

On eve of impeachment hearing

Republicans mount cover-up for Starr

Martin McLaughlin
19 November 1998

As the House Judiciary Committee begins formal hearings on impeachment Thursday, the main effort of the Republican majority is to protect Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and block any exposure of the right-wing forces which have instigated the legal assault on the Clinton White House.

Committee Chairman Henry Hyde spelled out the Republican Party's priorities in a harshly worded letter to the White House in which he rejected a proposal that Clinton's attorneys be given 90 minutes to cross-examine Starr after the Independent Counsel makes his opening statement.

Referring to Clinton as the 'respondent' in the impeachment inquiry, Hyde emphasized that participation of Clinton's attorneys was a favor bestowed by the committee, not a right: 'as representatives of the respondent in these proceedings, you shall be confined to allegations against the president, and the facts and evidence in question. You will not be permitted to inquire into other matters not bearing on the question of impeachment.'

These 'other matters' are at the center of any serious investigation into the Monica Lewinsky scandal and impeachment drive. Clinton's lawyers will not be permitted to question Starr about the methods by which the prosecution has been conducted, including illegal leaking of grand jury testimony and behind-the-scenes collaboration with the attorneys for Paula Jones.

Hyde also held fast to his offer of only 30 minutes of cross-examination, which a White House spokesman derided as 'the length of a sit-com.'

The procedure imposed by the Republican majority on the Judiciary Committee reduces the proceedings to a travesty. If the restrictions on questioning are maintained it is difficult to conceive what could be asked of Starr, since he is not actually a witness to any

of the events involved in the impeachment probe, with the exception of Clinton's testimony before the grand jury on August 17.

Earlier in the week committee Democrats had sought memos, phone records, letters, notes and other written material from Starr's office documenting his contacts with the media, with right-wing groups sponsoring the Paula Jones lawsuit, and with the Justice Department during the days when Starr was seeking an extension of his jurisdiction to include the Monica Lewinsky affair.

Hyde initially backed this request for documents and Starr agreed to produce them, but the procedure for cross-examination would effectively bar any investigation into these subjects. Democratic congressmen on the committee may be allowed to raise these issues, but they are limited to five minutes of questioning apiece.

The congressional Republicans are clearly concerned that Starr's appearance before the committee represents a more serious perjury trap for the Independent Counsel than the one he set for Bill Clinton last January. That is one reason Hyde rejected the request by ranking committee Democrat John Conyers that Starr's four main deputies be called to testify as well, especially Jackie Bennett, reputedly the principal agent for illegal leaks of grand jury materials. The contradictions that would inevitably emerge in the accounts of these five prosecutors would further discredit the investigation.

While seeking to forbid any serious questioning of Starr, committee Republicans plan to allow Starr to raise issues other than the 11 impeachable offenses alleged in his 450-page report to Congress. Either in the course of his own statement, or in the questioning by Republican members of the committee, Starr is expected to charge that Clinton is guilty of a 'pattern' of obstruction of justice in relation to the Whitewater real

estate deal and other areas which the Independent Counsel's office has investigated for nearly five years without finding any evidence against the Clintons.

There were other efforts to intensify the political pressure on the White House. The *New York Times* published a front-page article Tuesday, based on an interview with Starr's chief press spokesman Charles Bakaly, which warned Clinton that the Independent Counsel would remain in business throughout Clinton's term in office and would be in a position to bring criminal indictments against the president after he leaves office.

On Tuesday morning the Judiciary Committee released the tape recordings of 22 hours of conversations between Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp, in a last attempt to dump salacious anti-Clinton material into the public record. The press and public reaction to the tapes, however, confirmed that the congressional Republicans miscalculated, just as they did in releasing the videotape of Clinton's grand jury testimony.

Transcripts of the tapes were released last month. The tapes themselves add nothing new in terms of evidence, but they give a more graphic picture of the personalities involved, especially Tripp, who comes across as a politically motivated manipulator of the younger woman.

It is clear from these tapes, as well as a second set of tapes of conversations between Tripp and her right-wing publishing agent Lucianne Goldberg, that Tripp was working with a definite political agenda as she coaxed statements and actions by Lewinsky that could be used to lay a trap for Clinton.

There were further signs of the political crisis within both parties as the impeachment hearing date arrives. Rival factions of the congressional Republicans held press conferences to oppose and support the impeachment drive. Several congressmen from the Northeast, including Peter King and Jack Quinn of New York and Christopher Shays of Connecticut, and a conservative Indiana congressman, Mark Souder, announced they would vote against impeachment unless new evidence, beyond Starr's report, was presented.

Georgia Congressman Bob Barr held a press conference with the leaders of 10 extreme right groups to denounce any attempt to call off the impeachment

drive, threatening withdrawal of right-wing support from any Republican leader who took steps in that direction.

The Democratic response was equally conflicted. White House spokesmen blasted Hyde's terms for the cross-examination of Starr, then agreed to accept them and the half-hour time limit on questions. House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt threatened a boycott of the Judiciary Committee over plans to extend the hearing to allegations related to Whitewater and campaign fund raising, but reversed himself within hours.

The overall posture of the Democrats and the Clinton administration is one of collaboration and conciliation with the Republican leadership, in the hope of striking a deal in which the impeachment will come to an end, but without any exposure of the right-wing campaign to oust an elected government through anti-democratic and conspiratorial methods.

See Also:

As House Judiciary Committee begins hearings on Clinton

Both parties in crisis over impeachment inquiry
[14 November 1998]

The US elections and the fall of Newt Gingrich

The political significance of the Republican debacle
[11 November 1998]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact