

Political coup gathers strength

Clinton's groveling emboldens right-wing push for impeachment

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The drive of right-wing forces within the Republican Party to leverage a sex scandal into a political coup reached a high point in last week's House Judiciary Committee hearings. The extraordinary proceedings culminated Friday in the passage of articles of impeachment only minutes after Clinton made a groveling appeal on nationwide television for Republicans to censure, rather than impeach him.

An ominous and almost unreal aura pervaded the House chamber throughout the impeachment hearings. Lawyers for the president and the Democratic minority, buttressed by legal scholars, historians, federal prosecutors and veterans of the Watergate-era Judiciary Committee, argued against removing the president for concealing an extra-marital relationship, while an impervious Republican majority moved in lockstep to vote articles of impeachment.

Washington Post columnist Tom Shales aptly described the scene as a group of scholars arguing with a lynch mob.

White House spokesmen combined cringing admissions of Clinton's 'reprehensible' actions and statements of remorse with pleas to Republican 'moderates' to support a censure motion and oppose impeachment when the issue comes before the House next week. Their entreaties were topped only by Clinton himself, who was abject in his brief White House appearance.

As Clinton ended his remarks, reporters demanded to know if he would resign if impeached by the House, and 10 minutes later the Judiciary Committee, on a strictly party-line vote, passed the first of two articles charging him with perjury.

Over two days of hearings, Clinton's lawyers presented a detailed critique of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's impeachment referral which exposed its biased and contrived character. On Thursday the counsel for the Judiciary Committee Democrats, Abbe Lowell, gave a point by point refutation of the four draft articles of impeachment handed out the previous day by the Republicans, demonstrating from testimony given before Starr's own grand jury the lack of any legal basis for the charges.

The Democrats' witnesses argued from the standpoint of the Constitution and historical precedent that lying under oath about a private affair, even if proven to have occurred, would not come close to the 'high crimes and misdemeanors' set by the Constitution as the standard for impeachment. Others warned about the dire political consequences of voting to remove a president on a purely partisan basis, against the will of the vast majority of the people.

The Rev. Robert Drinan, a Democratic member of the 1974 Judiciary Committee that voted to impeach Richard Nixon, predicted 'an explosion of public anger' should the House vote for Clinton's removal. Bruce Ackerman, a professor of law and political science at Yale, said a vote to impeach would have even less legal credibility or popular support since it

would be taken by a lame-duck Congress, including 40 congressmen who are retiring or were defeated in last November's elections.

Nixon's crimes in Watergate

Elizabeth Holtzman, another veteran of the 1974 Judiciary Committee, pointed out the absurdity of any comparison between Clinton's alleged misdeeds and the crimes against the Constitution and democratic procedures carried out by Nixon. 'Think,' she said, 'of what presidential abuses we saw then: getting the CIA to stop an FBI investigation, getting the IRS to audit political enemies, illegally wiretapping members of the National Security Council staff and of the press, a special unit in the White House to break into the psychiatrist's office of a political enemy, and on and on.' Drinin added, 'At that time, the country knew there was extensive lawlessness in the White House. The documentation of appalling crimes was known to everyone. Abuse of power and criminality were apparent to the American people.'

The panel of federal attorneys insisted that no responsible prosecutor would prosecute a case as flimsy as that concocted by Kenneth Starr against Clinton, and no jury would convict.

The Republicans, led by Henry Hyde, one of Ronald Reagan's chief defenders during the Iran-Contra affair, were left to respond with repeated assertions that Clinton lied under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Any doubt that the impeachment drive was based on the exploitation of a sex scandal was dispelled by the summation of David Schippers, the counsel for the Republicans. He provided a three-hour commentary on the private relations between Clinton and Lewinsky, laced with venom and punctuated by salacious asides, such as, 'Life was so much simpler before they found that dress, wasn't it?'

There was more than a whiff of McCarthyism in the air when Schippers began his recitation with vague and unsubstantiated references to new 'allegations of possible serious wrongdoing' and 'probable' crimes which, he claimed, he could not disclose.

Despite the feebleness of the Republicans' case, it was the Democrats who were on the defensive. As the House vote on impeachment nears, the White House has dropped any challenge to the credibility of the Starr investigation and the stage-managed proceedings within the Judiciary Committee. White House attorney Charles Ruff, who summed up the president's defense on Wednesday, went so far as to say 'reasonable people might conclude' that Clinton had lied under oath.

Articles of impeachment

The Republicans, for their part, went out of their way to show their contempt for Clinton and his defenders, circulating their draft articles of

impeachment even as Ruff was continuing his defense of the White House. These articles, asserting perjury in Clinton's Paula Jones deposition, perjury in his grand jury testimony, obstruction of justice and abuse of power, added to Starr's charges the claim that Clinton perjured himself in his answers to the 81 questions submitted last month by Hyde.

The Republicans had the advantage not just because they were in the majority. Indeed, less than two months ago the electorate expressed in unmistakable terms its opposition to the Starr investigation and the Republican impeachment drive. So decisive was the public repudiation, the leader of the Republican Party in the House, Newt Gingrich, was forced to resign in disgrace and the entire party found itself in disarray. Since then the opinion polls, which are normally the lifeblood of politics in America, have indicated increased opposition to impeachment and a further decline in support for the Republicans.

The Republicans retain the upper hand because the Democrats refuse to expose the political conspiracy underlying the impeachment proceedings. Throughout the long hours of televised hearings, they never sought to explain how Clinton came to testify about his sex life before the Paula Jones lawyers in the first place. They never raised the history of attempts by right-wing forces inside and outside of the government to harass and destabilize his administration with a series of manufactured scandals, beginning with Whitewater. They never exposed the connections of Starr to right-wing enemies of Clinton in Arkansas and Washington, the independent counsel's collusion with the Paula Jones suit, itself sponsored and funded by the ultra-right, his use of Linda Tripp to entrap Clinton, his relations with the media, and the role of the Supreme Court in allowing a civil suit to proceed against a sitting president.

In seeking to work out a plausible strategy to head off impeachment, it has apparently occurred to no one in Clinton's camp that they should go beyond the confines of the political establishment and adopt what would seem to be an obvious approach--to make a broad appeal to the American people. How is this to be explained?

The real state of American politics

The reason is that Clinton and the Democratic Party are themselves complicit in an effort to conceal the most crucial facts of American politics:

- That the Republican Party has become the instrument of extreme right-wing and fascistic elements, with forces such as Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition exercising a dominant influence over its actions and policies.

- That the entire effort to subvert the Clinton administration has from the beginning been orchestrated by a cabal of ultra-right organizations and individuals, lavishly financed by like-minded multimillionaires. These forces enjoy the protection and support of leading figures within Congress, the judiciary and the media. They pursue a hidden political agenda, which involves an enormous strengthening of the repressive powers of the state at the expense of basic democratic rights. Unable to realize their goals by democratic means, they have taken recourse to the methods of character assassination and political subversion, utilizing the office of the independent counsel and the constitutional fig leaf of impeachment.

Clinton and the Democrats have from the beginning of the Lewinsky affair, and even earlier, demonstrated a willful determination not to expose this element. The impeachment hearings have provided the spectacle of a clash between one capitalist party effectively run by right-wing conspirators, and an opponent bourgeois party that is conservative and cowardly to its bones.

The moral and political collapse of the Democrats is underscored by the fact that they cannot mount a struggle against the Republican right despite the drubbing delivered to precisely these forces by the electorate last

November. Even after the provocative performance by Schippers on Thursday, Clinton's lawyers referred to the impeachment hearings as a 'solemn constitutional process.'

Breakdown of bourgeois democracy

The Democrats refuse to fight the conspirators on the right because to do so would raise the most troubling questions about the political system in America. It would begin to expose the rotted-out foundations of the traditional forms and institutions of bourgeois democracy.

The danger from the right could only be opposed by turning to the masses of working people, who instinctively sense, whatever their political confusion, that there is something deeply and ominously wrong in Washington. But that is the last thing the Democrats wish. They dread the prospect of a movement of social and political protest from below, which could have incalculable implications for American capitalism, and for their own positions of wealth and privilege. This fear outweighs their dismay over the political huggery of their Republican opponents.

The Democrats' efforts to broker a censure agreement are as much an attempt to cover up the conspiracy behind the impeachment drive as a means of keeping Clinton in office. Either way--impeachment or censure--the forces of reaction will be strengthened.

The impeachment crisis is bringing to the surface the internal rot of American democracy. The immense and ever-widening disparities in wealth are finding their expression in the alienation of the broad mass of working people from the political system, and the indifference of the political servants of corporate America to the plight of those below.

The extremely narrow base of bourgeois politics contributes to the recklessness with which rival factions conduct their intramural struggles. Within this insular and privileged fraternity, the most reactionary forces exercise enormous power, far out of proportion to the support they enjoy among the American people.

The politicians of both parties make little effort to conceal the fact that the working class is completely disenfranchised. If the proceedings in Washington seem surreal, it is in part because they are such a blatant demonstration that, as far as the political establishment is concerned, it does not matter what the American people think, or even how they vote.

A crisis of historic proportions

Whatever the fate of Clinton, the spectacle in Washington has already exposed the existence of a crisis of historic proportions. It portends a breakdown of the political system in America. There is no dearth of potential shocks embedded in the present state of the American and world economy, as well as political and military affairs internationally. A sharp break in the stock market, an eruption of military conflict, even a serious diplomatic crisis could tip the balance and turn a highly unstable and volatile political situation into a crisis of the highest order.

There are already growing signs of an economic slowdown that could rapidly undermine the living conditions of tens of millions of workers in the US. Major social struggles will inevitably develop. The most important lesson that must be extracted from the political warfare that has dominated Washington for the past year is that the democratic rights and social interests of working people cannot be entrusted to either of the parties of big business. The Democratic Party in particular has demonstrated that it is neither able nor willing to defend basic rights.

These events raise the necessity for the working class to build its own party, so as to advance a socialist program for the defense of democratic rights and the achievement of social equality.

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