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Exorcising Orrin Hatch



By Marty Kaplan

It couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

Because Senator Orrin Hatch couldn't eke out 60 percent of the votes at the Utah Republican Party's convention this past weekend, he'll face a primary challenge from former state senator Dan Liljenquist.

With the help of Tea Party piggy banks like FreedomWorks, Liljenquist has assailed Hatch as a conservative in name only. Hatch counters that his seniority - he's been in the Senate since 1976 - will put him in line to chair the Finance Committee if the GOP takes the upper chamber in November, but Liljenquist has flipped that into a liability: Hatch has been a Washington insider too long. Going into the convention, Hatch held a big lead over Liljenquist in statewide polls, but millions of dollars of anonymously funded attack ads could well make Hatch sweat bullets.

Which would be sweet, because Hatch, along with former Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, has held a special place in my heart ever since the 1991 hearings on Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination. Then as now, it's impossible to be neutral on Professor Anita Hill's allegations against Thomas. Either you believe that Hill was lying about being sexually harassed by Thomas at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and that the Judiciary Committee hearings were, as Thomas memorably called them, a "high tech lynch mob," or you believe that Thomas perjured himself, and that the Republican senators impugning Hill's integrity were - well, disgusting jackals doesn't seem too unforgiving.

Though a Mormon bishop, Hatch looked to me more like a judge at a Puritan witch trial. "With his stiff neck and high collars," as Mary McGrory described the "pompous, pious" Hatch, "his round brown eyes perpetually pop in surprise and shock at Democratic follies." Watching Hatch ask Thomas again and again about Long Dong Silver, the porn star that Hill said Thomas told her he was a fan of, it was hard not to wonder whether Hatch's obsession with the iconography of large black penises was more revealing about himself than the victim.

The money shot, captured in front-page pictures around the nation, came on the second day of the hearings. Hatch quoted Hill's testimony to Thomas: "One of the oddest episodes I remember was an occasion in which Thomas was drinking a Coke in his office. He got up from the table at which we were working, went over to his desk to get the Coke, looked at the can and asked, 'Who has put pubic hair on my Coke?'"

"Did you ever say that?" Hatch asked Thomas.

"No, absolutely not."

Then, to an explosion of clicking shutters, Hatch held up a copy of William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel, *The Exorcist*.

"Ever read this book?" he asked Thomas.

"No, Senator."

"Ever see the movie?"

"I have seen only the scene with the bed flapping."

In what may be the most whacked accusation of plagiarism ever hurled, Hatch then charged Hill with cribbing her claim from the 20 year-old book. "Oh, Burk," sighed Sharon," Hatch began reading. "In a guarded tone, she described an encounter between the Senator and the director. Dennings had remarked to him, in passing, said Sharon, that there appeared to be 'an alien pubic hair floating around in my gin.'"

Amazing staff work — and this was before Google! On the other hand, as Garry Wills put it, “If she had said Thomas called her a bug, Hatch would presumably have proved that the exchange did not take place by brandishing Ka a’s *Metamorphosis*.”

But as it turned out, life, not art, was Hill’s source material. *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus, who covered the hearings, later cited four people corroborating Hill. Marcus noted that Kevin Merida and Michael A. Fletcher, in their book, *Supreme Discomfort*, found that “some of the behavior Hill complained about resonated with episodes from Thomas’s past. “Hill described an episode in which Thomas, drinking a soda, asked, ‘Who has put pubic hair on my Coke?’ James Millet, a college classmate of Thomas’s, recalled ‘an almost identical episode’ at Holy Cross. ‘Pubic hair was one of the things he talked about,’ another classmate said. Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson, in *Strange Justice*, found two others who recalled a pubic hair-Coke can comment at the EEOC.”

Yes, I know that Orrin Hatch collaborated with Ted Kennedy on bills like the Orphan Drug Act and that he ordered an investigation of potential Republican Judiciary Committee staff misconduct (Democratic files on judicial nomination strategy had been hacked and leaked). But since George W. Bush’s second term, Hatch has been as disciplined an ideologue as Mitch McConnell, so being beaten by his Republican primary opponent would make the Brigadoon of bipartisanship no less unattainable.

Nineteen years after Justice Thomas’s confirmation hearings, when his wife Virginia left a bizarre voicemail asking Anita Hill to apologize and provide a “full explanation of why you did what you did with my husband,” Hatch leapt to Virginia Thomas’s defense. “Look, I was there,” he said. “I know this more intimately than almost anybody. And I can tell you that Clarence Thomas was telling the truth. I think this has probably grated on Ginni all these years. And I think she was probably hoping that maybe Anita Hill would admit that what she said was wrong.”

Ginni Thomas has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in undisclosed contributions for Tea Party campaigns, a fact which her husband finds no reason to recuse himself from sitting in judgment on President Obama’s Affordable Health Care law. It would be sweet justice if some of that dough has made its way to paying for attack ads that have already humiliated her pompous, pious defender.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.

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