

Destabilization campaign targeted White House

Report charges illegal links between Starr and media

Martin McLaughlin
16 June 1998

In an interview made public June 14, Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr confirmed that he and a top aide gave secret briefings to selected press and television reporters during the week in January that charges surfaced in the media about President Clinton's relations with Monica Lewinsky.

The interview with Starr is the centerpiece of a 28-page article documenting leaks of secret grand jury information and other abuses of power by the independent counsel, written by Steven Brill for the first issue of his new magazine of media criticism, *Brill's Content*. Brill conducted the interview on April 15 but did not make it public until last Saturday.

Starr's statements give an unprecedented glimpse of the close collaboration between the independent counsel's office, the television networks, *Newsweek* magazine, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. During the week of media frenzy which followed the January 21 *Washington Post* article which first made public the allegations that Clinton had a sexual relationship with Lewinsky, the vast majority of press accounts cited "anonymous sources" for their reports. It is now clear that these sources were Starr and one of his chief deputies, Jackie Bennett.

Starr said that Bennett spent "much of the day briefing the press" on January 21, the day the Monica Lewinsky story broke. According to Brill, both the initial article in the *Washington Post* and a subsequent *Newsweek* cover story on Monica Lewinsky originated in Starr's office.

Starr and Bennett met frequently with such reporters as Susan Schmidt of the *Washington Post*, Jeff Gerth and Stephen Labaton of the *New York Times*, Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek*, Jackie Judd of ABC News and David Bloom of NBC News. These reporters not only broke most of the Monica Lewinsky story, they supplied some of the major fabrications which were spread by the media in those weeks.

Judd first reported that Lewinsky was in possession of a dress stained with Clinton's semen, and that a White House steward was being subpoenaed because he had seen Clinton and Lewinsky together alone. Both reports were widely rebroadcast—NBC's Tom Brokaw even interrupted regular network programming to announce the second revelation—but

were later discredited.

Gerth and Labaton wrote an account of conversations between Clinton and his personal secretary Betty Currie which portrayed Clinton as urging her to change her recollection of events in the White House. This article, published on the front page of the *Times*, dovetailed with Starr's claims that the president was guilty of "obstruction of justice" and "suborning perjury." It was checked with the independent counsel's office before publication.

Michael Isikoff played a key role in bringing together several of the players in the drama. He had interviewed Linda Tripp the previous summer for a *Newsweek* article that first reported Kathleen Willey's claim that Clinton had made an unwanted sexual approach. He was in contact with Tripp during the time that she was illegally tape recording telephone conversations with Lewinsky, and, by mid-January, had prepared an article on Lewinsky's alleged relationship with Clinton.

Newsweek officials contacted the independent counsel's office before publishing the article, and at his request delayed its appearance so that Starr's office could attempt to recruit Lewinsky and induce her to tape record a conversation with the president. The magazine essentially served as an instrument of the independent counsel's office in an attempted sting operation against the White House.

Starr did not deny the substance of Brill's report, admitting that he had divulged secret information to selected reporters. The independent counsel defended his actions on purely technical grounds, saying that as long as he discussed what witnesses had said in their interviews with prosecutors and FBI agents, not what they said to the grand jury—even though the substance was the same—there was no violation of the law.

In a decision issued last month, the US Circuit Court of Appeals for Washington, DC rejected such a distinction and said that prosecutors had an obligation to keep confidential, not only the actual words used by witnesses before a closed grand jury hearing, but all significant aspects of the proceeding. "Encompassed within the rule of secrecy are the identities of witnesses or jurors, the substance of testimony as well as actual transcripts, the strategy or direction of the investigation, the

deliberations or questions of jurors, and the like,” the court wrote.

Starr made a similarly technical argument against the charge that his leaks of grand jury testimony violated Justice Department guidelines for the conduct of prosecutors. He pointed to an exception that allows prosecutors to discuss secret proceedings when it is necessary to restore public confidence that an investigation is being conducted properly. If the concern was to restore confidence in the investigation, however, it is difficult to understand why the secret briefings were given “on background,” that is, with the proviso that the media reports could not reveal that the independent counsel had been the source of the information.

The investigation into the Clinton administration has involved repeated attempts to manufacture a crime out of a series of unrelated and minor episodes. Now at last a real crime has been uncovered—committed not by Clinton but by the independent counsel!

It is significant that, after Brill’s report was the focus of the Sunday television talk shows, the media has largely turned away from the story. The journalists who have reported breathlessly on the development of Starr’s search for possible criminal activity in the White House are well aware that they are recipients of information that may have been passed to them illegally by the special prosecutor. They have no desire for an examination of this subject.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has characterized the right-wing campaign against the Clinton White House as a political coup d’état, an attempt to remove an elected president without a vote, through the combined actions of the Office of Independent Counsel, the media and leading congressional Republicans. This assessment is entirely vindicated by the Brill report, which documents the role of the media in a campaign of dirty tricks to destabilize the Clinton administration.

Many observers have taken note of the exceptional fury and intensity of the media attack on Clinton in late January. But the unbalanced character of the reporting has been attributed to a “feeding frenzy,” or to intense competitive pressures generated by the Internet and other media.

Now it is clear that a more sinister interpretation is in order. Far from acting as independent or objective investigators, the principal media outlets—controlled, it must be said, by a handful of the biggest American corporations—worked as agents of the special prosecutor to create a political climate which would compel Clinton to resign from office.

The bulk of the press and television accounts of the Lewinsky affair consisted, not of reporting on Clinton’s alleged relationship with the former secretarial aide—about which little information was or is available—but of speculation that revelations about Lewinsky would force him to leave office.

Both the independent counsel and the media monopolies expected that the firestorm over Lewinsky would compel Clinton to step down almost immediately. They did not

anticipate the widespread public hostility which this media campaign aroused. Whatever their feelings about Clinton and his policies, the vast majority of the American people reacted with distrust to the attempt to use a sex scandal to drive him out of office.

Failing to stampede the public, Starr and the media embarked on a series of makeshift maneuvers—nonstop interrogations of White House aides, the CBS interview with Kathleen Willey, and new “scandals,” equally insubstantial, ranging from Webster Hubbell’s prison phone calls to US satellite launches using Chinese rockets.

One lesson should be learned from this latest exposure. What is shown on the television news each night and published in the daily newspapers each day is not an objective account of political events, but the outcome of manipulations involving small cliques who control the media monopolies, pursuing a definite political agenda.

The final outcome of the struggle in Washington remains to be seen. What is of decisive importance to working people is not the personal fate of Clinton, but the political implications of the entire process. Powerful forces are at work behind the scenes, seeking to oust an elected government and replace it with a regime which will attack, even more directly and openly than Clinton, the jobs, living standards, social benefits and democratic rights of working people.

The reactionary implications of this political agenda were demonstrated last week when a representative of Starr’s office went before the US Supreme Court seeking a ruling that would make a major breach in the confidentiality of attorney-client discussions, a fundamental principle of due process.

The central issue in the attack on the Clinton White House is the internal putrefaction of the democratic process. It is only possible to conceive of ousting a president through methods of media manipulation in an atmosphere where politics is reduced to maneuvers in a very narrow social layer, where corrupt and venal journalists and politically motivated prosecutors come together to serve the most reactionary interests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact