

Clinton speech signals intensification of Washington political warfare

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In his speech Monday night to a national television audience, President Clinton made his first political appeal to the public against the right-wing campaign which seeks to use the investigation by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr to drive him from office.

He acknowledged that he had concealed his affair with Monica Lewinsky, declared that this relationship was a private matter, of no concern to anyone outside his family, and attacked the Paula Jones lawsuit as “politically inspired.” He denied that he had urged Lewinsky or anyone else to lie, destroy evidence or “take any other unlawful action.”

Clinton went on to criticize the intrusiveness of the investigation conducted by Starr, and called for it to come to an end. After starting with the 20-year-old Whitewater real estate deal, Clinton said, “The independent counsel investigation moved on to my staff and friends, then into my private life. And now the investigation itself is under investigation. This has gone on too long, cost too much and hurt too many innocent people.”

Clinton’s speech marks a distinct change in tack by the president, who had confined himself since January to legalistic arguments which merely sought to limit the most brazen intrusions into the functioning of the White House. These legal maneuvers were largely unsuccessful, as federal judges and ultimately the Supreme Court have permitted Starr to interrogate virtually every person in the president’s inner circle.

The White House address followed a long afternoon of testimony before the grand jury convened by Starr, in which Clinton flatly refused to answer several questions on the grounds of privacy. The session was so contentious that Clinton took a one-hour break in the middle to consult with his lawyers, then rejected a request by Starr to continue the interrogation after the agreed-on four hours.

There was much that Clinton left unsaid in his speech. He did not assert that Starr himself was politically motivated, nor did he refer to the well-established fact that the Starr investigation and the Paula Jones suit were coordinated behind the scenes as part of a right-wing “dirty tricks” operation.

But even the limited resistance offered in a brief, five-minute speech on national television left media pundits and Republican congressional leaders apoplectic. Orrin Hatch, chairman of the

Senate Judiciary Committee, denounced Clinton for his criticism of the Jones’ lawsuit and Starr’s investigation, declaring, “It was the worst thing he could have done.”

Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee, who will have the first say on any impeachment report filed by the independent counsel, lined up to attack Clinton in post-speech interviews, insisting that Starr’s investigation should go forward. William McCollum, the second-ranking Republican on the committee, said that if Clinton lied about his relationship with Lewinsky in his sworn testimony in the Paula Jones suit, he should be impeached.

Media commentary both on television and in the press was almost uniformly hostile to the tone of Clinton’s speech. The spectacle of Clinton being compelled to testify before the grand jury produced a day-long media frenzy outside the White House, followed by what one observer called the “nightly chorus of rantings, ravings and wild speculation” that have characterized television coverage of the Lewinsky affair.

The rabid hostility of the media to Clinton is a function of the extreme sensitivity in the ruling circles over any attempt to break out of the narrow confines of official Washington and take the issues posed in this crisis to a broader audience, now largely excluded from official politics.

After floating predictions that Clinton would abase himself on national television and even make a flattering reference to the independent counsel as “Judge Starr,” the press was livid when he did not follow the script. This reaction is a guilty one: the media has served as co-conspirators with Starr, the federal judiciary and organized right-wing groups in utilizing the sex scandal to push for a definite political agenda.

What is this agenda? Contrary to its presentation in the media, the conflict in Washington is not about sex, lies or obstruction of justice. It is a political struggle in which Clinton’s right-wing opponents are employing methods of conspiracy and provocation to overturn the results of two presidential elections.

Political struggles frequently take a sordid form in the United States—and this is one of the most repellent—given that official political discourse bans any open discussion of social and class issues. The agenda of Clinton’s right-wing opponents includes efforts to privatize Social Security, sweeping away the last

vestiges of the welfare state; to eliminate all taxation on the wealthy, a goal already more than half accomplished; to end all government regulation of business; and to build up the military and wage a more aggressive foreign policy.

As he has throughout his presidency, Clinton's method has been to come to an accommodation with his right-wing opponents, to work things out within the framework which they dictate. Hence his collaboration with the Republican Congress in the destruction of welfare and other social programs.

He proceeded in a similar fashion in relation to the independent counsel's investigation, never challenging its basic legitimacy even when the collaboration between Starr's probe and the Paula Jones suit was revealed. This extraordinary passivity only encouraged ever more vicious and relentless efforts to organize his political destruction.

Clinton's attempt at conciliating the special prosecutor continued right into the session with the grand jury Monday. It has been reported that it was only in the course of the interrogation by Starr's attorneys that Clinton decided on a more aggressive response in his television speech.

Now it appears certain that the conflict will continue as an increasingly envenomed struggle within the ruling elites, under conditions where it intersects with broader social issues and arouses the concern of a broader public. Certainly the prospect of impeachment hearings will dominate the fall elections and shadow all the efforts of the American ruling class to confront global crises from Russia and Iraq to the Asian financial meltdown.

There are profound historical issues involved. Clinton's opponents are engaged in a covert, undemocratic and unconstitutional campaign to effect far-reaching changes in the American political system. In the bizarre form of a sex scandal, the traditional balance of powers between the three branches of government is being drastically altered and the powers of the president significantly eroded.

The attack on previous social reforms, initiated by Reagan and continued under Bush and Clinton, is now to be stepped up qualitatively. The goal is to remove all obstacles to the unfettered operation of the capitalist market, by reducing the executive branch to little more than a ceremonial role, at least as far as domestic policy is concerned, and limiting the federal government to essentially police-military functions.

For the working class it is not a question of defending a "strong" as against a "weak" presidency. The American presidency is an institution of capitalist rule, and will always function to defend the power of big business to exploit working people. The basic democratic rights and social interests of workers can be defended only in a political struggle against the whole of the capitalist system, culminating in the creation of a new, genuinely democratic and egalitarian political and economic order.

But insofar as the attack on the presidency is carried out by right-wing forces, and the masses of working people, politically

disenfranchised and alienated, are mere spectators, the consequences can only be of the most reactionary and anti-democratic character. The removal of Clinton by a right-wing, quasi-judicial *coup d'etat* would have the most ominous implications.

The very intensity of this crisis calls into question the official claims that American society has reached a new plateau of prosperity and abundance. If things are running so smoothly in America, why is the ruling class engaged in such vicious internecine bloodletting?

Nor can the broad public sympathy for Clinton be explained by reference to the soaring stock market and the low official unemployment rate. Overnight polls after Clinton's speech once again confounded the media pundits, showing little change in the popular hostility to the Starr investigation.

There is no question that Clinton's expression of anger over the invasiveness of Starr's investigation has struck a chord in public opinion, where privacy, the right to be let alone, is understood as a fundamental democratic right. There is a growing suspicion of the media and concern over the undeclared political agenda behind the anti-Clinton campaign, which expresses not complacency and contentment, but distrust and wary resentment. It reflects an intuitive sense among broad layers that those behind the investigation are up to no good.

Given the restrictions of the American political system, with two dominant parties both controlled by big business, and no political party genuinely representing the interests of working people, these sentiments do not yet find independent and organized political expression. But they will.



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