

The crisis in Washington: what history tells us, Part Three

The Clinton scandals

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[Part One] [Part Two] [Part Three]

The following is the concluding article in a three-part series contrasting the Watergate and Iran-Contra affairs of the 1970s and 1980s to the current political scandals in Washington.

Almost from its inception the Clinton administration has been mired in a series of scandals, many of them subsumed under the name Whitewater, although most have little relation to the failed real estate venture of the late 1970s, which was the occasion for the appointment of an independent counsel to investigate the President and Mrs. Clinton.

None of the various scandals or purported scandals involves the usurpation of power by the executive branch, in the pattern of Nixon's "plumbers" or Oliver North's paramilitary "enterprise" in the Reagan years. The bulk of the allegations involve matters of private behavior or personal finances which are, from a historical standpoint, inconsequential: allegations of financial impropriety involving the failed Whitewater real estate deal, now 20 years old; claims of cronyism in the firing of White House travel office staff and their replacement by friends and relatives of Clinton; and charges that Clinton was unfaithful to his wife and lied about it.

The charge of the improper campaign fundraising during the 1996 election campaign undoubtedly raises a political issue. That the White House and Congress are essentially for sale to the highest bidder says a great deal about the nature of 'the democratic process' in America. But Clinton's Republican accusers, who raised nearly twice as much corporate cash, are hardly in a position to point the finger.

The congressional hearings on campaign finance ignored the vast bulk of the cash flowing into both big business parties, which comes from corporate interests, and focused on a relatively small amount raised from Asian-American contributors and Asian immigrants. Thus the official probe had the character of a political diversion with racist and chauvinist overtones.

In only one case, the alleged perusal of FBI files on outgoing Bush administration officials, is there even a claim that the Clinton White House was involved in an infringement of the democratic rights of its political opponents. The investigation by independent counsel Kenneth Starr has largely ignored this issue, however, in order to focus on the more sensational allegations of sexual impropriety and cover-up.

Starr and Clinton's opponents in Congress and the media insist that there are substantial constitutional issues arising from their otherwise unedifying obsession with Clinton's personal life. The president, they aver, may be guilty of perjury and obstruction of justice in his attempts to conceal and cover up his activities.

What made charges of perjury and cover-up so explosive in Watergate and Iran-Contra, however, was not the fact of lying itself—all of capitalist politics is based upon lies, above all the lie that a political system financed

and run by millionaires can represent the interests of working people. The significance lay in what was being covered up and lied about.

Nixon lied and obstructed investigations in order to conceal his active role in organizing political espionage and repression, including illegal wiretapping and burglary of the headquarters of the main opposition party. Oliver North and other Reagan aides, and Reagan himself, lied in order to conceal an illegal American war against the people of Nicaragua in which tens of thousands of innocent people were killed, as well as other illegal covert operations.

Even if one assumes that the charges levied by his right-wing opponents are largely true, Clinton's lies were aimed at concealing his role in petty financial corruption, cronyism and philandering—the small change of American public life. From the standpoint of the working class, these transgressions do nothing to distinguish Clinton from any other big business politician.

In focusing on this issue, however, Clinton's opponents inadvertently reveal the underlying mechanism of what is now nearly five years of scandalmongering attacks on the White House. More important than the specific charges is the political pressure placed on the administration, through allegations which are embarrassing and sensational, and which compel it to respond.

Not only does this embroil the White House in almost continuous efforts at damage control, keeping it off balance and frustrating any discussion of policy initiatives—this itself is one of the goals of Clinton's attackers. But more importantly, the constant barrage of media attacks, subpoenas, lawsuits and legal motions creates innumerable opportunities for further allegations of perjury and cover-up, which then become the subject of new legal inquiries.

The independent counsel seeks information from the White House, then subpoenas the notes made by White House aides in discussions on how to respond to the original request. When further White House meetings are held to discuss the subpoenas, notes of those meetings are subpoenaed, and so on. Starr's investigation amounts to repeated attempts to provoke the Clintons into committing a crime, what in other circumstances would be called entrapment.

The process is literally endless. Hence the spectacle of Starr expanding the jurisdiction of his investigation to include Clinton's relations with Monica Lewinsky in 1996-97, linked by a long chain of hypothetical cover-ups to the original cause of action, the Whitewater investment which the Clintons entered into when Lewinsky was four years old.

In order to make sense out of Whitewater it is necessary to examine, not so much the White House, but rather its antagonists within the sphere of ruling class politics. From the beginning they regarded Clinton's election victory as an aberration and considered his initial policy measures, a slight increase in taxes on the rich and a mildly reformist proposal on health

care, with horror.

The original Whitewater allegations--it requires some effort now to recall the mundane details--involved charges that the Clintons' investment was partially financed at the expense of Madison Guaranty, the S&L run by his friend James McDougal which later collapsed. There were also charges of improper contacts between the White House and the Treasury Department at the time when Treasury officials were deciding how to proceed with the investigation into Madison, one of hundreds of such cases arising out of the S&L debacle of the late 1980s.

These allegations were sensationalized in the media in direct response to Clinton's unveiling of his proposed health care reform plan. In the space of four weeks, beginning in late November 1993, such pressure was placed upon the administration that Clinton caved in and agreed to the appointment of an independent counsel, Robert Fiske, to investigate Whitewater.

The same month saw the publication of the first major attack on Clinton's sexual proclivities, the so-called 'Troopergate' story in the *American Spectator*, a ultra-conservative magazine financed in part by Richard Mellon Scaife, the heir to the banking and aluminum fortune, who has bankrolled much of the right-wing onslaught against the White House. This article in turn brought forward Paula Jones, who announced her lawsuit against the president at a press conference in March 1994 held at the Conservative Political Action Conference, an assembly of extreme-right-wing activists.

Then came a key turning point in the affair, the replacement of Fiske as independent counsel in June 1994 by Kenneth Starr, a longtime Republican Party activist and Solicitor General in the Reagan administration. Fiske was fired by a panel of three federal appeals court judges, two of them conservative Republicans, who had been expected to confirm his appointment.

When Nixon fired independent counsel Archibald Cox in the infamous 'Saturday Night Massacre' of October 1973, it was because Cox was getting too close for comfort with his demands for turning over the White House tapes. Fiske was also fired because his investigation displeased those in power, but for the opposite reason--he had concluded that the most serious allegations against Clinton had no substance.

His removal came shortly after he announced that his investigation had determined that the death of White House deputy counsel Vincent Foster was a suicide, rebuffing right-wing conspiracy theorists. Fiske had also concluded that the contacts between the White House and the Treasury Department did not amount to obstruction of justice or improper political interference. This left nothing more on his agenda but the investigation into a failed real estate venture now more than 15 years old, a probe which offered little prospect of providing grounds to impeach Clinton or force him out of office.

The three-judge panel that fired Fiske was headed by David Sentelle, a former aide to Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). It was Helms who suggested in 1993 that Clinton should not visit military bases in North Carolina because he was so unpopular with the troops, his life would be in danger. Sentelle was seen lunching with Helms and his equally right-wing North Carolina colleague, Senator Lauch Faircloth, on the day of his decision to fire Fiske. Implausibly, Helms, Faircloth and Sentelle all denied that they had any discussion of the political bombshell that the judge was about to launch against the Clinton White House.

Sentelle was one of the judges who played a decisive role in hamstringing the independent counsel's investigation into the Iran-Contra affair, handing down procedural rulings which made it virtually inevitable that the criminal convictions of Oliver North and other conspirators would be overturned on appeal.

The transformation of Sentelle's relation to the independent counsel is symptomatic. To a very real extent, the right-wing conspiracies which were the target of the Watergate and Iran-Contra investigations have laid

hold of the independent counsel's office and made it their headquarters for an assault against the Clinton White House that has the elements of an attempted political coup.

The political lineup in Watergate and Iran-Contra has resurfaced in Whitewater, but with the institutional positions reversed. The tendencies towards dictatorial methods of rule, which were revealed in the functioning of White House plumbers and the Iran-Contra paramilitary 'enterprise,' now emerge in the functioning of the independent counsel's office.

The illegal recording of telephone calls is carried out, not by White House political operatives looking for information on their opponents, but by politically motivated enemies of Clinton like Linda Tripp, working at the behest of the independent counsel.

Starr then sent Tripp into a meeting with Monica Lewinsky wearing a bugging device, monitored by FBI agents, while she sought to induce the former White House intern to repeat her damaging statements about Clinton. He then sought to get Lewinsky to wear a wire for further talks with Vernon Jordan and, undoubtedly, with Clinton himself.

Starr's investigators have subpoenaed the record of book sales at Barnes & Noble and other Washington-area bookstores. They have sued to obtain notes of attorney-client discussions, asking the federal courts to set aside confidentiality protections. They have hauled White House aides before the grand jury for repeated questioning--up to seven times in one instance--with the goal of generating some variation in testimony which could become the basis for a perjury indictment.

The independent counsel's office has even sought to criminalize political speech, by suggesting that Clinton aides who criticized Starr in discussions with the press could face charges of obstruction of justice. (By this standard, it should be noted, both the Bush administration, congressional Republicans and much of the media were guilty of far more flagrant obstruction of Lawrence Walsh's investigation of the Iran-Contra affair).

It is a historical irony that the independent counsel's office, an organ of government first formally established in response to the Watergate crisis, has itself become the instrument through which a secretive and antidemocratic conspiracy is being pursued--essentially an attempt to reverse the results of the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections.

One of the major and little discussed aspects of the Whitewater affair is the degree of coordination between the independent counsel's office and the federal judiciary, including its highest level. The Supreme Court decision in June 1997 that Paula Jones was entitled to proceed to trial with her sexual harassment claim against Clinton, regardless of the constitutional objections lodged by Clinton's attorneys, was critical in unleashing the torrent of scandal around Monica Lewinsky.

Following that decision Jones fired her attorneys, who were urging acceptance of a White House settlement offer, and took her case to the right-wing Rutherford Institute, a Christian fundamentalist. Thereafter, the Jones lawsuit and Starr's investigation functioned virtually in tandem, with Jones's attorneys calling witness after witness under oath, questioning them about Clinton's sex life, while Starr waited to pounce with perjury and obstruction of justice charges.

Starr's office apparently fed questions to Jones's attorneys, while they steered witnesses to the independent counsel. As the *Washington Post* observed, after the dismissal of the Jones lawsuit, 'it was difficult to know where the Jones suit ended and Starr's investigation began.'

It was this collusion between the independent counsel, the courts, the media and the array of extreme-right-wing groups to which Hillary Clinton referred when she attacked the 'vast right-wing conspiracy' against her husband's administration.

This statement, made on national television shortly after the Lewinsky affair exploded, has staggering political implications. But the Clintons simply dropped the subject, never naming the conspirators, explaining

their political motives or discussing the dangers of this conspiracy for the democratic rights of the American people.

Their silence reflects the anemic state of Democratic Party liberalism, which has embraced the essentials of the right-wing attack on welfare state policies, and which fears, just as much as its opponents, the intervention into political life by the broad masses of working people, who are completely unrepresented by the two big business parties.

Considered as a whole, the great political scandals of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s do have a common thread, however different their outward appearance. They reveal the degree to which political life in the United States is being reduced to a series of intrigues in which small cliques within the ruling class fight out issues, using the media as an adjunct to manipulate public opinion, while the real content of the disputes remains largely hidden.

There is a definite downward progression. More and more, the great mass of the American people are excluded from any role in the political infighting in Washington. In Watergate there was such a degree of public outrage over the illegal activities of the White House that Nixon was compelled first to fire his closest associates, then to resign himself, the first US president to do so.

In Iran-Contra, there was widespread opposition to US intervention in Central America, but through the intervention of the congressional Democrats and the courts, the illegal operations of Oliver North and other White House conspirators were largely whitewashed. Reagan completed his term in office, and North himself was boosted into a successful career as a right-wing commentator and political candidate.

In Whitewater, neither Clinton nor his right-wing opponents has been able to mobilize mass support. The opinion polls showing a jump in Clinton's popularity in the wake of the Lewinsky allegations demonstrate more the popular distrust of the media, the independent counsel and the congressional Republicans than any genuine enthusiasm for the present occupant of the White House.

Such inchoate and inarticulate distrust is not enough. Tens of millions of working people are without any political voice in the America of 1998. Their interests go unrepresented, while powerful forces work behind the scenes to impose an ever more right-wing political agenda.

The decisive lesson of the Clinton scandals, and of the overall decay of the institutions of capitalist democracy, is that the working class must organize itself politically and build an independent mass party of its own. It is to build such a movement, based on a socialist program, that the Socialist Equality Party has been established.



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