

Elite opinion and public opinion

Reflections on the class divide in America

Martin McLaughlin
8 September 1998

On September 3 the *New York Times* published an editorial praising the decision of Attorney General Janet Reno to take a step towards the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the role of Vice President Al Gore in 1996 Democratic Party fundraising. After affirming its longtime support for such an investigation, whose purpose is to do to Gore what Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr is doing to Clinton, the *Times* noted, “There is, as always, a gap between grass-roots and elite opinion. The public is tired of the Lewinsky story.”

Similar statements have appeared in other leading daily newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, which contrasted the visceral hostility to Clinton “inside the Beltway” with the hostility towards Starr’s investigation in the broader public, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, which asked, in a major article August 31, “Why the Political Split between Public and Washington Elite?”

The major dailies and the television networks have always been the spokesmen for “elite opinion.” In the bias of their coverage as well as in their openly declared editorial views, they express the interests of the giant corporations and billionaire families which dominate American life both politically and economically. What is new is that, far from seeking to conceal their identification with this “elite,” the corporate-controlled media shamelessly proclaims it.

To some extent, the media has been compelled to do so because of the obvious divergence between “elite opinion” and the sentiments of the broader public in relation to the Starr investigation into President Clinton. This came to a head after Clinton’s August 17 speech, which was universally denounced in the media and on Capitol Hill. Meanwhile opinion polls showed two-thirds of the public thought Clinton’s admission of

a relationship with Monica Lewinsky should bring the Starr investigation to an end.

What accounts for this sharp divergence? The destabilization of the Clinton administration through a “sex scandal” is the peculiar—and even bizarre—form taken by a raging political dispute within the American ruling class. Unable to go openly before the American people with their program of destroying all domestic social programs and abolishing taxation on the wealthy, extreme right-wing elements have employed a classic “dirty tricks” operation to undermine and oust the administration and create the political conditions for a further and even more drastic swing to the right in government policy.

It is therefore of great political significance that, despite all the machinery of manipulation of public opinion which has been deployed, especially over the past eight months, public opinion has not been shifted. The poll numbers showing widespread opposition to the Starr investigation reveal, not so much support for Clinton, but a distrust of the political motivations of the anti-Clinton campaign and an entirely healthy disgust for the moralizing hypocrisy of his antagonists.

It is a measure of the enormous social polarization in America, the growing gulf between the wealthy elite and the working people, the vast majority of the population, that it is no longer possible for the corporate-controlled media to maintain the pretense that their views are the expression of the views of the vast majority. They have to admit that there are two opinions in America—the opinion of the moneyed interests, which is now being mobilized to drive a president from office, and the opinion of the ordinary people, which counts for nothing.

In this context another political issue is posed: why the thoroughly demoralized response in the Clinton

White House? One Clinton aide after another is planning to step down. Clinton himself is visibly dispirited. Yet the polls show that were he to attack and denounce his persecutors and expose their connections to extreme right-wing forces there would be broad public support.

The most humiliating spectacle came in Ireland, when Clinton was questioned by an American reporter at a joint press conference with Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern: what did he think about the speech of Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Connecticut Democrat who denounced Clinton's conduct as "wrong and immoral"?

Rather than dismissing the question as out of place and insulting, or telling his interrogator to wait until he returned to Washington, Clinton groveled before his media and congressional critics, declaring that he agreed with Lieberman.

It is not the task of socialists to give Clinton advice, but rather to explain the objective significance of Clinton's failures from the standpoint of the interests of the working class. Clinton is incapable of conducting any serious struggle to defend himself because he too is oriented entirely to "elite opinion." He has sought to cling to office, not by appealing to the American people, but by increasingly desperate efforts to ingratiate himself with corporate America.

Decades ago, it was possible for an American president, faced with intransigent opposition from Wall Street and the press barons, to make an appeal to broader social forces. In 1936 in his speech accepting renomination at the Democratic National Convention, Roosevelt declared that he was hated by the rich and glad of it. Political equality had no meaning, he said, unless it was combined with economic equality.

Roosevelt, of course, was no radical, let alone a socialist. Scion of a wealthy and aristocratic New York family, he made his appeal to workers, farmers and racial minorities in order to carry out policies which would defend the long-term interests of the ruling class, despite the short-sighted opposition of what he called the 'economic royalists.'

Clinton is incapable of making such an appeal, not so much because he is no Roosevelt—that goes without saying—but because American capitalism no longer has the luxury of Roosevelt-style policies. There is no significant constituency in the ruling class for any policy except one that provides an immediate increase

in its income and wealth.

To make an effective appeal to the vast majority of the American people who oppose and distrust the Starr investigation would require stirring up popular anger against the moneyed interests who are backing this attempt to overturn the results of two presidential elections. It would raise the specter of the intervention into American political life of social forces that are presently excluded.

Clinton does not have the fortitude to turn the tables on his opponents because he is more afraid of the consequences of a successful campaign to mobilize public opinion against them.

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