

Brill article details media role in plot to oust Clinton

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The 28-page article entitled “Pressgate,” published in the inaugural issue of the magazine *Brill’s Content*, provides a detailed account of the behind-the-scenes collaboration between right-wing opponents of Bill Clinton, news reporters and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr that resulted in the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal.

Brill has done a remarkable job, attempted by no one else in the press, to identify the main protagonists and lay bare the modus operandi of the media-led, quasi-judicial offensive against the White House that has dominated American political life for the past six months. Toward the beginning of his article, he sums up the ensuing narrative as follows:

“Here [in the Lewinsky story], an author in quest of material teamed up with a prosecutor in quest of a crime, and most of the press became a cheering section for the combination that followed.... For in this story the press seems to have become an *enabler* of Starr’s abuse of power.”

Brill refrains from drawing conclusions about the political agenda of Starr and his co-conspirators. However, the facts he reports make it clear that the eruption of the White House sex scandal last January was the outcome of a highly organized and carefully scripted provocation. Starr and the media were working together to create a sudden, sharp political crisis that would destabilize the White House and rapidly force Clinton from office.

Not surprisingly, the media coverage of Brill’s exposé—which makes a devastating critique of supposed pillars of American journalism like the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as the TV networks—has been largely hostile. Moreover, the commentary has focused on Brill’s interview with Starr, in which the independent counsel admits leaking secret information to the press.

But the most serious and important material deals with how the scandal was prepared and launched, with a journalist for *Newsweek* magazine, Michael Isikoff, essentially writing the scenario which was then implemented by Linda Tripp and Lucianne Goldberg, Tripp’s literary agent. (Goldberg, a right-wing Republican, has acknowledged spying against Democratic Party candidates as part of Nixon’s “dirty tricks” operations in 1972.) One thing emerges clearly from Brill’s account: without the active intervention and guidance of *Newsweek* magazine, the Monica Lewinsky scandal would never have come to pass.

Here are the most salient facts:

- In January 1997, *Newsweek* published a cover story promoting the Paula Jones suit, claiming that it raised serious and legitimate legal and political issues, not merely the effort of right-wing political activists to embarrass the White House.

- After the article’s publication, Isikoff ~~was assigned~~ to dig up dirt on the president’s sex life, received a tip from Paula Jones’s lawyers which led him first to Kathleen Willey, the White House volunteer who claims she was “groped” by Clinton, and then Linda Tripp, the former White House secretary who was now working in the Pentagon with Monica Lewinsky.

- In August 1997, *Newsweek* published an item by Isikoff on Kathleen Willey, the first time a major media outlet had reported on claims of sexual misconduct by Clinton in the White House. Tripp was quoted in the article.

- In September 1997, at Goldberg’s urging, Tripp began illegally tape recording telephone conversations with Lewinsky about her alleged relationship with Clinton.

- In October 1997 Goldberg offered the Lewinsky tapes to Isikoff, hoping for a sensational story that would lead to a lucrative book deal for her client and herself. Isikoff said that what Goldberg and Tripp had brought him was not enough. As Goldberg later told Steven Brill, Isikoff said that in order to get an article in *Newsweek*, “he needed more than just sex. He said he needed other sources and he needed for this to relate to something official.”

Thus directed by the *Newsweek* reporter, Goldberg and Tripp proceeded to generate both the new evidence and the official connection required to convert an alleged sexual encounter into potential grounds for impeachment or forced resignation. While concealing her contacts with Goldberg and Isikoff, Tripp induced Lewinsky to send letters and packages to the White House, using a courier service owned by the family of Goldberg’s brother. The records of this courier service were later turned over to ABC News and to the Starr investigation as proof of a Clinton-Lewinsky relationship.

It was during this period as well that Lewinsky made multiple visits to the White House and also approached Vernon Jordan, seeking to obtain job recommendations. It is not known whether Tripp urged her to take these actions too, in order to create the appearance of official misconduct (the “obstruction of justice” that Starr now alleges took place).

What is known is that during the same month a woman made repeated anonymous phone calls to the attorneys for Paula Jones, telling them to subpoena Linda Tripp and Monica Lewinsky. Tripp and Goldberg (or Isikoff through an intermediary) are the only possible sources for these calls, since only they knew of Tripp’s connection to Lewinsky.

The subpoenas were duly served, thus making Clinton’s relations with Lewinsky an “official” matter, part of an ongoing civil lawsuit, just as Isikoff had prescribed. He later told Brill, “When I found out

that they had been subpoenaed, I could see the perjury possibilities and everything else. It was starting to be a real story.”

Tripp waited until after Lewinsky had given a sworn deposition to Paula Jones’s lawyers, denying any sexual relationship with Clinton, before she approached the independent counsel’s office on January 12, 1998, giving them the tapes she had begun making the previous September.

After debriefing Tripp, Starr’s investigators immediately made her available to the attorneys for Paula Jones, who were preparing to take Clinton’s deposition. As Brill describes this close coordination, “the president’s criminal inquisitors, having just finished with Tripp, had now made it possible for his civil case opponents to be given ammunition with which to question the president in his sworn testimony—from which Starr, in turn, might then be able to extract evidence of criminal perjury.”

Starr cited Tripp’s tape recordings to persuade Attorney General Janet Reno to expand his jurisdiction—originally limited to the 1978 Whitewater land deal—to include Clinton’s sexual activities 20 years later. FBI agents and investigators for Starr’s office began interrogating Lewinsky even before Reno had approved extending his jurisdiction.

At the same time, Isikoff was in contact with Starr’s deputy prosecutor Jackie Bennett, who asked him not to phone Jordan, Lewinsky or the White House so as not to preempt efforts to tape record Lewinsky and then persuade Lewinsky to tape record Jordan or Clinton himself.

Newsweek held up its planned story to give Starr the opportunity to entrap the president, only to have a report on its decision to delay publication posted on the Internet by a right-wing gossip peddler, Matt Drudge. Within days, Monica Lewinsky and her alleged connection to Clinton were the focus of an unprecedented media barrage. Brill notes the extraordinary fact that media pundits began to speculate about impeachment or forced resignation of the president before a single fact had been established and without any evidence that a crime had been committed.

What does this entire affair say about the state of American political life? How is it possible that such a tawdry scheme, carried out by a pair of right-wing political adventurers and a journalistic smut-peddler, could bring an elected government to the brink of collapse?

There were, of course, more powerful forces involved. The Lewinsky affair could never have developed as it did without the intervention of the Supreme Court, which authorized the Paula Jones lawsuit to go forward. This gave right-wing opponents of the White House the opportunity to bring together the Paula Jones suit and the Starr investigation, with the aim of creating a legal noose for Clinton.

Playing a pervasive role throughout has been the media, increasingly dominated by a handful of giant conglomerates which decide what is “news” and seek to mold public opinion along the lines desired by corporate America.

The most fundamental feature revealed in the Washington crisis is the general decay of American democracy, as the entire political structure shifts ever further to the right. The lack of political alternatives to the agenda of big business, the decades of right-wing propaganda against socialist and radical thought, the absence of a genuinely critical intelligentsia, the lack of mass organizations of the working class with any independence from big business, the exclusion and alienation of the broad masses of working people from political life: all these leave the political structure increasingly fragile and subject to manipulation by a handful of people.

In such a social environment conspiracy comes to the fore as a method of political struggle, and right-wing cliques feel emboldened to move for the ouster of an elected president, using a venal press and a prosecutor deeply hostile to considerations of democratic rights and due process. In the fetid atmosphere of contemporary Washington, unsavory characters like Goldberg and Tripp are utilized by a right-wing camarilla in what amounts to an attempted political coup d’etat.

The conspirators assumed that their provocation would quickly generate an overwhelming public demand for Clinton to resign. This factor—the response of the populace at large—was the one contingency they could not script.

In fact, the media firestorm over Monica Lewinsky failed to generate the expected public reaction. While Tim Russert and Sam Donaldson were suggesting that Clinton could be out of office in “48 to 72 hours,” the anticipated public groundswell against the White House failed to materialize. Instead the polls showed growing hostility to Starr and disgust over the media frenzy.

The broadcast media and press are contemptuous of public opinion, regarding the American people as passive objects of manipulation. But the deep alienation of masses of people from the existing political system, their confusion and distraction, are not merely apathy and disinterest. The public is not without critical judgment and has developed an increasing skepticism towards the sensation-driven attempts to stampede it.

This was again demonstrated only a month after the Lewinsky scandal broke, when the Clinton White House and the media sought to whip up a war fever against Iraq. After an embarrassing fiasco at the official teach-in at Ohio State University, and other signs of public opposition to a renewed Persian Gulf war, the administration backed off from its planned confrontation with Saddam Hussein and accepted a UN-mediated compromise.

The atmosphere of crisis and conspiracy that pervades the political system, including the virtual paralysis of the Clinton administration itself, has far deeper roots than the personality of the present occupant of the White House. It arises from the increasingly narrow social basis of American political life, controlled by corporate interests and catering to the needs of the most privileged layers of the population.

The underlying feebleness of the political order will become obvious in the period ahead. The eruption of a major economic, social or political crisis will quickly expose the weakness of the leading personnel in all of the institutions and parties of the ruling class, and the social chasm between the elite and the great masses of working people.



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