

Clinton crisis reveals decay of American democracy

Editorial Board
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Whether these are the last days of the Clinton administration, or whether the occupant of the White House somehow staggers through the present crisis to finish his term, cannot be predicted with certainty. The task of an analysis of the Monica Lewinsky affair is, in any event, not to foretell the personal fate of Clinton. Far more important is an explanation of how a private matter of no intrinsic political significance could paralyze the government of the most powerful capitalist nation and bring it to the brink of collapse.

Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky is of no concern to anyone outside their immediate families, despite the prurient interest of Kenneth Starr and his colleagues at the Office of the Independent Counsel. The notion that Clinton faces impeachment or forced resignation because he violated a taboo of Christian morality--one which is, in contemporary America, more often honored in the breach--seems both bizarre and irrational.

Nor can one take seriously the claim that the prosecution of Clinton is based on the principle that 'no one is above the law.' Quite the opposite: Clinton is being held to a standard of conduct which applies to no one else. If official Washington were purged of every politician, corporate lobbyist and media celebrity who had sex out of wedlock and lied about it, the city would be a ghost town.

There are plenty of justifications for the ouster of President Clinton at the hands of a politically awakened and organized working class: his collaboration with the Republican Congress in the destruction of social welfare programs, his support for US military intervention in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans, his backing of tax breaks for the wealthy, his abysmal record on democratic and civil rights.

Clinton's lies about 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq, used to justify UN sanctions which have killed half a million Iraqi children--these are truly crimes. But lies about sex with a consenting adult, in connection to the spurious Paula Jones lawsuit, itself concocted by his ultra-right political enemies--that is an altogether different matter.

The very fact that a tawdry scandal worthy of the supermarket tabloids, set up by a handful of right-wing activists and their media spokesmen, now threatens to bring down a president is an indication how fragile and crisis-ridden the entire political system in the United States really is.

One is compelled to ask: has the American ruling class lost its mind? This is not merely a rhetorical question. There is a powerful element of disorientation and loss of perspective in the obsession of so much of the political and media establishment with Clinton's alleged crimes.

A column Wednesday by the *Wall Street Journal's* Washington correspondent, Gerald F. Seib, captures what he describes as the

'surreal' character of the Starr investigation. Seib notes that when Starr first began his investigation into the Whitewater real estate deal in 1994, Monica Lewinsky was still in college and Clinton was three years away from giving a deposition to the attorneys for Paula Jones:

'... the Clinton presidency teeters because of an investigation into alleged criminal acts that hadn't yet been committed, and a suspected conspiracy involving people who hadn't yet met, when Mr. Starr was appointed to explore an entirely different matter. If visitors from Mars land in your backyard today and ask how things work in America, good luck in explaining all this to them.'

It is ironic that this characterization appears in a newspaper whose editorial pages have played the leading role in fomenting anti-Clinton paranoia.

The social roots of the crisis

Clinton is contributing to his own demise by upholding the legitimacy of the independent counsel and continuing to cooperate with his investigation. After a single public appearance where she declared, correctly enough, that her husband was the target of a 'vast right-wing conspiracy,' Hillary Clinton has said nothing more. Clinton himself has refused to comment publicly on the Lewinsky affair for nearly six months.

This weakness and paralysis are not merely expressions of Clinton's personality. The impotence of the White House and the Democratic Party in the face of the right-wing attack spearheaded by Starr, and the atmosphere of palace intrigue that dominates official Washington, are symptomatic of a profound decay of democratic institutions in America.

Democracy in the US has always been sharply circumscribed by its subservience to the corporate interests that dominate capitalist society. But the Clinton crisis reveals a far-reaching erosion of traditional methods and forms of rule. In the US today multimillionaires on the extreme right and disgruntled corporate powers no longer accept the results of elections as definitive. They are both able and willing to utilize a politicized judiciary and a corrupt media to destabilize, cripple and even remove a president, in the pursuit of their private and political agendas.

This state of affairs has its ultimate source in vast changes in the economic structure of American society: above all, the unheard-of accumulation of wealth at the top, fueled by the stock market boom of the last decade, and the decline, both relative and absolute, in the income level and living standards of the great majority of the population.

This immense social polarization is reflected in the political gulf

between the ruling circles and the masses of people. There is an ever-growing distance between the issues which dominate the Washington political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, and the real concerns of working people.

The basis of bourgeois politics has narrowed. The middle class, the principal mass support for bourgeois democratic politics in every major capitalist country, has itself been dramatically polarized. A small minority has enriched itself, contributing to the unprecedented number of new millionaires, while the majority have suffered economically.

Small businesses own an insignificant portion of US business assets, and it has been decades since the relative handful of family farmers--less than 1 percent of the US population--were a sizeable social force. More recently, in the wave of corporate downsizing, large numbers of professional and white collar workers have been proletarianized, losing their once-secure jobs and being driven down into lower-paying positions.

The broad masses of working people are excluded from any effective role in political life. Their concerns were once voiced, to a limited extent, by the trade unions, but these organizations, which in the past exerted a significant pressure on the political structure, are now impotent.

The result is the increasing alienation of the people from the government and the two big business parties. One expression of this alienation is the continuing decline in voter turnout: only a quarter of the population elects the president of the United States, while as few as 4 and 5 percent choose the occupants of lesser offices.

Within the ruling class itself, an extraordinary political fracturing has taken place. No longer do the Sixty Families, or a handful of Wall Street banks and Washington law firms, set policy for big business by consensus. The enormous increase in wealth generated by the stock market boom has given a new layer of corporate rich the opportunity to exert political influence, while the absence of significant pressure from below has largely eroded caution or restraint in the use of money to control political life.

In the Lewinsky affair, a single banking heir, Richard Mellon Scaife, has provided the bulk of the financial backing to Starr, the Paula Jones suit and other legal and political campaigns directed against the White House. As one congressional Democrat observed, 'You can do a lot of damage with a billion dollars.'

The danger to democratic rights

An increasingly frenzied political struggle is being waged within a narrow circle at the top of American society. While Clinton may fall victim first, the real danger is to the democratic rights of working people. In this atmosphere of backroom infighting and conspiracy, in which a handful of politicians, media tycoons and other corporate bosses vie for control, political life has been stripped of virtually all democratic content. It is an atmosphere which can, in the future, fuel the rise of political adventurers, right-wing demagogues and movements of a fascist or militarist character.

The American media turns a blind eye to these threats to democratic rights. But the increasingly tense and unstable political atmosphere in the United States has begun to draw concerned comment overseas. The *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Canada's leading business newspaper and a bastion of political conservatism, published an editorial July 28, headlined, 'Washington's special prosecutor is out of control.'

The *Globe and Mail* traced the transformation of the office of

independent counsel from an agency created to check violations of the law in Watergate, into a 'well-staffed, deep-pocketed institution whose only job is that of nailing the President to the wall for something, anything.'

It is Starr, not Clinton, who represents the threat to democracy, the newspaper said: 'Not even the President's enemies argue that this is a new Watergate. But in one way it is: There's a destructive abuse of power going on here, and unwillingness to respect the institutions and rules that form the basis of the United States' order and prosperity. Only this time the culprit doesn't live in the White House.'

Clinton is unwilling and unable to conduct a political struggle against the right-wing cabal backing Kenneth Starr because he is himself a product of the decay of liberalism and the rightward movement of the Democratic Party. He has no fundamental or principled differences with the agenda of the right wing, as he has sought to demonstrate in four years of collaboration with the Republican Congress.

More fundamentally, to wage such a struggle would require an appeal to the American public, the identification of those involved in the 'vast right-wing conspiracy,' and a blunt exposure of their program. This would risk opening up the political system to the intervention of the broad masses of working people, a development which could threaten the profit system. For a capitalist politician like Clinton, impeachment or forced resignation is preferable.

The crumbling of the Clinton administration is a further demonstration that working people cannot defend their social interests and democratic rights by relying on the Democratic Party and the political corpse of liberalism. They can do so only by building an independent mass political party of the working class.

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