

On the eve of the US midterm elections

What happened to the impeachment drive?

Barry Grey
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A curious thing has happened since the October 8 vote in the US House of Representatives for impeachment hearings against Bill Clinton. Almost as soon as the Republicans and Democrats turned from the charges surrounding Clinton's sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky to the campaign for the November 3 midterm elections, both parties virtually dropped the scandal. The investigation by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, which preoccupied the media to the virtual exclusion of every other issue for more than nine months, all but disappeared from the front page and receded into near oblivion on the network news.

It might seem odd that an issue which has convulsed Washington and brought the American political system to the point of paralysis should be relegated to the back burner just when, in theory at least, the American people are called on to exercise their democratic will. But it is precisely because of the elections that both parties, as well as the media, have grown so taciturn about the impeachment drive.

Both the Republicans and the Democrats are determined to prevent the November 3 vote from taking on the character of a public referendum on the political offensive against Clinton, which has been spearheaded by Starr and the Republican Congress. They are well aware that the overwhelming majority of Americans are opposed to the Starr investigation and the attempt to unseat Clinton because of his relations with Lewinsky. Even more dangerous are the signs that masses of people sense the impeachment campaign is indicative of a growth of anti-democratic forces and a deep-going corruption of the entire political system.

The Republicans want to keep the impeachment question in the background because they know if they made it a central issue they could lose the election. The Democrats want to downplay the matter because they

fear if they exploited it as a campaign issue they might win. Both parties fear that an electoral rebuke from the public would bring into sharp relief the chasm that separates the political establishment from the great bulk of the American people.

Only in the final week of the campaign has the National Republican Congressional Committee, after much internal debate, decided to spend several million dollars on two 30-second TV ads that allude to the Clinton scandal. These are being aired in carefully selected markets, mainly in the south, where Republican officials believe there is a need to motivate the party's right-wing 'base' to go to the polls. From statements in the press, it is clear that the Republicans consider these ads, which focus on Clinton's public dissembling and avoid any mention of sex, to be a gamble. But they feel compelled to air them as a means of placating anti-tax, anti-abortion and Christian fundamentalist zealots who are angry over Republican support for the federal budget passed earlier this month.

According to party officials, no individual Republican candidates for the House are mentioning the Lewinsky affair in their own commercials. And the impeachment drive has been absent from the campaign propaganda of virtually all Republican Senatorial and gubernatorial candidates.

Only a handful of Democrats are making the Republican attack on Clinton a campaign issue, and the party's national organizations have decided against airing TV ads on the issue. This is despite clear evidence that the Democrats' electoral chances would be greatly enhanced if they made an appeal to public disgust, particularly strong among workers, with the Starr inquiry and the Republican impeachment drive.

On October 19 Jay Inslee, a Democrat running for the House in Washington State, released a poll showing

that his campaign had gained considerable ground since he began running a commercial attacking the Republican incumbent Rick White for voting in favor of the Republicans' bill to launch impeachment hearings. The survey showed that Inslee had picked up several percentage points and pulled even with White in the two weeks that the ad was aired.

Inslee's turnabout was widely reported in the press, as was a memo written by former Clinton advisers James Carville and Stanley Greenberg urging Democratic candidates to press the impeachment issue. 'The impeachment inquiry is an opportunity,' they wrote.

Clinton and the Democratic National Committee have rejected any such appeal. Instead they are withholding party funds from Democrats running for House seats, prompting Rep. Charles Rangel of New York, the finance chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, to publicly denounce Colorado Governor Roy Romer, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Rangel and other House Democrats have accused Romer and, by implication, Clinton, of discouraging Democrats from going to the polls by making pessimistic predictions of big Democratic losses on November 3.

Martin Frost of Texas, the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, told the *New York Times*, 'Romer is simply wrong. We're going to pick up seats.' Rangel's remarks were more pointed. In a rebuke directed to Romer, he was quoted by the *Times* as saying, 'Keep your money and shut up your mouth.'

It is no doubt puzzling to many that Clinton and the top leadership of the Democratic Party should pursue a course inimical to winning back control of the House of Representatives--a course so destructive that a senior Democratic congressman all but accuses them of throwing the election. This appears all the more mystifying since Clinton has to assume the impeachment drive will resume after the elections, and the more favorable the outcome of the vote for the Republicans, the more dire his personal situation.

There are, however, profound reasons for the Democrats' political prostration. 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 attackers than they do with the masses of working people, in whom they see a threat to the social order which they defend.

The Democrats recognize that the world financial crisis is rapidly driving the US economy into recession, with potentially catastrophic implications for the jobs and living standards of tens of millions of Americans. There are those within the Democratic leadership who see regaining control of Congress under such conditions a political liability.

Even more fundamental is the fear that any appeal to the pent-up social anger reflected in the popular opposition to the impeachment drive could encourage the intervention of broad masses of working people into the political crisis. This is anathema to both big business parties.

See Also:

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