

As House Judiciary Committee begins hearings on Clinton

Both parties in crisis over impeachment inquiry

Martin McLaughlin
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The formal opening of the House Judiciary Committee's inquiry into the impeachment of President Bill Clinton demonstrates that a significant section of the Republican Congress is pressing ahead with its campaign against the White House, despite the expression of popular opposition to the impeachment drive in the November 3 elections.

The Judiciary Committee will not hear its first witness until November 19, when Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr is to testify, the first time that he has been questioned under oath about the long-running investigation of the Clinton White House. But the Republican majority on the committee has already taken a series of actions to further the impeachment process.

On November 5, Chairman Henry Hyde sent the White House a letter listing 81 questions of fact about the Monica Lewinsky affair, seeking Clinton's replies to each question, under oath. Despite the provocative character of this procedure--it amounts to a third attempt to set a perjury trap, following the Paula Jones deposition and the August 17 grand jury testimony--White House aides said that Clinton would respond to the interrogatories.

On November 9, the Judiciary subcommittee on the Constitution convened a preliminary hearing on the history of impeachment, at which 19 historians and political scientists gave their views on whether lying about a sexual relationship could be considered an impeachable offense. The 10 witnesses called by the Republicans predictably portrayed Clinton's behavior as a major crime, while the eight witnesses called by the Democrats said that impeachment was reserved for official misconduct, not private actions.

Subcommittee chairman Charles Canady made remarks in opening the preliminary hearing which demonstrate the stage-managed character of the inquiry. Before any of the expert witnesses testified, and before the full Judiciary Committee has heard a single witness, Canady declared that Clinton was guilty of a series of impeachable offenses.

The Alice in Wonderland character of this process--first announce a verdict, next discuss whether the offense committed is an impeachable one, and only then take testimony on the facts of the case--raised hardly an eyebrow, either on Capitol Hill or in the press coverage of the event.

Some Republican congressmen have conceded that the impeachment drive has proven overwhelmingly unpopular and politically disastrous and have urged that the party leadership

devise an 'exit strategy.' Given the narrow margin of Republican control in the House, the votes of 11 Republican congressmen would be sufficient to defeat an impeachment resolution, if all the Democrats and the lone independent vote against it. If the impeachment vote is delayed until the newly elected House convenes in January, the Republican margin narrows further, and a mere six Republicans could torpedo an impeachment resolution.

Republicans on the Judiciary Committee, however, have rejected such concerns and declared that the 'constitutional process' must continue. In addition to the speech by Canady, Chairman Henry Hyde, Bob Barr--who introduced an impeachment resolution in 1997, before the Lewinsky issue arose--and Bob Inglis all issued fervent defenses of the impeachment inquiry and declared that lying about Monica Lewinsky was grounds for Clinton's removal from office.

The attitude of the Democrats to the revived impeachment drive is a mixture of cowardice and collaboration. After Hyde agreed to make Kenneth Starr the first witness at the hearings, Democrats on the committee, who had initially suggested this way of proceeding, reversed themselves. They protested that Starr had already spelled out his views on the case in great length in his report to Congress, and that other witnesses should be called instead.

Privately, several committee Democrats expressed the fear that Starr might prove an effective witness. It is more likely, however, that they are fearful that Starr's appearance before the committee will spark even more public outrage over the investigation, and put the spotlight on the half-hearted character of their own opposition to the probe.

Both the White House and the congressional Democratic leadership are seeking an agreement with the Republicans which would bring the impeachment inquiry to an end and keep Clinton in the White House, while blocking any investigation into the political connections between the Starr investigation, the Paula Jones lawsuit and extreme right-wing elements who have sought to destabilize the Democratic administration.

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt made the most explicit statement along these lines, in comments Thursday to the *New York Times*. He urged Democrats on the Judiciary Committee not question Starr about how he conducted his inquiry, adding, 'We don't have time now to do what we were supposed to do, much less go off on another wild goose chase.'

Gephardt opposes an investigation into the real dangers to democratic rights which the Starr investigation represents. A serious investigation, animated by a real concern over these dangers, would mean an investigation of the Starr investigation itself, raising a whole series of questions about the relations between Starr and the extreme right wing. Such questions would include:

- * What have been Starr's connections to the Paula Jones suit, including consultations with her attorneys during the weeks before they took Clinton's January 17 deposition?

- * When did Starr's office first learn of Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky? Did Starr's office supply information to the Jones attorneys so that they could lay a perjury trap for Clinton?

- * Why did Starr's office not instruct Linda Tripp to remain silent about her tape recordings of Lewinsky and her cooperation with the Office of Independent Counsel, rather than letting her debrief the attorneys for Paula Jones?

- * How did Starr's office know the contents of Monica Lewinsky's affidavit in the Paula Jones suit, before it was delivered to Judge Susan Webber Wright? Was it supplied by Paula Jones's attorneys?

- * What contacts did Starr and his delegates have with *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, ABC News and other media outlets, in leaking secret grand jury materials that would be damaging to Clinton?

- * Why didn't Starr take testimony from Lucianne Goldberg, the right-wing Republican activist and former Nixon dirty trickster who was a key adviser to Linda Tripp? Goldberg is the only major figure in the case who was never questioned by the grand jury.

- * What are Starr's connections to North Carolina senators Jesse Helms and Lauch Faircloth, who were seen in discussions with Appeals Court Justice David Sentelle on the day he decided to remove special prosecutor Robert Fiske and appoint Starr in his place?

- * What are Starr's connections to billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife and any organizations, foundations and publications financed by him?

- * What does Starr know of payments from Scaife-backed entities such as the American Spectator and the Arkansas Project to David Hale, Starr's chief witness in the Whitewater real estate inquiry?

What Gephardt rejects as a 'wild goose chase' is any attempt to expose the right-wing conspiracy that underlies the Paula Jones lawsuit, the Starr investigation, and the impeachment drive itself. His statement is in effect a proposal for a bipartisan cover-up of the activities of extreme right-wing elements which have sought to bring down an elected government through a sex scandal.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has vigorously opposed the Starr investigation, not in order to defend Clinton and the Democratic Party, but because the methods of political provocation and media scandal mongering, employed in the attempted right-wing political coup, were and remain a threat to the democratic rights of the American people. Rather than allowing these issues to be swept under the rug, the interests of working people dictate the fullest possible exposure of this anti-democratic conspiracy.

New evidence continues to emerge about the coordination of the Starr investigation and the Paula Jones lawsuit. Important

documents were released November 9 by Judge Wright, the federal judge in Arkansas who threw out the Paula Jones lawsuit last April, ruling that even if Jones's story of an unwanted sexual advance from then-governor Bill Clinton in 1991 was true, she had not proven any resulting injury and could not prevail in her sexual harassment suit.

The documents included the record of a series of appeals made by Judge Wright to Jones and her lawyers, urging them to settle the case because they were unlikely to convince a jury. The last appeal was made at a pretrial conference last January 12, when Judge Wright offered to meet personally with Paula Jones and try to convince her to settle the suit out of court.

The timing of this meeting is extraordinary, since it came only five days before Clinton was to give his deposition testimony in the Jones' suit. By then Paula Jones's attorneys had become aware of Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky and of the tape recordings made by Linda Tripp. The sequence of events suggests that they rejected the judge's arguments for a settlement, not because it was in the best interests of Paula Jones to proceed with the suit, but because the political agenda of those sponsoring her lawsuit required that they go forward to take deposition testimony from Clinton, in order to manufacture what they hoped would be an impeachable offense--lying under oath about his relationship with Lewinsky.

See Also:

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