

Week one of the impeachment trial: bipartisan agreement delivers setback to the White House

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Last Friday's unanimous passage of the Senate resolution on the rules for the impeachment trial marked yet another major political setback for President Clinton. The fact that all 45 Democratic senators joined their Republican colleagues in approving the procedure for the trial has endowed the proceedings with precisely what they lacked following the impeachment vote in the House of Representatives: a politically-indispensable aura of constitutional legitimacy.

The calculated display of bipartisanship has effectively deprived Clinton of what would have been his most potent defense: that he has been the victim of a political coup d'état organized by the extreme right-wing forces that control the Republican Party.

To be sure, this is a line of defense that Clinton has shown no interest in pursuing. The policy of the White House has been, from the very beginning of this crisis, to avoid any open attack on, or even reference to, the political aims of the forces that are spearheading the drive to remove him from office.

This utterly passive policy has produced defeat after defeat and, in the wake of Friday's vote, has brought the Clinton administration to the brink of disaster.

It is not possible at this stage to predict the outcome of the Senate trial. But the *World Socialist Web Site* sharply differs with the conventional wisdom of the media—that Clinton's acquittal is a foregone conclusion, that the Republicans will never win the 12 Democratic votes that they need to obtain the two-thirds majority required for conviction, etc.

In fact, the initiative for avoiding a party-line vote on the procedure resolution came from some of the most determined opponents of the Clinton administration.

When it appeared on Thursday that the two sides were deadlocked over whether the House prosecutors would be allowed to call witnesses, and a strictly partisan vote in favor of the Republican plan was imminent, these right-wingers intervened to delay the vote and schedule the joint session for the following day that ultimately produced an agreement. Said Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, "Speed was getting in the way of credibility. It was going to be a partisan vote."

This stamp of bipartisanship was essential for those seeking to drive the impeachment process to the end. The highly partisan proceedings in the House had further discredited the drive to remove Clinton in the eyes of the public.

Moreover, while it required only a majority vote for the House to impeach, it requires a two-thirds vote for the Senate to convict. Simple arithmetic dictates that those pushing for conviction adopt a posture of bipartisanship so as to win the support of a significant section of Senate Democrats.

Besides legitimizing the proceedings, the rules for the trial accept the basic framework of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's investigation. They place the White House on the defensive and leave the initiative entirely in the hands of the Republicans, who will have the final say as to which witnesses are called, and what questions are asked. There will be, for all intents and purposes, no questioning of the methods and political background of the Starr investigation and impeachment drive.

Senate Democrats indicated there would no repetition in the upper chamber of charges made by some House Democrats of a political frame-up and coup. Typical were the remarks of Louisiana Senator John Breaux,

who warned the White House against “scorched earth” tactics, i.e., any attempt to expose the neo-fascist forces that have spearheaded the impeachment drive, and their links to Starr and the Republican Party.

The terms of the resolution on procedure are designed to block any evidence of a political conspiracy from coming to the attention of the public. If, as is likely, a vote is taken within the next two weeks to permit the calling of witnesses, all potential witnesses will first be deposed in closed session. Thereafter the full Senate will vote on whether to allow witnesses to testify on the Senate floor. This will enable the Republicans to vet all testimony, blocking any evidence that goes toward the role of forces such as the Christian Coalition in effectively running the Republican campaign against the White House.

What is unfolding is a conspiracy within a conspiracy. The Republicans are spearheading an attempt to parlay Clinton’s private relations with Monica Lewinsky into the removal of an elected president. The Democrats are conspiring to conceal this political coup from the American people.

The source of the repeated miscalculations of the professional analysts and media pundits on the course of the political crisis has been not only an underestimation of the ruthlessness and determination of Clinton’s opponents, but, more fundamentally, their denial that the events in Washington in any way reflect a crisis of democratic institutions in America. In fact, the political breakdown is giving expression to immense social and political contradictions within the US.

A fierce struggle over policy within the highest circles of the bourgeoisie is reaching its climactic stage in the Senate, an institution that even more directly than the House reflects the influence of the most powerful sections of big business. It is not simply a matter of counting heads—whether 12 Democrats can be found to vote with the Republicans. Even the defection of a few influential Democrats could set in motion a process leading to Clinton’s removal. This could take different forms—his conviction, or growing pressure for his resignation, either in advance of a vote on the articles of impeachment, or in the aftermath of a vote.

Even if Clinton manages to extricate himself and remain in office, it will be on the basis of definite policy commitments. As in every previous crisis during

his tenure as president, the outcome will be a sharp move to the right. Already over the past two weeks, Clinton has signaled his readiness to shift his policies, most notably in his call for the biggest increase in military spending since Reagan, including the allocation of billions for a missile defense system.

Clinton’s trip to Detroit last Friday demonstrated the constituency to which he is appealing. He did not speak before an audience of auto workers, nor did he visit any of the working class neighborhoods of this impoverished city. He spoke at the Detroit Economic Club, before an assemblage of the city’s elite of bankers, auto bosses, union bureaucrats and politicians.

Ignored by all of the factions in the impeachment crisis—Democrat and Republican alike—are the interests, the rights and the will of the great mass of the American people.



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