

On eve of Clinton testimony

A noteworthy shift in media coverage of Starr investigation

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It is now clear that Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's four-year effort to concoct a criminal case against the White House has come down to a perjury trap in the form of Clinton's August 17 grand jury testimony.

Armed with Monica Lewinsky's reported admission of a sexual relationship, backed up by the notorious stained dress, voluminous notes and tapes supplied by Linda Tripp and any other evidence extracted from Clinton aides, lawyers, secretaries and Secret Service guards, Starr hopes to have maneuvered the President into a corner. If Clinton holds to his testimony last January in the Paula Jones suit, since thrown out of court, denying a sexual encounter with Lewinsky, Starr will charge him with perjuring himself before the grand jury. If Clinton alters his earlier testimony, and his public statements on the matter, Starr is ready to charge him with perjury in his Paula Jones deposition, and the media will have a field day branding the President a liar.

In either event, it appears likely that Starr will send a report to Congress some time next month alleging possible 'high crimes and misdemeanors,' the first step toward impeachment proceedings. Thus the relentless, quasi-judicial campaign to cripple and, ultimately, bring down the Clinton White House--proceeding from the twenty-year-old Whitewater real estate deal, via 'travelgate,' the Vince Foster suicide and 'filegate' to the Lewinsky affair--resolves itself into a tawdry exposé of an alleged private relationship that has nothing to do with Clinton's official duties as President.

All of the media reports agree that Lewinsky, in her grand jury appearance, denied that Clinton urged her to lie in the Paula Jones case, and maintained that the so-

called 'talking points' she gave to Tripp in preparation for Tripp's testimony in the Jones suit were written by herself, without any input from the White House. Likewise, the charges that Clinton, via his friend Vernon Jordan, suborned Lewinsky to perjure herself in return for a new job, have apparently collapsed.

Lewinsky's testimony last week was, if one accepts the media presentation, no different in essence from that which she was prepared to give within weeks of the eruption of the sex scandal last January. It is instructive, given this fact, to consider the media's reaction to Lewinsky's grand jury testimony.

For months, following the sensational disclosure of Clinton's alleged sexual tryst with the former White House intern, the TV networks and newspapers repeated ad nauseum that Starr's case was not about sex. (Such statements were invariably sandwiched between bits of salacious gossip.) Echoing the office of the independent counsel, they insisted the real issue was 'criminal' acts--perjury, suborning of perjury and obstruction of justice. The general line in the media, particularly after the Paula Jones civil suit was dismissed, was that Starr had to prove more than a sexual affair, and that even perjury by Clinton in his Jones deposition would not suffice to justify impeachment proceedings. Starr had to prove that the White House urged others to lie under oath and sought to induce them to perjury with job offers or other enticements.

Yet in the aftermath of Lewinsky's testimony and on the eve of Clinton's, virtually no major newspapers or broadcast media have publicized the fact that precisely these supposedly crucial elements of Starr's legal case have evaporated, and that, in the end, his case rests

entirely on one issue and one issue alone--did he or didn't he have sex with Lewinsky. In fact, the current issue of *Newsweek* magazine reports that Starr's submission to Congress will focus entirely on 'the Lewinsky matter and other allegations flowing out of the Paula Jones case,' mainly because after four years and \$40 million, the independent counsel has come up with no credible case against Clinton on Whitewater, the Travel Office affair or the FBI file scandal.

Without the slightest accounting for this shift in their own reporting, the media have effortlessly and instantaneously adapted themselves to the new requirements of the political offensive against the White House headed up by Starr. Far from highlighting the insubstantial character, even from a narrow legal standpoint, of Starr's case, the TV pundits and establishment newspapers, in the first place the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, have generally portrayed Lewinsky's testimony as a triumph for Starr and a damning indictment of the White House.

Ironically, one exception is a news account in Tuesday's *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial pages have been among the most frenzied in supporting Starr and publicizing every imaginable scandal against the White House. 'While [Clinton's] critics frequently insist the Lewinsky case is 'not about sex,' the *Journal* writes, 'it does appear to be sex, in the end, that the case turns on.'

The collusion between the independent counsel and the media was further underscored last week when the ruling of Judge Johnson of the Federal District Court overseeing Starr's grand jury was unsealed. Johnson upheld a complaint filed by Clinton's lawyers and ordered hearings into their charges that Starr's office had repeatedly violated federal law by leaking secret grand jury information to the press.

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