Clinton grand jury testimony broadcast by networks

Editorial Board
22 September 1998

Monday's nationwide television broadcast of President Clinton's testimony before the Monica Lewinsky grand jury was a scene straight out of the Inquisition. For four hours Clinton was compelled to answer questions as off-camera prosecutors pressed repeatedly for the most intimate details of his personal life.

Even those who are strongly opposed to Clinton and his policies should be horrified by this spectacle. In no democratic society should any individual be subjected to such an interrogation. Clinton was compelled to answer question after question, under oath, about private sexual relations that were clearly consensual and which did not involve allegations of rape, abuse or harassment.

The videotape was broadcast in full by a half dozen television networks, including ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN, as soon as the tape was made available by the House Judiciary Committee shortly after 9 a.m. The committee also released another 3,000 pages of pornographic material, much of it consisting of explicit descriptions by Monica Lewinsky of sexual encounters with Clinton.

And this is not the end of the filth being dumped on the American public as part of the politically motivated campaign against the White House. Next will come the videotape of Clinton's January 17 testimony at a deposition taken by attorneys for Paula Jones. Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde has already sought release of this tape from the federal judge who dismissed the Jones lawsuit.

As he did in his brief televised speech that same day--August 17--Clinton seemed on occasion to speak over the heads of the prosecutors to a broader audience. He accused Starr of 'trying to criminalize my private life,' and asked for his conduct to be understood sympathetically, as the normal actions of a man seeking to conceal an extramarital affair.

Clinton suggested in several exchanges with the prosecutors the concocted character of the Lewinsky investigation. He noted, albeit with considerable reticence, the close coordination between Kenneth Starr's office and the lawsuit brought against him by Paula Jones, inspired and financed by organized right-wing groups.

He chided Starr's prosecutors for acting as though he should have volunteered information about his private life to Jones's attorneys, rather than asserting his legal right to give as little information as possible. He pointed out that his obligation in testifying last January was to 'be truthful but not particularly helpful,' since he was the defendant in the civil suit.

Starr added the Lewinsky investigation to his Whitewater jurisdiction in January on the premise that he would establish a pattern of obstruction of justice, tampering with witnesses and other efforts by the Clintons to cover up a series of scandals. But with Clinton before the grand jury, Starr did not even attempt to make this connection. Indeed, the word 'Whitewater' was never spoken by any of the four prosecutors who questioned Clinton at length.

Attack on democratic rights

The Paula Jones lawsuit was authorized by the Supreme Court in a ruling which held that the president was subject to a civil suit while in office. But Starr has exploited this suit in a way which denies Clinton the democratic and due process rights that other defendants would be entitled to in such an investigation.

Grand jury testimony is not legal evidence, since it is given without cross-examination and without a judge. That is one of the reasons it is kept secret. But thousands of pages of such uncorroborated testimony have now been dumped into the public domain, in a transparent effort to discredit Clinton politically and force him to resign.

The very existence of the videotape of Clinton's grand jury testimony is indicative of the political motivation of the Starr investigation. The independent counsel's office initially agreed to a live feed of Clinton's testimony to the grand jurors, impaneled in a federal courtroom a few blocks from the White House. The videotape was only made because Starr claimed a single grand juror was going to be absent. Now the tape supposedly made for an audience of one has

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been broadcast to millions.

The immediate media reaction to the broadcast was to declare it outrageous that Clinton continued in his August 17 testimony to affirm the statement made in his deposition to Paula Jones's lawyers in January, that he had not had a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Clinton actually made an effective legal argument in the course of his testimony, noting that it was the lawyers for Jones and the presiding judge who devised the definition of sexual relationship which he employed in his testimony. But the media ridiculed this argument, as though it was outrageous that Clinton should avail himself of his legal rights.

The process of investigating Clinton's sex life is not only degrading, but inherently intimidating. If a president of the United States, supposedly the most politically powerful officeholder in the country, can be persecuted in this fashion, what can ordinary citizens expect if they come into conflict with the state?

A turning point in history

It might appear odd that it is left to socialists, who oppose Clinton on his economic, social and foreign policies, to remind our audience of what the US political establishment has abandoned: elementary precepts of bourgeois law, due process and democratic rights.

This only points to the real historical significance of the Lewinsky affair: it is a massive crisis of the political structure of the United States. However bizarre the form which the Lewinsky affair has taken, it reveals a dramatic turn to the right within the American ruling elite. An unelected cabal is making use of a sex scandal to carry out a virtual coup d'etat, behind a constitutional fig leaf.

The Democratic Party is being exposed as impotent. Not only has it abandoned any connection with the liberal reformist policies which it once espoused, not only is it hostile to the concerns and interests of the working people who once supported it, the Democratic Party is incapable of defending the democratic rights even of its own president.

As for the so-called 'free press,' the corporate-owned media is a full partner in the campaign to oust a twice-elected president and establish an even more right-wing regime in Washington. In all the media commentary, there are no questions raised about the legitimacy of the Starr investigation, or the extraordinary process by which the probe of a 20-year-old failed real estate deal in Arkansas became transmuted into an interrogation of Clinton's sex life in the White House.

A whole series of major questions are raised. If one examines the extraordinary circumstances surrounding this case--the peculiar behavior of Monica Lewinsky, the strange relationship between her and Linda Tripp, the exchange of evidence and witnesses between Starr and the attorneys for Paula Jones, the provocative role played by *Newsweek* magazine--it is highly suggestive that this entire operation is the product of a political conspiracy.

From the standpoint of democracy, it is far more important to examine these connections than to detail Clinton's sexual trysts with Monica Lewinsky. There can be little doubt that this entire affair is the product of a political provocation organized by elements in the media, the religious right--which runs the Republican Party--and right-wing activists in the Office of the Independent Counsel and the judiciary.

The media will not examine these issues, but instead continues the effort to drown public opinion in a tidal wave of filth. The task of combating the right-wing conspiracy and of launching a political struggle to defend democratic rights falls to the working class. To that end it will be necessary to make the most exhaustive and detailed examination of the individuals and organizations which are spearheading the destabilization campaign against the White House.

See Also:
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