

Starr report sets stage for impeachment

End game in the Clinton crisis

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The delivery of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's report to Congress, calling for the impeachment of Bill Clinton, marks the effective end of Clinton's presidency. Even if, despite present appearances, he should stagger through to finish his term of office, Clinton would be a virtual prisoner in the White House while his right-wing opponents dominate the political stage.

What is taking place in Washington is the closest thing to a coup d'etat in the history of the United States. Kenneth Starr did not mobilize tanks in front of the Capitol Building Wednesday. His weapons were two vans loaded with legal documents. But behind the facade of a criminal investigation, the task of Starr's office has been a political one: to force the removal of a twice-elected president by means of a classic destabilization campaign.

The release of the report was a media event, carefully staged to give the impression that there is voluminous evidence of criminal activity in the White House. On Friday the House of Representatives is expected to release to the Internet the full 445-page text of the report. The aim of the congressional Republicans, working in tandem with Starr and the sensation-hungry and corrupt media, is to produce a deluge of salacious details of alleged sexual misconduct in the Oval Office, drown out any critical response, stampede public opinion and create the political conditions in which Clinton would be forced to resign immediately, even before impeachment hearings.

Amid the increasingly lurid speculation and leaking of alleged details of the Starr report, there has been almost no commentary on the most significant aspect of the document: that there is nothing in it but sex, i.e., Clinton's relations with Monica Lewinsky and his efforts to conceal these relations from his right-wing opponents in control of the Paula Jones lawsuit. Four years of probing into Whitewater and a whole series equally tendentious allegations of misconduct produced nothing until Starr and Paula Jones's lawyers joined forces in an attempt to manufacture an impeachable offense.

Some of the individuals and groups involved in this dirty tricks operation have already been identified: Linda Tripp, Lucianne Goldberg, *Newsweek* journalist Michael Isikoff, billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife, and right-wing outfits like the *American Spectator* magazine and the Rutherford Institute. The exact role and motivation of others, including Lewinsky herself, can only be guessed at.

Despite the talk of protracted impeachment hearings and an eventual vote in the Senate, where a two-thirds majority is required to remove the president from office, it is more than likely that the crisis will not run its full constitutional course. The further crumbling of either the stock market or Clinton's position within the Democratic Party could lead to his resignation in a matter of days.

The reception given to the Starr report by congressional Democrats is particularly significant. For months they had characterized Starr as a biased and partisan prosecutor seeking to bring down a president over a sexual affair. But now that Starr has delivered his massive report, devoted entirely to Clinton's sex life, the Democrats have changed their tune.

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, Minority Whip David Bonior and ranking Judiciary Committee member John Conyers all declared that they would give the Starr report the most respectful consideration. They praised House Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde, who will head the impeachment probe, and pledged bipartisan cooperation in doing their 'constitutional duty.'

A series of Senate Democrats--Boxer of California, Hollings of South Carolina, Kerrey of Nebraska, Moynihan of New York--followed the example of Connecticut's Joseph Lieberman in making speeches denouncing Clinton's conduct as immoral. The senior Democrat in the Senate, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, compared Clinton to Richard Nixon.

Nothing so reveals the low level of intellectual and political life in America as these constant comparisons of the present crisis to Watergate, its diametric opposite. In Watergate the White House was the center of a conspiracy against the democratic rights of the American people. In the Clinton crisis the White House was the location of sexual trysts between two consenting adults, while the conspiracy against democratic rights was carried out by the special prosecutor's office.

Watergate was about politics: Nixon employed police-state methods such as spying, break-ins and 'dirty tricks' against those who opposed US military intervention in Vietnam. The Lewinsky affair is about sex. Clinton faces impeachment or forced resignation because of his private conduct. It is as though Nixon had been impeached for his use of 'expletive deleted' on the White House tapes.

The methods employed in the two investigations are also radically opposed. In Watergate, nationally televised congressional hearings built up a public case against Nixon, painstakingly documented, for crimes involving a massive abuse of power. In the Lewinsky affair, the case has been developed behind closed doors by a special prosecutor who combines secret grand jury proceedings with selective leaks to the media.

Government by special prosecutor

The frenzied and bitter political warfare in Washington might seem incomprehensible given the lack of any significant or substantial political differences between the Democratic and Republican parties.

Both parties represent and defend the interests of corporate America, at home and abroad. Clinton himself is the most conservative Democratic president of the twentieth century--the president who signed legislation cutting off millions of welfare recipients, proclaimed the end of 'big government,' and tailored his policies to the demands of the bond market and the stock exchange.

Nonetheless, Clinton has become the focus of the political hatred of a myriad of extreme right-wing groups. This must itself be explained politically, as the distorted expression of enormously powerful social contradictions in the United States. America has become polarized economically between an elite of wealth and privilege at the top--4 million millionaires, several hundred billionaires--and the vast majority of working people struggling to make ends meet.

Powerful right-wing forces were enraged by the timid reformist proposals of Clinton's first year in office: a budget proposal which increased taxes on the rich by a fraction of 1 percent, and a health care reform plan which, however constricted, suggested that government action was required to meet an important social need.

The media hue and cry over Whitewater was launched within two months of the formal unveiling of the health care reform plan. It was followed in quick succession by the filing of the Paula Jones sexual harassment lawsuit, the judicial intervention into the Whitewater investigation with the firing of Robert Fiske and his replacement as independent counsel by Kenneth Starr, and a series of other investigations. There are presently a half dozen special prosecutors investigating Clinton or his cabinet members.

Clinton's ouster would not mean the end of this process of government by special prosecutor. Forced resignation or impeachment would only embolden his right-wing opponents to press ahead against his constitutional successor, Vice President Al Gore. The legal mechanism for removing Gore or paralyzing his administration is already being put into place, with Attorney General Janet Reno approving the first steps toward appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate Gore's role in 1996 Democratic Party fundraising.

Should Gore succeed to the White House, he will be under immediate pressure either to step down himself or to pledge not to run in the 2000 election. This process will begin as soon as Gore nominates his own successor as Vice President, who must be approved by the Republican Congress.

The demise of liberalism

The Clinton crisis is not the debacle of an individual. It means the death of the Democratic Party and the last shreds of liberalism in American capitalist politics. The November elections are likely to see a further swing to the right, prepared more by the Democrats than even the Republicans.

The collaboration of the congressional Democrats and the extraordinary cowardice of Clinton himself, as one groveling apology succeeds another, have a political and not merely a personal significance. Clinton and the Democrats are incapable of any serious resistance to the right-wing destabilization campaign because they represent the same social layer.

It is significant, as widely noted in the press, that Clinton's political standing within the Democratic Party has declined sharply in the past three weeks. But it is ludicrous to suggest that this is the result of shock on the part of longtime Democratic Party officeholders over Clinton's admission that he had sex outside of wedlock and lied about it.

A contributing factor in this decline is the continuing fall in the stock exchange. The wiping out of \$2 trillion in stock market values has had little direct impact as yet on the vast majority of working people, but these are real losses and the losers, who comprise the top 10 percent of American society, are angry.

With the working class effectively disenfranchised, official political life revolves exclusively around the needs and interests of this elite social layer. Their mood of resentment finds expression in the vindictive and bitter comments of Lieberman and Co.

The successful overthrow of a sitting president by quasi-constitutional means has the most ominous implications for the democratic rights of the working class. It would encourage every reactionary and backward element in American political life, and open the floodgates for new attacks on domestic social programs, an end to any remaining restraints on the naked exercise of corporate economic power, and a new eruption of American militarism.

The disintegration of liberalism and the Democratic Party represents, in the short-term, a victory for the most right-wing elements within the ruling class. But its long-term implications are profoundly destabilizing for capitalist rule.

The deepening social and economic crisis, heralded by the stock market tremors of the last several weeks, cannot be ignored and covered up much longer. Nor can the voice of the working class be smothered forever by the censorship of the media and the collaboration by the trade union bureaucracy with big business.

Out of this crisis a movement must emerge among working people to defend their rights and social interests, under conditions where all the old defense mechanisms for bourgeois society--liberalism, the Democratic Party, the trade unions--have been discredited.

Under these conditions, workers and young people looking for an alternative to the diseased and reactionary character of big business politics will find it only in the building of a new political movement, entirely independent of the old political structure and based on a socialist and anticapitalist program.

See Also:

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