

In his words

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

There are two names many Americans would probably prefer never again to hear lumped together in the same sentence: Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill.

Thomas' confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee in October 1991 were very painful for the future Supreme Court justice, his wife and his family. But this was hardly a private matter. The proceedings were no less painful for the country, and for the millions who watched the vulgar spectacle unfold on national television.

Many of us remember exactly what we were doing at the time of the Thomas hearings. But, even now, 16 years later, do most Americans have a clear picture of what it was we were seeing, and what this messy chapter in U.S. political history was about? Some will say the hearings were about only one thing: sexual harassment. But there is more to this story. This was also about power and race and hyper-partisanship. It was also about efforts by Senate Democrats to use whatever means necessary to discredit, or even destroy, an African-American conservative nominated by a Republican president.

There have been countless articles and books written about Thomas, Hill and the Senate hearings. But until now we had not heard much from Thomas himself, save his angry remarks at the hearings in which he accused Democrats of orchestrating a "high-tech lynching." In a candid new memoir, Thomas finally has his say and the chance to speak at length about what he went through and why he thinks he went through it.

Not surprisingly, from his vantage point this was never about sexual harassment. For him, this was always about the abortion issue and the lengths to which the pro-choice lobby would go to keep a pro-life justice off the Supreme Court.

And not surprisingly, in remarks this week Hill said she stood by her testimony and her claims that Thomas created a hostile work environment while she worked for him at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Hill said she felt compelled to speak out because she was worried that Thomas, in trying to set the record straight, was impugning her integrity.

For many of those who rallied around Thomas, the goal of the detractors wasn't just to pummel the Supreme Court nominee. It was to inflict enough damage so that he would withdraw his nomination and force President George H.W. Bush to nominate someone more deferential. Gratefully, Thomas didn't slink away. He stood his ground and fought back. And, in doing so, he provided us all with an inspirational reminder that this country isn't just about working hard and making sacrifices so one can achieve great things. It's also about not letting others unfairly take away what you've achieved through your hard work and sacrifice.

However you feel about Clarence Thomas or his politics, let's at least be clear about what this man has achieved and what, during an especially memorable October 16 years ago, he was willing to endure to protect it.

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