

The Starr investigation: a creeping coup d'etat

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The US Circuit Court of Appeals, acceding to the urgings of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr for action on a “very expedited basis,” on Friday ordered the White House to file its appeal on the issues of attorney-client privilege and privilege for Secret Service agents by June 15. The court said it would hear oral arguments the week of June 29.

The appeals court’s announcement, coming one day after the Supreme Court rejected Starr’s motion for it to bypass the lower courts and rule on the privilege questions directly, put a damper on White House claims of a legal victory. The court action made it clear that the offensive against the Clinton administration spearheaded by Starr’s investigation will continue at an accelerated pace.

Starr’s June 2 legal submission to the Supreme Court was the clearest statement to date that the aim of his investigation is the removal of Clinton from office. He wrote: “The nation has a compelling interest that this criminal investigation of the President of the United States conclude as quickly as possible—that indictments be brought, possible reports for impeachment proceedings issued, and non-prosecution decisions announced.”

The media have overwhelmingly echoed Starr’s claims that his investigation is a legitimate probe of serious criminal allegations, and that the defensive legal tactics of the White House are tantamount to an admission of guilt. With the withdrawal of Monica Lewinsky’s lawyer, William Ginsburg, news commentators have concentrated on speculation that the former White House intern’s new legal team will quickly negotiate an immunity deal with Starr, paving the way for Lewinsky to give grand jury testimony contradicting Clinton’s insistence that no sexual relationship existed between them.

Ginsburg made a number of astute observations on the role of the independent counsel and the media in a speech June 3 in Los Angeles. Referring to the office of the independent counsel as an “anticonstitutional monstrosity,” he said:

“Mr. Starr is on a political mission, a mission motivated by those who support him and his own ego, which is even worse. He is clearly maligning the presidency and has established himself as the permanent nemesis of the presidential office, as long as the office is occupied by President William Jefferson Clinton.” Ginsburg pointed out that if absolute sexual fidelity had been a requirement for the US presidency, “then at least seven of the last ten presidents would be ineligible for the job and impeachable once elected.”

He summed up his experience with the press over the past five months in biting terms:

I can say with certainty that the news has largely changed from a mechanism of free speech to more a mechanism of commercial speech, in many cases motivated by money and design, to keep up more with the economics of the news business than the accurate and fair reporting of the news.

Ginsburg’s speech was broadcast live on the MSNBC program *White House in Crisis*, and was followed by a stream of largely ad hominem attacks by the commentators on the show.

Notwithstanding the biased and superficial media coverage, what is unfolding under the cover of Starr’s four-year probe—which has jumped from one issue to another, beginning with a 1970s land speculation deal and eventually settling on an alleged sexual relationship—is nothing less than a political coup d’etat.

It is a concerted attempt to discredit, humiliate, undermine, and, if possible, oust an elected president, on the basis of the flimsiest allegations. It does not take the form of a bombardment of the White House or a marshaling of troops along Pennsylvania Avenue. Rather, it assumes a form more in keeping with the traditional methods of American politics. It even takes on the trappings of legality.

But in a profound sense the political campaign against the Clinton administration headed up by Starr is deeply undemocratic. In essence the institution of the independent counsel, an unelected office with vast powers, is being used to effect far-reaching changes in the American government.

Starr himself has the closest personal and political connections to extreme right-wing elements. Behind him stands a shadowy network of multimillionaires, far-right congressmen, lawyers and judges, and corrupt journalists. They are pursuing an unstated political agenda, and utilizing the media to create as much confusion as possible among the general public.

Starr’s right-wing connections are well known and amply documented, but they are for the most part ignored by the media, which plays a central role in the political conspiracy. The TV networks and the press have, for example, largely suppressed the role of billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife—who offered Starr the chair of an institute which he has underwritten at Pepperdine University—in bankrolling the campaign against Clinton.

Nor have they noted the activities of one of the numerous right-wing groups involved in the assault on the White House, the Council for National Policy (CNP). According to the magazine *In These Times*, this highly secretive organization includes Republican Senators Jesse Helms, Lauch Faircloth and Trent Lott (the Senate majority leader), Republican Congressmen Dick Armey (the House majority leader) and Dan Burton, former Attorney General (under Reagan) Edwin Meese, Christian fundamentalists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Oliver North, right-wing political strategist Paul Weyrich, and John Whitehead of the Rutherford Institute, the organization that is financing the Paula Jones suit.

In These Times reports that the political action arm of the CNP met last June and decided to escalate the offensive against Clinton by promoting a bill, subsequently introduced into the House of Representatives by Rep. Bob Barr (R-Ga.), that would initiate the first, preliminary stage of impeachment proceedings. The magazine quotes Weyrich, one of the CNP’s founders, as saying, “We are no longer working to preserve the

status quo. We are radicals, working to overturn the present power structure in this country.”

Typical of the press’s reaction to the Starr inquiry is the editorial published by the *New York Times* on June 2, the same day that the independent counsel filed his motion with the Supreme Court. Condemning Clinton’s “refusal to cooperate with a prosecutor’s reasonable requests for information in a legitimate criminal inquiry,” the *Times* urged the Court to uphold Starr’s motion, “grab” the case from the lower courts and prevent the White House from further “impeding” the independent counsel’s work.

Said the *Times*, “This is an instance where the Court, in its constitutional role, should see the need to intervene in the interest of orderly government and the rule of law.”

Precisely what the criminal acts are that threaten the “rule of law” is something about which the *Times*—together with the rest of the media chorus supporting Starr—has curiously little to say. However, this is not so mysterious, since, when all is said and done, the alleged crime upon which Starr’s case for impeachment is built is a private relationship between Mr. Clinton and another adult.

Moreover, the *Times*’ sensitivity to threats to the “rule of law” is highly selective. The fact that the primary evidence of a sexual liaison between Clinton and Lewinsky consists of tape recordings made in violation of the law does not faze the newspaper in the least.

In reality, the entire case conjured up around the Lewinsky affair is a transparent example of a political destabilization operation. All of those involved, from Starr to the Paula Jones people to financial backers like Mellon Scaife, are seeking to leverage what in legal terms is an insignificant denial of a sexual relationship into the “high crimes and misdemeanors” of perjury and obstruction of justice. In the process they are perpetrating a colossal fraud on the American people.

An important aspect of the disinformation campaign accompanying the Starr investigation is the independent counsel’s attempt to equate his case against Clinton with the Watergate exposures that ultimately brought down the Nixon administration. Starr is given a free hand in this by the media, which refuse to point out the vast differences between the two cases.

Let us recall that at the heart of the Watergate crisis was a real crime. Political operatives on the White House payroll, many of them former CIA agents, organized a break-in at the headquarters of the main bourgeois opposition party for the purpose of illegally installing bugging devices.

As the scandal developed, what emerged was a systematic pattern of criminal behavior: the establishment of White House slush funds to pay off witnesses and suppress evidence, illegal wiretapping of political opponents and even of government officials suspected of dissident views, the use of the Internal Revenue Service and other government agencies to harass opponents.

The Nixon administration subverted the constitution by waging an illegal and undeclared war in Cambodia and an equally illegal war against political opposition at home, including the burglary of the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist and the drafting of the Huston Plan, which called for mass roundups of opponents of the Vietnam War. So politically tense was the atmosphere in Washington that in the final days before Nixon’s resignation, his own Secretary of Defense monitored White House instructions to military commanders because he feared an attempted coup to block impeachment proceedings.

The Iran-Contra affair in 1986-87 revolved around actions by the Reagan administration of a no less serious and directly criminal character. At their heart was a deliberate and systematic violation of a law, the Boland amendment, passed by Congress some years before, which expressly forbade US funding for the so-called contras in Nicaragua, a counterrevolutionary insurgency which carried out mass terror and killing

in an attempt to bring down the Sandinista government.

In order to circumvent the Boland amendment, the Reagan administration authorized an ‘off-the-shelf,’ secret operation, headed by Oliver North and headquartered in the basement of the White House. The president sanctioned an undeclared war in Central America, using private mercenary forces which were funded in part through secret arms shipments to Iran.

High-ranking Reagan officials lied to Congress about the operation, a fact which North not only admitted, but boasted of in his testimony before a congressional hearing into the affair. Although a few of the principal operatives were fired, the official investigations into Iran-Contra were a series of whitewashes and cover-ups, and neither Reagan nor any of his top aides were convicted of any crimes.

Thus Nixon and Reagan, in their official capacities and as a matter of policy, subverted the law and the Constitution and waged illegal wars behind the backs of the American people. Clinton, on the other hand, stands accused of lying about his personal life in connection with a civil suit, the Paula Jones case, that has since been thrown out of court.

Several serious issues arise from the Starr investigation and the media campaign surrounding it. First is the extraordinary and almost baffling silence of Clinton himself.

It would seem that an individual in Clinton’s position, subjected to so egregious an attack, would defend himself vigorously. All the more so given the clear evidence of widespread public suspicion and even disgust with both the methods and subject matter of Starr’s investigation. Four months ago Hillary Clinton declared on national television that the independent counsel probe was part of a ‘vast right-wing conspiracy’ against the White House. Her remarks evoked a strong response from the public, as indicated by opinion polls. But neither she nor any other leading administration spokesperson has since then elaborated on this extraordinary warning.

Why the spectacle of political cowardice and paralysis on the part of Clinton? Why have no defenders come forward from the Democratic Party to expose the conspiracy against democratic rights that underlies the campaign headed up by the independent counsel?

Whatever Clinton’s individual attributes, the answer is fundamentally political, not personal. Clinton cannot fight these forces because they are the very social element on which he bases himself. His administration has marked the final abandonment by the Democratic Party of any connection to the social reform policies of the past. And the more he lurches to the right, in an attempt to accommodate the reactionary demands of big business, the more he and the Democrats erode any base of genuine mass support among the working population.

What, after all, is the alternative for Clinton? To fight back would mean to speak openly and publicly about the nature of the social interests that are backing the campaign against him. But therein lies an enormous danger—that of arousing a popular movement against the economic elite that controls the political system and dictates social policy. This is not a viable option for a bourgeois politician. In the end, Clinton is at the mercy of the very forces that are seeking to destroy him.

The social reality that underlies the crisis of the Clinton administration and the growing assault on democratic rights is an unprecedented accumulation of wealth at the very top of American society, and a vast and growing chasm between this increasingly privileged layer and the overwhelming majority of the population.

The policies pursued by American big business and the government over the past two decades, under Democratic as well as Republican administrations, have fostered an enormous change in the social structure of the country. The staggering growth in wealth of the richest five percent of the country has been based on two interrelated processes: an unrelenting assault on the working class, and a massive inflation of share values on the stock market.

In fact, the bull market of the 1990s has been based to a tremendous extent on the decline in the living standards and social conditions of the broad masses of working people. The depression of wages, the destruction of jobs, the proliferation of part-time and temporary labor, unionbusting, the gutting of social programs, the shifting of the tax burden even further from the rich to the working masses, and the weakening of government regulations on business have all been part of this ruling class strategy.

The resulting social polarization is not only unprecedented from a quantitative standpoint, in the sense that the gap between the rich and the masses is greater than ever, it has also altered the class structure of American society in a qualitative sense.

At the top, assets and disposable income have reached such proportions as to create something akin to a modern aristocracy of wealth. According to figures published in the British financial magazine the *Economist* this week, there are 170 billionaires in the United States, up from 13 in 1982. Even more significantly, there are 250,000 deca-millionaires, possessors of fortunes of \$10 million or more, and 4.8 million millionaires.

The *Economist* commented on the extent to which this bonanza for the richest layers in America has been based on the rise in stock market values: 'In many cases, the rich have got richer by doing very little. An American who had \$500,000 in shares and a \$500,000 New York apartment fifteen years ago, and has merely held onto them, is now \$5 million better off.'

The ranks of millionaires and multi-millionaires comprise only a small fraction of the American population, less than 2 percent. Yet, for all practical purposes, this is the political universe of the United States. Those outside this new aristocracy are deprived of all political influence in either of the two big business political parties and have no representation in Congress or any other institution of the capitalist state. At the same time, small groups of multi-millionaires exercise a degree of influence over the policies and personnel of the state that extends beyond even that of the robber barons at the turn of the century.

Meanwhile the income of 90 percent of the American population has stagnated or declined. Moreover, and this is central to the developing political crisis, the social polarization has entailed a disintegration of the middle social layers--professionals, middle managers, technicians, family farmers, small businessmen. Large sections of these segments of society have been proletarianized--reduced to the status of wage earners, lacking any real economic security. A small minority have been lifted by the inflation of share values on the stock market into the ranks of the rich.

But it is precisely these middle layers that traditionally constitute the main social base for bourgeois democracy. Their dissipation inevitably finds its reflection in the decay of the democratic forms and institutions that have so long served as the political basis for capitalist rule in America. This development is compounded by the general decline in the political activity of masses of working people, resulting above all from the dead end of the AFL-CIO's political alliance with the Democrats.

These social processes are at the heart of the rotting out of democratic forms that is so starkly revealed in the crisis of the Clinton administration. The financial elite, living entirely apart from the broad masses of the population, approaches political issues almost exclusively from the standpoint of its private financial concerns. Indeed, the growth of transnational corporations and the proliferation of global investors with fortunes greater than the assets of many nation states cut against the development of a national consensus within the ruling class itself. The scramble of each mogul against all fosters enormous divisions and ferocious infighting within the uppermost echelons of corporate power. This becomes a significant contributing factor in the type of unbridled political warfare currently underway in Washington.

This aristocracy of wealth is acutely sensitive to any suggestion, real or imagined, of a shift in social policy away from the relentless assault on the working class that has sustained the Wall Street boom. Notwithstanding

Clinton's ceaseless efforts to accommodate this elite, his supposed liberal inclinations are seen as a threat, and not a few from their ranks would just as soon see him replaced, with or without the formality of an election.

The resulting political conflict within the ruling class and virtual paralysis of the federal government are expressions of an immense crisis of bourgeois rule. No small element in this crisis is the recklessness with which sections of the ruling class attack their own traditional political institutions.

However, to the extent that the masses of working people are not able to intervene as an independent force to defend their democratic rights and social interests, the ruling class is given a free hand to resolve the crisis on its own terms. This will inevitably take the form of a governmental setup even more right-wing and ruthless in its assault on democratic rights.

Such was, in fact, the outcome of Watergate and the collapse of the Nixon administration. Because the working class, as a result of the reactionary policy of the AFL-CIO, failed to intervene in the crisis on the basis of its own interests, independently of the two big business parties, the ruling class was able work out a new political strategy, which a few years later took the form of the Reagan administration.

The present crisis poses with even greater urgency the need for an independent political movement of the working class. That is why the Socialist Equality Party is striving to lay the foundations for the development of a political alternative to the existing capitalist parties, based on a socialist program for the defense of jobs, living standards, social services and democratic rights.



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