

EMBARRASS YOUR EX

“I can’t believe they’re holding Congressional hearings on a game show!” Jason Andrews complained bitterly. The 23-year-old Satellite Broadcasting System programmer had earned his prime time coup and was outraged that anyone would even consider undermining his résumé by exploiting a minor scandal.

“They have a lot of nerve,” Jennifer More agreed, while shifting slightly in her seat to make sure her dress wasn’t being wrinkled. She wanted to look her best when they entered the committee room for the televised hearings.

“I mean, like that nerd has been out of the hospital for weeks, for God’s sake,” Jason continued.

“They’re also mumbling something about my directives to the referees, you know,” Jennifer said confidentially, “especially the one about holding back until an incident becomes life-threatening.”

“And you’re telling me football isn’t life-threatening?”

“Save it for the Reps, Jason. I’m on your side,” Jennifer said caustically. The twice-divorced 26-year-old SBS Vice President, creator of the wildly popular game show *Embarrass Your Ex*, did not need Jason to stoke her own moral outrage. She felt deep in her heart that the incident these Congressmen were intentionally exaggerating was already history.

“Oh yeh,” Jason realized slowly, distracted by a penetrating glance from the SBS President, Michael Clemens. Michael had overheard their conversation while reviewing the overnight ratings: almost 28 percent of the national audience, a 48 share, had tuned in to last night’s show in spite of the fact that under 75% of American homes were equipped to receive the SBS signal.

That ever so slight dip in popularity of *Embarrass Your Ex*, caused by the Congressional hearings publicity and related boycotts, did not disturb Michael. He knew that the publicity would eventually only serve to send the show's ratings even higher into the stratosphere.

Michael had already begun calculating how far he could afford to ratchet up the per second advertising rates for *Your Ex*, as everyone at SBS called the show, when he realized there was no harm in ratcheting up Jason's and Jennifer's outrage, too. He immediately thought about how well that would play on TV in just a few minutes.

"They're just like everyone else," Michael said quietly, breaking the silence that had abruptly descended on the waiting room. "They want a piece of your popularity. For free."

"But a Congressional inquiry? Like this was treason?" Jason could not calm down.

"It's been done before, almost 40 years ago," Michael said, encouraging the perception that he had been in broadcasting nearly forever, though he was not yet 40 himself. "A game show scandal was one of the first to rock the industry."

"So what!" Jennifer said irreverently. Her position at SBS was more secure than life tenure. "I'm still pissed that just because some jerk gets choked a little during prime time these guys go running off in all directions like it's the end of the world."

"You're absolutely right, Jennifer, but, like I said, they just want some of your popularity to rub off—on them. How else could these stuffed shirts collar our kind of audience?"

"By appearing on our show?" Jason giggled. He had gotten it now, but he was still angry. He did not like freeloaders invading his turf.

"Short of being publicly anointed as President Clinton's favorite in the mid-term elections next month, you're right," Michael agreed.

Although Jason and Jennifer were young enough to have already taken President Clinton's enormous popularity for granted,

Michael still felt that making such a claim on behalf of any politician had to be an exaggeration. But it wasn't.

Two years after she had won the 1996 election in the first unanimous electoral vote since George Washington, President Clinton's popularity was still phenomenally high. Her approval ratings had never dipped below 90 percent, and it was clear a mere nod from her could ensure reelection for any incumbent.

Of course, there were a few lonely iconoclasts who still protested the means by which Hillary Rodham Clinton had stunned the nation with her resourcefulness and generosity, but their cautious words were weak whispers, nearly inaudible in the gale of tumultuous support.

In her previous incarnation as the President's wife, Hillary had been buffeted by alternating waves of approval and disapproval. But in early 1996 her already weak approval ratings had plummeted. It was obvious to nearly everyone that her frustrating but continuing attempts to shepherd a universal coverage health care bill through Congress were taking their toll.

But she was not to be denied. On Wednesday, May 1st, after a week of rumblings from the Federal Reserve that interest rates might drop, Hillary and her staff borrowed \$100 billion from the US Treasury to short stocks and bet huge sums on currency futures on the Frankfurt, Tokyo, Hong Kong, London and New York exchanges. Shortly after noon, when the Federal Reserve Chairman announced a sharp 2 percent increase in the Federal Discount Rate, Hillary's operatives began closing out their positions. By Friday morning they had netted slightly over \$2 trillion.

In a prime time news conference that evening she announced that the proceeds of her Reverse Marshall Plan, as she called it, would be used to pay down almost half the national debt. And she mentioned that she would no longer listen to any more excuses in Congress about what our country could or could not afford to do.

Three days later she walked back to the White House from the Capitol, followed by an impromptu parade of hundreds of thousands, carrying an approved universal coverage health care bill in

her hands. She presented it to her husband for his signature with a ceremonial flourish that was carried live by all the networks.

It came as no surprise, then, that in June some Democrats seriously floated the idea of having Bill step aside in favor of his popular wife. But it did catch almost everyone off guard when Bob Dole himself nominated Hillary Rodham Clinton for President at the Republican convention in July. Even more startling was her acceptance speech, delivered five minutes later after the cheering had died down.

Three weeks later Bill Clinton accepted the honor of nominating his wife at the Democratic convention. Her acceptance speech there included the promise that she would put her husband's experience to use as her Secretary of State. Only a few irascible columnists dared mention this was designed to give him foreign policy experience before the 2004 elections were held.

Riding her continuing wave of popularity, candidate Clinton, representing both major parties, had won 95% of the vote in November. Ross Perot's name had remained on the ballot in 35 states, although he had withdrawn from the race for the second time in mid-October. His 4 percent, and an assortment of votes for libertarian, vegetarian and socialist parties, were the reason the popular vote was not also unanimous.

So Michael Clemens had not been exaggerating. A nod from President Clinton was more valuable for assisting a reelection campaign than any association, even a scandalous one, with his network's number one game show. But even if it did rank a distant second to the President in popularity, *Embarrass Your Ex* had its own large and loyal following.

The game itself was simple, and that was one of the keys to its nightly success, to its continually taking the first five slots of the top ten shows week after week since its prime time premiere 37 weeks earlier.

The format of *Embarrass Your Ex* was an almost bare stage on which two chairs sat, angled half toward the audience and half toward each other. The chairs were kept 20 feet apart and were

securely attached to the stage. A thick blue line halfway between the two chairs divided the stage into two playing zones. Two thin red lines ran parallel to the blue one, dividing each playing zone in half.

The contestants were restricted to couples whose divorces were final. The scoring was simple: you received five points whenever your ex crossed the red line of his or her playing zone, with bonus points for every second he or she spent on the wrong side of the red line. And if your ex completely left his or her playing zone by crossing the thick blue line, you were automatically the winner.

The strategy for inducing your ex to leave his or her chair and to cross the red line, or even the blue line, was equally simple. Within a week of the premiere it was clear that the only effective means were to say something personal, to tell a shared secret or to reveal an event so embarrassing that your ex would get angry enough to stamp about the stage, shouting and cursing, or even to lunge for your throat, carrying him or her across that thick blue line.

It was a very entertaining show to watch.

Of course, there had been difficult moments, but they had mostly been ironed out during the audience testing sessions before the show went national. The director had quickly learned that, even after passing through a metal detector, each contestant should still be frisked twice.

But then there was the “incident” a month ago. The winning ex had spent a week in the hospital in critical condition after being attacked by his former wife. She had been made so furious by his very first revelation (a relatively minor one concerning the location of some excess body hair), and had moved so quickly out of her chair and across the thick blue line, that her ex had only had enough time to stand up and gasp before her forceful knee had found its way to his formerly appreciated groin. She had then held his throat so tightly in her grasp as they struggled on the floor that it had taken several referees to pry her loose.

The “incident”, and Jennifer’s secret directive to the referees to refrain from intervening in the private affairs of contestants un-

less an incident became life-threatening, were, as suspected, the subjects of the Congressional hearing. But minutes into the proceedings even Jennifer and Jason could see that Michael Clemens had been right. The hearings were no more than a shame-faced attempt by several Congressmen facing tough reelection campaigns to capitalize on *Embarrass Your Ex's* popularity.

As Jason, Jennifer and Michael took their seats, they looked straight past the committee chairman to the bank of televisions playing the offending scene from *Your Ex* over and over again. After Jennifer was asked a few perfunctory questions about her directives to the referees, the chairman launched into a detailed summary of the titillating facts known about the now-imprisoned former wife (who, it had been determined, was so furious at her ex that any little thing could have sent her into a murderous rage). Then the chairman unexpectedly banged his gavel, lifted up a sign with an 800 number on it and announced that the call-in portion of the hearings would begin.

That was a first for a Congressional hearing, as far as anyone could remember. But it proved rather dull until the 11th caller, a woman whose voice was immediately recognizable to everyone, said cheerfully, “hey, fellas, lay off these guys. I like their show.”

Michael Clemens raced to the speaker phone, sure that the hearing was now at an end.

“Does that mean you might agree to be a contestant some day?”

“Let me think about that one—”

“It’s a no-brainer, Ms. President,” Michael argued. “I can absolutely guarantee you the highest ratings in television history.”

President Rodham Clinton laughed loudly. “Ask me again in 2004,” she said confidently.