

The Democrats: fighting impeachment on their knees

Barry Grey

10 October 1998

Neither the White House nor the Congressional Democrats offered serious opposition in Thursday's House vote to proceed with the Republican plan for open-ended impeachment hearings against Clinton. The Democratic leadership had already decided not to oppose impeachment proceedings per se, putting forward instead a proposal for a more limited inquiry. Democratic speakers directed their criticisms not to the transparently contrived case drawn up by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, but rather to secondary questions of 'process' and 'fairness.'

They took great pains not to challenge the legitimacy of the Starr inquiry and to minimize the differences between themselves and the Republicans. The top Democrat in the House, Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, set the tone, saying Clinton had 'deeply disappointed the American people' and 'let us all down.' His main complaint was that the Republicans' hard line ruled out a bipartisan vote: 'I believe if we had succeeded in what we should be doing, we would have one resolution, agreed to by all 435 members today. The question, you see, is not whether to have an inquiry. The question today is what kind of inquiry will it be?'

Only five Democrats voted against holding any impeachment hearings, and 31 voted for the Republican plan, which gives the Judiciary Committee a free hand to stage what amounts to a show trial not only on the Monica Lewinsky affair, but also on the Whitewater real estate deal and the other allegations--Travelgate, Filegate, campaign finance, etc.--that have been lobbed against Clinton by his political opponents on the right.

The most consummate expression of political prostration came from Clinton himself, who responded to the House vote by declaring, 'It is not in my hands.... There is nothing I can do.'

The Democrats' cowering before Starr and the Congressional Republicans--who voted in a bloc for their party's proposal--cannot be attributed to ignorance over the specious character of the impeachment drive from a legal and Constitutional point of view, or confusion as to the reactionary substance of the Starr investigation. The publicly stated consensus of Constitutional scholars and jurists holds that the charges against Clinton, even if true, by no stretch of the imagination rise to the level of 'high crimes and misdemeanors' set forth by the Constitution as the basis for impeachment.

The Democrats are also well aware of the revelations surfacing almost daily about the illicit connivance between Starr's office, Linda Tripp and the Paula Jones lawyers, adding to the mountain of evidence that Clinton was set up for impeachment by right-wing forces closely linked to the Republican leadership, operating under the wing of the Office of Independent Council.

Commentaries have begun to appear in the American press warning

of the far-reaching implications for democratic rights and the traditional separation of powers flowing from the political assault on the Clinton administration, and even some Democratic congressmen have raised such issues. Vic Fazio, the chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, warned in a column in Thursday's *New York Times* of 'political upheaval' and wrote: 'From now on, any Congress dissatisfied with the policies of a particular administration or the personal behavior of any President could simply conduct an ongoing, costly and distracting inquiry intended to limit and dilute the President's authority.'

Jerrold Nadler of New York charged from the House floor that the Starr investigation and impeachment drive amounted to a 'thinly veiled coup d'etat.'

But the Democrats have no intention of mounting a political counteroffensive against Starr and his Republican allies. Looked at from a superficial point of view, this appears to make no sense, all the more so since the opinion polls show that a majority of the American people are opposed to impeachment hearings, and an even greater percentage, especially among workers, are hostile to the Starr investigation and the Republican Congress.

With the mid-term elections less than a month away, it cannot have failed to dawn on the Democratic leadership that a campaign waged as a public referendum against those pushing impeachment would win powerful popular support. Yet any such suggestion has been rejected out of hand.

The AFL-CIO was planning to spend millions of dollars on pro-Clinton, anti-impeachment TV ads, but the labor bureaucracy shelved the campaign under pressure from Congressional Democrats. The Democratic leadership has told the AFL-CIO not to focus on the impeachment issue as a means of rallying support for the Democrats in the elections.

When Clinton's former campaign strategist James Carville announced on Meet the Press last month that he was declaring 'war' on Newt Gingrich, Gephardt complained to the White House, which promptly disavowed Carville's challenge to the Republican Speaker of the House. On the eve of Thursday's House vote, Carville complained to the *New York Times* of the Democrats' groveling. Saying he believed the Democrats could do 'much better than anyone expects' in November, he asked, 'How can you take the Congress back if you don't make a case against the people who are running it?'

From an electoral standpoint, the Democrats' cowardly posture would seem tailor made to benefit the Republicans. The more impotent the Democrats appear, the more they discourage those inclined to register a protest against Starr and the Republican impeachment drive from going to the polls. How is the prostration of

the Democratic Party to be explained?

The Democrats are not oriented, in their policies, their speeches, or their tactics, to the masses of working people. From Clinton on down, they are turned to privileged layers of the middle class, as well as the financial and corporate powers that dominate American society. The public opinion to which they are attuned is not the feelings of the general population, but rather the appetites and moods of a narrow elite, which includes the media establishment and those wealthy segments of society who 'count.'

The Democrats find little solace in the hostile reaction of tens of millions of working people to the intrigues of Starr and the Republican leadership. They recoil at any broad appeal to the pent-up social anger reflected in the opinion polls, because they sense that a popular mobilization against impeachment could become the starting point for a more general movement of mass protest, one that could escape the control of either capitalist party.

The inability and unwillingness of the Democrats to clearly distinguish themselves from their Republican adversaries on the impeachment issue is not an aberration. They have spent the past two decades accommodating themselves to the right-wing policies of the Republicans. Clinton built his national political career by lining up with those conservative forces within the Democratic Party most insistent on abandoning the social reform policies of the past. The hallmarks of his administration have been the destruction of the New Deal-era welfare system and a balanced budget.

Ironically, as the *Wall Street Journal* pointed out in a front-page column on Friday, the Democrats who have given the greatest aid and comfort to Starr and the Republicans are the so-called New Democrats with whom Clinton was allied in the Democratic Leadership Council, a body which Clinton helped found and for a time chaired, and whose aim is to co-opt as much as possible the domestic and foreign policies of the Republicans. DLCers such as Senator Joseph Lieberman and former Senator Sam Nunn were among the first Democrats to publicly denounce Clinton after he admitted to an affair with Monica Lewinsky. New Democrats Jim Moran of Virginia and David Minge of Minnesota were among the 31 members of Clinton's party who voted with the Republicans on Thursday.

The current crisis in Washington is the outcome of a prolonged process and a definite political dynamic. The more the political consensus within the bourgeoisie has shifted to the right, the more unpopular the social policies which it has required, the more it has been compelled to rely on the most right-wing forces within the political establishment.

The prominence today of right-wing radicals in the Republican Party, animated by the market libertarian creed which demands the removal of all government restraints on the capitalist market, and linked politically to fascistic forces in the Christian Coalition and the militia movement, has not emerged overnight. Since the election of Reagan, the term 'liberal' has increasingly become a political swear word, and the moderate reformist outlook that was over many decades the dominant ideology of the bourgeois establishment has been banished to the fringes of American political life.

Republicans like Newt Gingrich, Richard Armey, Tom DeLay and those even more extreme in their outlook and temperament have the advantage over the Democrats because they express in the most consistent form--in their hatred of social welfare policies, democratic rights, and egalitarian ideals--the logic of bourgeois politics. The Democrats, to the extent that they remain tied down by the historical baggage of past reformist policies, are seen as less able to carry

through the policies required by the corporate elite.

In their assault on the White House, the Republicans are making clear to big business that they are prepared to carry out ruthless measures, and do so in defiance of the sentiments of the broad masses of people. The extremism which they display in their war against Clinton provides a glimpse of the extremism which a government under their control will show in attacking the social conditions and basic rights of the working class.

For the Democrats to oppose the impeachment drive would mean to expose before the American people the social, financial and political interests which are motivating it. But this is impossible, because the Democratic Party is a bourgeois party, committed to the defense of American capitalism and beholden to the very social forces in whose behalf the political attack on the White House is being waged. In the final analysis, the Democrats have far more in common with their Republican tormentors than they do with the masses of working people, in whom they see a threat to the social order which they defend.

The impeachment drive against Clinton marks a turning point in American history. It is an expression of a deep-going crisis of the entire political system. The Democratic Party is visibly disintegrating, but the Republican Party is also headed for convulsions. It cannot escape the impact of the social forces that will be unleashed by the economic, social and political impasse of American capitalism.

It is critical for the working class to grasp the great dangers which it faces, and draw the necessary political conclusions. It must demonstrate no less determination to conduct a struggle in defense of its class interests than the reactionaries show in their assault on democratic rights. To the extent that the Republican right succeeds in its attempt, by means of a pseudo-Constitutional coup, to effect far-reaching changes in the political institutions of the US, the most reactionary forces in America will be emboldened to press ahead with their political agenda.

The prostration of Clinton and the Democrats demonstrates the organic inability of the Democratic Party and the liberals to oppose this right-wing attack. The only social force that has a deep interest in defending democratic rights, and the power, if mobilized, to do so, is the working class. The precondition for this struggle is that the masses of working people end their political subordination to the Democratic Party and establish their political independence, by building their own mass socialist party.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact