

Legal offensive against Clinton continues

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While President Clinton travels in Africa, the legal warfare between the White House and its right-wing opponents continues to intensify, in a series of moves and countermoves in courtrooms in Washington, DC, Little Rock, Arkansas and Lubbock, Texas.

Perhaps the most significant actions were the decisions of two federal district court judges to sentence minor figures in the Clinton scandals to long prison terms on charges of lying to federal investigators in their deposition testimony.

On March 25 Linda Jones was sentenced to three and a half years in prison in Lubbock, Texas on charges of lying to FBI investigators about money which she had been paid by then Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros, her former lover. Jones lied to FBI agents who were conducting a routine background check in late 1992 after Clinton nominated Cisneros for the cabinet position.

The special prosecutor's investigation of Cisneros is a flagrant case of political harassment. The "crime" which the former HUD secretary is accused of is concealing from the FBI the amount of support money he was paying his former mistress—he told them \$10,000 a year, when it was really more than \$50,000. The suggested motive was purely personal, to lessen the embarrassment for Cisneros and his wife, with whom he has since reconciled.

Although the issue concerns private conduct and has nothing to do with the policies pursued by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and although Cisneros left office in 1996, the special prosecutor's investigation grinds on, with Cisneros himself facing trial in November on felony perjury charges.

One week earlier a stiff prison sentence was meted out to Ronald H. Blackley, a former aide to then Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy, who was forced to step down in 1994 after reports that he had received

gifts from big agribusiness firms. Blackley was convicted in December of concealing \$22,000 in payments he received from Mississippi growers and lying to federal investigators under oath.

The payments themselves were not illegal, and federal sentencing guidelines call for probation for a first-time perjury offense, but US District Court Judge Royce Lamberth imposed a sentence of two years and three months in prison.

Brazenly revealing the political motivation for the sentence, Judge Lamberth specifically referred to William Ginsburg, the lawyer for Monica Lewinsky, who has dismissed suggestions that she could face a jail sentence if she lied in her deposition testimony denying a sexual relationship with Bill Clinton. Lamberth said, "A lawyer, who must have been on another planet—actually he was just from Hollywood—recently claimed that no one is ever prosecuted for false statements under oath in a civil proceeding.... This Court has a duty to send a message to other high level government officials that there is a severe penalty to be paid for providing false information under oath."

Lamberth's sentencing and comments were hailed by the *Wall Street Journal*, which has long spearheaded the right-wing campaign against Clinton, in an editorial which compared Lamberth to Judge John Sirica, whose severe sentences on the Watergate burglars compelled them to testify about the role of top-level Republican Party and White House officials.

This is an analogy which collapses under any serious examination. Sirica's sentencing had a clear judicial purpose. The five men arrested for burglarizing the Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate had refused to cooperate with investigators and identify those who commissioned the break-in. In return for lower sentences, most of the Watergate defendants shifted their position, agreed to testify, and set in motion the chain of events which ultimately led

to the removal of Nixon.

The sentences for Linda Jones and Ronald Blackley have no judicial purpose. Neither is a potential witness whose cooperation is required in an investigation of higher-level officials. The sentences are punitive political actions, whose purpose is to send a message to the White House. The aim in both cases appears to be to counter the claims that Clinton should not face prosecution or impeachment if he is shown to have lied in his sworn testimony denying a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Meanwhile special prosecutor Kenneth Starr continues to haul current and former White House aides and relatives and associates of Lewinsky before the Washington grand jury.

Longtime Clinton aide Martha Scott was interrogated about her knowledge of another alleged Clinton sexual liaison, with Dolly Kyle Browning, a former high school classmate. Browning has written a potboiler about a fictional affair with a man who becomes president, while maintaining it is based on her real relationship with Clinton.

Starr has even subpoenaed a Washington bookstore, ordering it to produce records of Lewinsky's purchases. This is surely one of strangest extensions of a prosecutor's jurisdiction, if one recalls that Starr was originally commissioned to investigate the 1978 Whitewater land deal—contracted when Lewinsky was four years old.

Further evidence has surfaced of the close links between right-wing pressure groups in Washington and the special prosecutor's office. Judicial Watch, a conservative legal group, has begun subpoenaing Clinton aides and making public their deposition testimony about Clinton's sexual conduct.

The group originally filed a lawsuit over the White House review of the FBI background files on Reagan and Bush administration officials, charging this was an invasion of privacy. But when former Clinton adviser James Carville gave his deposition last week, he was asked not about the so-called Filegate affair, but about his contacts with Clinton over how to handle the press campaign over Monica Lewinsky.

Judicial Watch turned over videotape of Carville's deposition to the Geraldo Rivera talk show, which broadcast a portion of it, and handed over a transcript to the *Washington Times*. No doubt both are now in the

hands of Kenneth Starr.

As a final fillip to the week, House Republicans pushed through an appropriations bill giving \$1.3 million in additional funding for the House Judiciary Committee to handle possible impeachment proceedings, although House Speaker Newt Gingrich said no decision on impeachment would be made until after Starr files a report with Congress on his investigation.



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