

Conyers defends Democrats' silence on impeachment conspiracy

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At a forum held last Sunday at Michigan State University, John Conyers, a senior Democratic Congressman from Detroit, acknowledged that the Senate impeachment trial is the outcome of an immense political conspiracy, but that he and his fellow Democrats have decided to conceal their knowledge of this plot from the American people.

Conyers spoke at a teach-in entitled "Americans Against Impeachment" organized by Democratic Party supporters in the Lansing area. Before a small audience of about 250, he described the events in Washington as a "political coup d'etat" and "a bloodless takeover of the government."

Conyers has been a fixture in the House of Representatives for three decades and, as the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, played a key role in the hearings last fall that ultimately resulted in the first-ever impeachment of an elected president. Speaking from the vantage point of a Washington insider, he suggested that the right-wing conspiracy involved the highest levels of the state, including the Supreme Court.

"There have been a lot of changes that make us have to look at the Supreme Court itself," he said. "They ruled that Clinton would be the first president to stand trial during his presidency."

Indicating that the choice of Kenneth Starr for the post of independent counsel was part of the conspiracy, he pointed out that Starr, a well-known figure within the right wing of the Republican Party, "was not an unknown quantity."

Those who selected Starr, Conyers continued, "knew he would do the things he did." (Conyers could have added, but didn't, that Chief Justice William Rehnquist, the man who is presiding over the Senate impeachment trial, had a hand in Starr's appointment, having chosen

an extreme right-wing Republican, David Sentelle, to head the three-judge panel that fired Robert Fiske and named Starr as his replacement.)

Finally Conyers implicated the media, saying it "fed fuel to the fire" and withheld information that would have exposed the "perjury trap" and "elevation of a personal matter into an impeachment."

Conyers' remarks on the Republican Party reflected the common knowledge in Washington that the GOP has largely become the instrument of extreme right-wing and fascistic forces, such as the Christian Coalition, militia groups and anti-abortion zealots.

"A huge battle is going on for the soul of the Republican Party," he said. "It is between the Conservative Right and a dwindling number of quiet, milk-toast moderates. The moderates have been told: 'Those of you who break ranks will have an opponent and we will run against you with everything we have.'" He added that the people leading the charge against Clinton have a "pathological hatred" of the president and the "modest programs" he proposes.

The audience at the MSU meeting was indicative of the narrow social base on which the Democratic Party rests. Those present consisted chiefly of Democratic Party officials, their staffs and families, as well as local clergymen and demoralized veterans of various protest movements. As the turnout indicated, the active supporters of the Democratic Party come mainly from the privileged sections of the upper-middle-class and the rich, social layers that are for the most part oblivious to the conditions of the vast majority of Americans, and indifferent to the defense of democratic rights.

Within this milieu, Conyers felt at liberty to say things he has not said on the floor of the House of Representatives or before television cameras. But

having outlined a political attack from the right on the institutions of American democracy, he spent much of his time Sunday evening justifying his own refusal, and that of the White House, to fight back.

When challenged by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party in the audience to explain the Democrats' failure to alert the American people of the threat to their democratic rights, Conyers made it clear that this silence is absolutely conscious and deliberate.

In response to a question from the floor, Conyers admitted that he and everyone else on Capitol Hill know about the ties between leading Republicans and racist organizations. "I would love to raise all the questions of [Bob] Barr and [Trent] Lott and everybody's association with racist organizations," he said. "But guess what? A lot more besides those two have been doing it for a long time. And some Democrats, by the way, have also."

It cannot be said that Conyers has lacked a platform to speak to the public about these matters. For weeks on end, during the House impeachment hearings, he made the rounds of the TV interview shows, where he was presented as the leading Democrat on the Judiciary Committee. He questioned Starr under oath when the independent counsel testified before the committee. He was in a position to subpoena documents from Starr's office, and demand the testimony, under oath, of Starr's deputies and the entire cast of conspirators, from Linda Tripp to the multimillionaire reactionaries who have financed the plot, such as Richard Mellon Scaife and Peter Smith. Needless to say, none of this was done.

At the Sunday forum Conyers said he has not raised these issues because they would be "extraneous." Amazing! He acknowledges the existence of--in his own words--a political coup d'etat, but says it is an "extraneous" issue! At another point Conyers said to expose the conspiracy would "create far more problems." Indeed, Mr. Conyers, problems for whom?

One can compare the role of Conyers and his fellow Democrats to officials who have direct knowledge of a contagion that threatens the population, but decide to keep their mouths shut. Precisely this happened a few years back in Europe, when health officials concealed their knowledge that the blood supply had been tainted by the HIV virus. They were prosecuted and sent to jail.

Conyers attempted to justify his silence as a matter of tactical expediency and political realism. "We cannot

raise these questions under this particular timeline," he said. "We're appealing to 100 senators."

This argument is bankrupt, even if one takes Conyers on his own terms. The White House's policy of accommodation and silence has produced one disaster after another. What was the result of this policy as applied by Conyers in the House? The Republicans succeeded in impeaching Clinton, despite having suffered a debacle just weeks before in the November election.

In fact, for all his experience as a congressman and for all his political "realism," Conyers admitted Sunday that he completely underestimated the forces that he and the White House were up against. He confessed to the audience that after the November elections and the resignation of Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, "We expected there would be contrition ... [but] the Republicans kept moving forward as if the November elections never happened."

In Conyers and the Democrats as a whole one sees a peculiar combination of cynicism, deceit, contempt for the working class, cowardice and bewilderment. But underlying their prostration are definite social and class issues. The overriding concern of the Democratic Party is not the defense of the democratic rights and social interests of the broad masses, but rather the preservation of the economic and political status quo. Far more than the destruction of bourgeois democratic institutions, they fear a movement of the working class that could assume the character of a political challenge to the capitalist system.

At one point on Sunday this writer, pressing Conyers to explain his silence on the political conspiracy, asked, "Is the concern, in fact, that there would be a social reaction in this country a lot broader than the Democratic Party really wants?"

"Well, there might be," he replied.



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