

Why is the *New York Times* supporting Kenneth Starr?

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One aspect of the political assault on the Clinton administration that has seemed most baffling to many observers is the role played by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in supporting Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and his right-wing allies.

The lurch to the right by the *Times* has left many of its own readers dazed, as reflected in the newspaper's letters columns, which overwhelmingly oppose Starr's abuse of due process and disregard for Constitutional principles. The *Times*'s best known commentator on civil liberties, Anthony Lewis, has been reduced to writing pieces that read like plaintive appeals to his own newspaper to defend elementary democratic rights.

Typical of the *Times* commentaries was an editorial published several days after the broadcast of Clinton's grand jury testimony. In the face of widespread revulsion over the star-chamber character of the proceedings, the *Times* came to the independent counsel's defense. It dismissed Starr's tactics as 'legal klutiness' and declared that he was simply doing his 'legal duty.' The *Times* cited approvingly a statement by former President Bush, saying that Clinton had 'diminished the house and the office that Mr. Bush and the other Presidents since Richard Nixon treated with personal respect and careful stewardship.'

This bow to Bush and Reagan is a whitewash of what was truly an assault on the Constitution, the Iran-Contra affair. Under their 'careful stewardship' the basement of the White House was turned into a secret command center, presided over by Oliver North, for illegally funneling money to the Nicaraguan contras, whose counterrevolutionary terror took thousands of lives.

'Whatever Mr. Starr's failings,' the *Times* concluded, 'they will never achieve the grand malignancy of Mr. Clinton's folly and miscalculations.' It is preposterous to even compare Clinton's personal indiscretions with

what the *Times* acknowledges may be major violations of civil liberties by Starr. Such fatuous statements are, however, typical of the newspaper's editorial commentary.

Last week its editorial page supported the House vote for impeachment hearings, echoing the Republican line that the proceedings embodied 'the rule of law.' It ignored the fact that the allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice are based on the private actions of Clinton, and not affairs of state. Nor did it take note of the growing body of evidence of a political conspiracy linking Starr, the Paula Jones lawyers, ultra-right organizations such as the Christian Coalition and the Rutherford Institute, right-wing opponents of Clinton in Arkansas, and individuals in the top echelons of the Republican Party and the federal judiciary.

In a nod to widespread concerns over the violations of due process and privacy on the part of Starr's office, the newspaper said, 'We take seriously the debate over Kenneth Starr's tactics, over whether the investigation of Mr. Clinton raises privacy dangers for the general society and whether Mr. Clinton has been denied the rights of a common citizen.' However it blamed any breaches of civil liberties not on Starr, but rather on Clinton, whose defensive tactics had 'seriously distended the legal system.'

The support of the *New York Times* has been critical to the success of the political destabilization operation headed up by Starr. The *Times* is the principal voice of American liberalism. It plays a major role in shaping public opinion and setting the parameters of permissible opposition on the left of the political establishment. By lending credibility to the four-year inquisition of Starr the *Times* has enormously facilitated the efforts of extreme right-wing forces to effect far-reaching changes in US political institutions.

Such shameless apologetics for Starr and his right-wing allies raise two basic questions. Why has the liberal press moved so dramatically to the right, and what are the broader implications of this political trajectory?

Matters of policy, domestic and foreign, play an important role. On the same day as the editorial endorsing the vote for impeachment hearings, the *Times* ran a commentary by columnist A.M. Rosenthal attacking Clinton for failing to bomb Iraq. Rosenthal vented his anger over the administration's acceptance of the deal brokered with Iraq by UN Secretary General Kofi Anan last February, and argued for Clinton's removal.

The *Times* has always been closely identified with Israel. Its defense of Israeli policy has been a factor, but only a secondary one, in its movement to the right. The *Times* has on a broad front aligned itself with those who consider Clinton's foreign policy indecisive, demanding a more aggressive use of military force around the world. On domestic issues as well, the *Times* has adapted itself to the glorification of the capitalist market and supported cuts in social programs.

This sharp movement to the right is not a matter of a few columnists or one newspaper. The record of the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek* magazine and virtually every other mass circulation publication associated with the liberal wing of the political establishment is no better. Their role in the Clinton crisis is indicative of an objective historical process--the decay of American liberalism.

It is instructive to recall the very different role the liberal press played in the last impeachment crisis. The *Times's* publication of the Pentagon Papers was one of the principal links in the chain of events that lead to Nixon's resignation, and the *Post's* exposure of the White House's role in the break-in at the Watergate complex and its subsequent cover-up was instrumental in provoking congressional hearings.

Vast changes in the social structure of the US have occurred since the period of Watergate, and they have had a politically and intellectually corrupting impact on the liberal milieu. America has become more sharply polarized, with the uppermost layers of the population experiencing an enormous accumulation of wealth, while living standards for the majority have declined.

The changes in the social demography of the US are

powerfully reflected in the present-day constituency of the liberal press. The *New York Times* in particular has come to reflect the outlook and concerns of a social layer that has become extraordinarily wealthy over the past 15 years of stock market boom. One need only leaf through the *New York Times* magazine on any given Sunday to get a sense of the audience to which the newspaper is oriented. There one will find advertisements for watches costing tens of thousands of dollars and fashions with price tags equal to several months' pay of the average wage earner.

These social changes underlie the most significant aspect of the liberal press's treatment of the Starr inquiry and impeachment drive--its unconcern with the defense of democratic rights. Alienated from the masses of working people, American liberalism today is indifferent to democratic traditions and hostile to any striving for social equality. In defending the status quo, and a level of wealth it could previously only dream of, the liberal establishment exhibits a debasement of critical thought and affinity for political reaction.

The rightward trajectory of the liberal press underscores the significance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which strives on the basis of the highest level of commentary and analysis to raise the political consciousness and develop the critical faculties of the one social force that remains deeply committed to the defense of democratic rights--the American and international working class.



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