

# The House Judiciary Committee: a portrait of the American political establishment

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Congressional Republicans and the media attempted to endow last Thursday's impeachment hearing with an aura of decorum and gravity. Much was made of the fact that the proceeding was being held in the same chamber as the Nixon impeachment hearings of 1974.

The House Judiciary Committee of that time was certainly no model of virtue or wisdom. This is, after all, the United States Congress, the body about which Mark Twain observed a century ago, 'It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.' Nevertheless, over the past quarter century a process of accelerated political decay has been at work, and the result was evident at last week's hearing.

Rep. Henry Hyde, Republican from Illinois, presided. Everyone in the room understood the contrived character of the investigation that had brought them together and the lack of substance in the allegations against Clinton. This found expression in Hyde's jokes, asides and sarcasm.

The Illinois congressman, to whom the superficial journalistic mind inevitably applies the word 'avuncular,' has made his name as a right-winger and opponent of the right to an abortion. He came to national attention as the author of the Hyde Amendment in 1978, which caps the use of federal Medicaid money for abortions. A biographer describes his district: 'In DuPage County ... affluent families raise their children at good schools with little fear of the urban crime they or their parents left in Chicago.'

Republican members of the committee made no attempt to conceal their admiration for Kenneth Starr, one of the most disliked men in American public life. Their flattery reached almost comical levels. Rep. Christopher Cannon of Utah gushed, 'I think that 1998 is going to be the year of McGwire, Sosa [record-breaking baseball players] and Starr.'

Cannon sounded a common theme, that Starr had been grievously slandered. Rep. Steve Buyer of Indiana noted that many of those on the committee had also been prosecutors and lawyers, 'But none of us could ever come close, not even close, to the attacks that have come upon you and your office and your character and the character of those in your office ...' Rep. Steve Chabot of Ohio asked, 'How difficult is it for you, as an independent counsel, to do your job when you're up against this onslaught ...?'

Rep. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina acknowledged Starr's unpopularity, saying, 'The most bizarre thing to me, in these odd

times in which we live, [is] that the public outrage is directed at you and not at the person who has allegedly done all these things.'

Material matters, i.e., wealth and awe in the face of it, emerged even on this solemn occasion. Rep. George Gekas of Pennsylvania joked that Democratic Congressman John Conyers of Michigan had gone 'through a litany of tremendous clients that your law firm represents. In fact, when I finish my tour in Congress, I'd like to talk with you, if I could!'

The Independent Counsel felt no need to conceal his own wealth. Replying to Rep. Mary Bono of California, he said, 'I would love to be back in private life.... I would prefer to be almost your constituent. A little bit farther west.... I've even looked at a house in Malibu Country Estates.'

Wisconsin Republican James Sensenbrenner, one of the wealthiest individuals in Congress, remarked: 'I think the rule of law is paramount, and with the rule of law goes the notion that everybody stands before the law equally, whether they be president or pauper, whether they be powerful or poor.'

Let us look more closely at the Republicans on the Committee:

We've referred briefly to **Hyde**, and the wealthy **Sensenbrenner** from suburban Milwaukee. The next-ranking Republican, **Rep. Bill McCollum**, is an arch-conservative and the congressman from Disney, representing Orlando, Florida. During Thursday's hearing he pressed Starr to charge Clinton with bribery for trying 'to get Monica Lewinsky a job.' **Gekas** of Pennsylvania, who was salivating over Starr's client list, 'is best known in the House for his career-long crusade for the death penalty.'

**Rep. Howard Coble** of North Carolina used to work as a field claims representative for an auto insurance company. Richard Nixon appointed him US Attorney for the Middle District of North Carolina in 1969. **Rep. Lamar Smith**, of Texas, has made the anti-immigrant witch-hunt his specialty. In 1998 he introduced a measure that would force immigrants seeking US citizenship to go through a tougher criminal background check. **Rep. Elton Gallegly** of California is also a crusader against immigrants. He has pushed to end welfare for immigrants and for stronger border patrols. Gallegly is a former real estate salesman and mayor of Simi Valley, the wealthy southern California community made famous as the site of the trial at which the policemen who mercilessly beat Rodney King were acquitted.

**Rep. Charles T. Canady**, whose father was a long-time assistant to Florida's Democratic governor Lawton Chiles, favors budget-cutting and measures banning a certain type of late-term

abortion. Apparently **Rep. Bob Inglis** of South Carolina is not famous for anything, except for being an 'arch-conservative' who called for Clinton to resign over the Lewinsky affair. He recently lost in an bid for the US Senate seat from South Carolina. **Rep. Bob Goodlatte's** rural Virginia district takes in evangelist Jerry Falwell's home-base of Lynchburg. Goodlatte is known as a 'budget hawk.' Indiana's **Buyer** advertises himself as a Persian Gulf war veteran. He served as legal counsel for the 22nd Theater Army during the assault on Iraqi forces. He has distinguished himself by voting against protecting access to abortion clinics.

A former Bush administration appointee as US Attorney, Tennessee's **Rep. Ed Bryant** represents 'the affluent white suburbs of Memphis.' He was also an army lawyer and taught law at the US Military Academy. Bryant advocates converting old military bases into prisons and limiting death sentence appeals. **Chabot** is a conservative from Cincinnati who 'is known for pushing the House to be more aggressive in its budget-cutting efforts.'

**Rep. Bob Barr** of Georgia is a fanatical right-winger, a favorite of Militia-type movements. He was an early advocate of impeachment, before Lewinsky's name was ever mentioned. Barr has attacked the Clintons for hiring people who were once on welfare, calling them 'security risks.' In 1996 he introduced the Defense of Marriage Act, allowing states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages. He advocates relaxing rules for excluding evidence and 'loosening strings' on federal money to local law enforcement. Barr's pedigree is irreproachable on these matters--the Georgia congressman worked for the CIA from 1971 to 1978.

Tennessee's **Rep. William Jenkins'** only claim to fame is that he served as an officer in the US Army Military Police Corps. Ronald Reagan appointed **Rep. Asa Hutchinson** as US Attorney for the Western District of Arkansas. Hutchinson, who ran a radio station as well as practicing law, 'has earned the support of small business and Christian conservatives.' Indiana's **Rep. Ed Pease** has the distinction of having amassed campaign funds through 'selling' his home to a wealthy cousin for \$350,000, then paying rent to live there, by that means getting around limits placed on campaign contributions. The headline of **Christopher Cannon's** mini-biography says enough: 'Cannon defends Utah business.' He unseated the Democratic incumbent in 1996 with \$1 million of his own cash. Cannon 'has made millions in taking over a local steel plant from USX.'

**Rep. James Rogan** of California, representing a suburban Los Angeles district, is known to be 'tough on crime.' **Graham** of South Carolina is a lawyer and former chief prosecutor in the US Air Force. He once said Clinton's policies made him 'want to throw up.' Last, and possibly least, **Mary Bono** is the woman Sonny Bono eventually married after Cher dumped him.

One only has to look at the faces to know this crowd. Affluent, self-satisfied, vindictive, petty. On display was the self-righteousness of small-town petty-bourgeois bullies and bigots. Hypocrisy is bred into their very bones. One can almost see them in the old days stealing away from the local brothel to supervise in an official capacity--as the guardians of public morals--the public flogging of unfortunate adulterers.

Opposing the Republicans are a tired crew of careerists and

cynics in the Democratic Party ranks: Conyers, who, when not reading from a prepared script, is nearly incoherent; Massachusetts' Barney Frank; New York Senator-elect Charles Schumer; Maxine Waters of California, etc. In some cases, they may have been sincere liberals, even social reformers, when they started out. Now? They are compromised, corrupt and essentially uncritical of the system they serve. In the final analysis, like Clinton, they are beholden to the same class interests as Starr and company. This social fact explains their inability and unwillingness to expose the right-wing conspiracy underlying the impeachment hearing.

One heard a great deal on Thursday from the Republicans about 'the rule of law' and 'respect for the law.' What does that mean to this collection of well-heeled lawyers, prosecutors, policemen, military officers and CIA employees? They provide a spectacle of the police-bureaucratic mind at work. They have contempt for due process. They are on the same page as Starr when he defends 'standard prosecutorial practices,' i.e., threats, deprivation of rights, bullying. This has been their bread and butter. They reject any notion of 'respect for the law' when it comes to democratic rights.

At a press conference last Friday, Graham, a former prosecutor, boasted that the techniques used in the Lewinsky case paled in comparison to procedures he used to extract information from suspects.

Canady of Florida gave this authoritarian outlook one of its clearest expressions: 'But what is going on in attacking your [Starr's] investigation is not right. It is not consistent with respect for the rule of law.' Opposition to Starr should perhaps be a punishable offense? Barr of Georgia thinks so. He has urged passage of laws that would make criticism of the independent counsel a federal crime on the grounds that it constitutes 'obstruction of justice.'

On the Republican side: ignorance and reaction; on the Democratic: spinelessness, opportunism and bowing before reaction. Such is the unedifying state of American bourgeois politics.

See Also:

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