon as saying. Like Jackley, Cannon is now living on the West Coast.

But such are the sidelights. The larger story is that in the guise of operating a representative democracy, our representatives have paddled the country ever closer to the big falls. The book brings to mind that eloquent dirge delivered on the Senate floor not long ago by John Danforth, who tried to grasp the reason so many of his colleagues had decided not to run for office again:

I think the major cause is that deep down in our hearts we believe that we have been accomplices to doing something terrible and unforgivable to this wonderful country. Deep down in our hearts we know that we have bankrupted America and that we have given our children a legacy of bankruptcy. We have been so intent on getting ourselves elected that year after year we have put off the hard issues . . .

Jackley seconds that emotion:

We squandered more money than Wall Street ever dreamed of. We made Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker look like amateurs. We had more scandals in one week than the Pentagon had in a year. We made the public forget about the hundreds of Reagan-era officials accused of misconduct.

This is a disheartening book, perhaps a bit long, but worth reading—especially by those who might be hesitant to pull the trigger on their local incumbent this fall. Figure it this way: even if it's only half as bad as Jackley says, they deserve the rack. Then the ax. □

CAPITOL GAMES:  
CLARENCE THOMAS, ANITA HILL, AND THE STORY  
OF A SUPREME COURT NOMINATION

Timothy M. Phelps and Helen Winternitz

Hyperion / 458 pages / \$24.95

reviewed by TOD LINDBERG

source counts as news, but the fact that the source conveyed it doesn't count as news. Without this conceit, journalism as we know it would cease to exist. All in all, that would be a bad thing; the practice is not indefensible. But reporters who deny that it is a problem are mistaken.

It is hard to imagine a case in which it is a bigger problem than in the case of the Anita Hill leak. The authors' catty concluding sentence notwithstanding, we have all known a few things at least since last October: interest groups opposed to Thomas's nomination on ideological grounds were working night and day looking for "dirt" on him; equally committed staffers of senators opposed to the nomination were similarly engaged; the groups and the staffers worked close together; at least some of those who were aware of Anita Hill's allegations thought they were potentially serious enough to derail the nomination; they further thought the reception accorded the allegations by the Judiciary Committee was inadequate; and they leaked information about the charges to the press with the expectation that a public airing, even at the eleventh hour, would derail the nomination.

The truth or falsity of Hill's allegations is, of course, the central issue. But it is preposterous to maintain, explicitly or implicitly, that the full history of the surfacing of these charges can tell us nothing about their truth or falsity. Yet that is where we find ourselves, by default, in the partial account offered in *Capitol Games*.

At the same time, the Phelps and Winternitz account is useful for the snippets it does provide. In this rendering, which rings true, we have a portrait of the Democratic staff and senators of the Judiciary Committee divided into warring camps over the Hill allegations. Staffers for Senators Kennedy and Metzenbaum hear rumors of the allegations from Nan Aron's left-wing Alliance for Justice, an organization whose principal mission is to derail conservative judicial nominees. But Kennedy, whose reputation has been beaten about the face and head thanks to the goings-on at the family compound in Palm Beach the previous Easter weekend, doesn't want to lead the charge on  
(continued on page 67)

The problems with Timothy Phelps and Helen Winternitz's *Capitol Games: Clarence Thomas, Anita Hill, and the Story of a Supreme Court Nomination* begin with its title and end with its last sentence. The title is non-committal, nonjudgmental. It seems to promise a disinterested insiders' account of events from June 27, 1991, when Thurgood Marshall announced he was retiring from the high court, to October 26, when the Senate confirmed Clarence Thomas for the seat—journalism in its "objective" or "fair" or "balanced" sense.

As for the last sentence, we may take it as an oblique summa of the authors' position on the truth or falsity of Prof. Hill's charge that Thomas sexually harassed her: "The Republicans had no appetite," the authors archly aver, "for investigating the alleged conspiracy that they say had been concocted to sabotage their nominee to the Supreme Court." It is a detail, the final detail, that the authors seem to regard as "telling." What does it tell? That even the Republicans, who are earlier described as willing to "stop at nothing" to see their man confirmed, may themselves not have believed Thomas.

This is polemic by insinuation, a practice that should be depressingly familiar to anyone who follows the Washington press corps. Rather than giving the book a proper title based on its contents (for example, *Betrayal: How the Senate Wronged a Woman Who Came Forward to Tell the Truth about a Supreme Court Nominee*), the authors and their publisher give us a veneer of neutrality. Why? Surely not to lend unwarranted authority

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to their highly selective presentation of the evidence in this spectacular case.

As it happens, *Capitol Games* was more or less foreordained to be a fundamentally disingenuous book. Phelps, who covers Washington politics for *Newsday*, was the second reporter (after Nina Totenberg of National Public Radio) to get Anita Hill to talk about her charges on the record. His story was the first to appear, in the Sunday, October 6 *Newsday* (whose first editions are printed Saturday evening, at about the same time its important stories are released over the wire services). Totenberg's broadcast was Sunday morning. Their one-two punch came just after the Senate Judiciary Committee had split evenly on the nomination, and the Senate as a whole was scheduled to vote October 8. Eventually that vote would be postponed, and the nation would be treated to an unforgettable, riveting weekend of television when Sen. Joseph Biden's committee convened as a sexual harassment tribunal.

Phelps, in short, knows exactly who let that runaway train out of the station. And he isn't saying. He promised his sources anonymity, and he is keeping his promise.

So *Capitol Games* is ultimately based on the premise that the charges Anita Hill made are more important than how they came to be made and how they came to be made public. In fact, the last two questions count for nothing to Phelps and Winternitz (though they intermittently pretend to address them). In this, they are hardly unique. It is the essential and paradoxical conceit of journalism that anonymous information conveyed by a