

Starr indicts recalcitrant witness Julie Hiatt Steele

Barry Grey
9 January 1999

Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's January 7 indictment of Julie Hiatt Steele is a flagrant example of prosecutorial abuse, but it is only the latest in a long string of attempts to use indictment or the threat of indictment to terrorize and punish witnesses who refuse to provide the testimony demanded by Starr and his gang of prosecutors.

The four-count indictment was handed down by Starr's grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia. It alleges three counts of obstruction of justice and one count of making false statements, charges which carry a maximum sentence of 35 years in prison.

Steele, 52, became the target of intense legal harassment by Starr's office when she submitted an affidavit in the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit, and subsequently gave testimony before Starr's grand juries in Washington and Virginia, that undermined charges against Clinton made by her one-time friend, Kathleen Willey.

In August of 1997 Willey told *Newsweek* magazine that President Clinton had made an unwanted sexual advance during a meeting in the White House in November of 1993. Julie Hiatt Steele had initially told the *Newsweek* reporter, Michael Isikoff, that Willey confided in her about Clinton's alleged misbehavior at the time. But she quickly recanted that story, telling Isikoff that she had been asked by Willey to lie, so as to back up Willey's charges.

Steele has since then steadfastly held to her second version of events, insisting that Willey never told her about an untoward incident with Clinton in 1993. This has created problems for Starr, who would like to charge Clinton with perjury in relation to his denials of Willey's allegations. It has also angered Republican Congressmen intent on removing Clinton from office, who want to pile Willey's charges on top of the salacious details of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky.

This week's indictment is the culmination of months of threats and intimidation by Starr's office against Steele.

She has been dragged before grand juries in both Virginia and Washington. Her daughter and brother, as well as a former lawyer and an accountant, have been questioned by a Starr grand jury. She has been forced to turn over her tax records, bank records, credit reports and telephone records to Starr's investigators. Starr's henchmen even threatened to investigate the legality of the procedures Steele used to adopt her eight-year-old child.

The most ominous and chilling aspect of the indictment against Steele is the fact that it cites as one example of "obstruction of justice" her appearance on the "Larry King Live" television program, where she refuted Kathleen Willey's story. With this citation, Starr is asserting that an individual can be prosecuted for obstructing justice for statements that he or she makes on a public news program.

This is a frontal attack, not only on the rights of Julie Hiatt Steele, but on democratic rights as a whole. If Steele can be indicted for public statements that conflict with the agenda of a prosecutor, then others can find themselves in similar circumstances. By Starr's logic, any public assertion that conflicts with his office, or challenges the propriety of his methods, can be deemed a criminal offense that warrants prosecution.

The indictment substantiates a warning which the *World Socialist Web Site* has been making since the onset of the Monica Lewinsky investigation: that the Starr probe, both in its methods and political motivations, raises the specter of a police state. The systematic abuse of civil liberties and democratic rights which has characterized the Starr investigation provides an indication of the type of governmental regime his political allies in the impeachment drive are aiming for.

The probe is, in the first place, an enormous intrusion of the state into a private, legal relationship between two adults. It represents an attempt to criminalize personal, sexual matters.

It has involved repeated attacks on freedom of speech and freedom of the press, including hauling Clinton administration aides before the grand jury and threatening to indict them for obstruction of justice because they publicly criticized the Office of Independent Counsel and exposed prior legal abuses by some of its staff. It has also included subpoenaing the records of bookstores to snoop on the reading habits of targeted individuals.

It has employed sweeping attacks on civil liberties. Another recalcitrant witness, Susan McDougal, was jailed for 18 months on contempt charges for refusing to provide Starr with incriminating evidence against Clinton. She still faces prosecution at Starr's hands. Former Clinton administration official Webster Hubbell, who has likewise refused to provide evidence against Clinton, has been indicted three times by Starr.

Other witnesses in Arkansas, Washington and elsewhere have been hauled before grand juries, threatened with prosecution, forced to pay huge legal fees and face public humiliation because they failed to give Starr the information he demanded.

Starr's deputies held Monica Lewinsky for 10 hours and used threats to dissuade her from calling her lawyer.

The independent counsel went to the Supreme Court in an attempt to undermine the legal principle of lawyer-client confidentiality, arguing that he should have access to notes taken by the lawyer of the late Vincent Foster, since the client was no longer alive. Moreover, his office has systematically and illegally leaked secret grand jury material to the press.

The political motivations behind Starr's witch-hunting methods are clearly indicated by the timing of the Steele indictment. It was handed down on the opening day of the Senate impeachment trial, in order to send an intimidating signal to potential witnesses, such as Monica Lewinsky, Vernon Jordan and Betty Currie, that they too could be indicted by Starr's office.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact