

67 of 127 DOCUMENTS

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MONICA SELLS

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It's been said that no previous White House perfected the art of rapid political response as well as President Clinton's has, so perhaps it was not surprising to find a Democratic loyalist camped out at this year's National Memorabilia Convention, held last weekend in Rockville, Maryland. With the Monica Lewinsky scandal nearly three months old, the novelty industry is well on its way to cashing in with a variety of knickknacks ranging from the silly (a computer game where players must guide Lewinsky from the Watergate to the Oval Office) to the salacious (an inflatable "Leaves of Grass"-reciting sex doll with the word intern stenciled across its chest).

Although a few of these goods are available already, the real onslaught won't begin until early summer--peak season for novelty sales--which means there's still time for Clinton supporters to minimize the public relations impact. In February, some Democratic fundraisers got together and helped create a new organization called Patriotic Profits. Its self-proclaimed purpose: to "uphold the esteem of the office of the presidency" by encouraging manufacturers not to put out such denigrating merchandise. "There is some fear here that a new fad glorifying Lewinsky could be born and heavily marketed," said P.J. Hozell, the organization's director. "Say it becomes like the Rubik's Cube; that would be bad for us."

Maybe so, but Patriotic Profits will have a hard time holding back this merchandising bonanza. As Hozell was explaining her strategy to me, she had to shout over the throngs of merchants chortling over an item on display in the very next booth: a talking figure called "Loving Lewinsky" that looks and works like a child's doll. (Pull the string, and it says, "I'm a good intern," "All hail to the chief," "I can fetch your mail," and "Whatever you want, Mr. President.") It was one of the more than 3,000 Monica-related items either on display or promised in catalogs at the convention. According to Clay Resin, a financial analyst who studies the collectibles markets, scandal-related novelty sales could top \$80 million. "This is the biggest event ever to be sold in U.S. history," he explained to the convention-goers. If Resin is right, the Lewinsky scandal will sell more than five times the merchandise that the Gulf war did and 15 times Watergate.

Some of the wares on display were predictable, like the countless Lewinsky t-shirts and more than 70 varieties of berets (available in more than 30 colors). Some were more creative, like a "Naturally scary Linda Tripp" Halloween mask for adults and a Lewinsky microcassette recorder that attaches to any telephone. Still others came with their own add-on accessories. Users of the inflatable Monica sex toy, for example, can also purchase Lewinsky wigs (the new pageboy cut goes for \$24 while the old do with bangs runs for \$22) and different voices (it's \$13 for the "hot-talk voice" and \$15 for the "little-girl voice"). There are greeting cards for Christmas (a Lewinsky caricature chanting "Ho-Ho-Ho") and birthdays ("I'll blow out your candle!").

Hozell realizes the scandal is a kitsch-maker's dream; she says her organization merely hopes to nudge manufacturers, ever

so slightly, in a more constructive direction. "We want them to make money; we understand that, so I am offering novelty designers profitable alternatives that validate the office of the presidency," she says.

Incredibly, she's had some success. Last month, fashion newsletters reported that at least seven companies, including the Gap, had considered postponing plans to feature berets in upcoming headwear lines. It turns out that Patriotic Profits had arranged for several prominent Democratic donors to call designers and sway them toward "fashion that affirms our nation's greatness." "You won't see any more berets than normal next year," Hozell beamed. "We are successful because our callers explain the sensitive nature of how fashion and politics intersect." Indeed, although the companies won't officially comment on whether Patriotic Profits influenced fashion decisions, one designer who received a call told me his firm was nervous about getting mixed up in politics in any way and decided the wisest course of action was to simply hold off introducing the line.

But it may be easier to win over skittish fashion houses than it will be to convince the P.T. Barnum-types who manufacture gags. Take Joel Carni, whose family business, Four Aces, is one of the nation's largest political novelty manufacturers. This summer, stores will be hit with Four Aces's newest product: the Monicondom. "It's thinner--specially designed for oral sex, when people often forget" to be safe, Carni said, boasting of its public health utility. "The Centers for Disease Control would be proud of this item." The cardboard box encourages users to put it on their "slick willy" and to "turn the White House scandal into a safe-sex public service."

Hozell insists Monicondoms could be just as profitable with some "tinkering." Her suggestions: change the flavors "beret berry" and "intern ice" to "berry good" and "interesting ice," and remove the word "slick willy" from the box and change the name to "My condoms." "None of these changes alters the meaning of the product, which is to prevent HIV transmission, something the White House is for," she earnestly explained. "But what they do is respect the presidency."

But Carni rejected those suggestions. "She doesn't get it. The whole point of a novelty is a gag," he added, clearly annoyed by the proximity of Patriotic Profits's booth to his. "The Star Spangled Banner' is not funny. The Pledge of Allegiance is not funny... The president with an intern under the Oval Office desk. That's funny. We sell funny."

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