

Journalist who turned in Clinton aide

# Scoundrel time redux: Christopher Hitchens as a social type

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These are politically instructive times, and that perhaps has its own objective significance. At historical turning points a variety of pretensions and guises fall away. Individuals, as well as social forces, are obliged to declare who and what they are.

The ongoing crisis in Washington--with its dual conspiracies, the right-wing Republican effort at a political coup d'état, the attempt by the White House and the Democrats to cover up this conspiracy--has demonstrated the enormous gap that separates the political and media establishment from the mass of the American people. The illness afflicting bourgeois democratic institutions has reached an advanced stage, far more advanced than is understood by wide layers of the population.

Over the course of the past 13 months left-liberal and radical circles have demonstrated that they function largely within the orbit of the political establishment. One would be hard-pressed to name a single organization or publication within this milieu that has developed or even set out to develop an independent analysis of the forces at work in the Clinton-Starr crisis. In differing fashions they have each lined up with one or another faction of the ruling class.

The case of Christopher Hitchens is not a unique one, although it is admittedly extreme. Hitchens is the British-born radical journalist who signed an affidavit for House prosecutors February 5 alleging that Clinton aide Sidney Blumenthal had provided him with information last March disparaging Monica Lewinsky. Hitchens asserts that Blumenthal told him over lunch that Lewinsky was a "stalker" and that the president was a "victim" of the young woman. During his questioning by prosecutors earlier in the week Blumenthal had acknowledged that Clinton described Lewinsky in that manner, but denied being the conduit of that story to the media. Shortly after the release of Blumenthal's videotaped testimony, House Republican prosecutors released Hitchens' affidavit.

A neat trap, except that nothing in Hitchens' affidavit contradicts Blumenthal's testimony. The latter told the House prosecutors he had repeated the story to friends and family. He can hardly have been attempting to plant the story with Hitchens, a long-time friend and a well-known Clinton opponent. Moreover, journalist Joe Conason has reported finding some 430 articles containing the words "Lewinsky" and "stalker" that predate the Blumenthal-Hitchens lunch date. From the point of view of nailing Blumenthal on a perjury charge, the whole business is ludicrous, typical of the heavy-handed operations mounted by the cabal of right-wingers behind the attempt to oust Clinton. The methods employed against Blumenthal, including the criminalization of private conversations and the use of informers, come straight out of Senator Joseph McCarthy's book.

Hitchens has floated various justifications for his turning stool pigeon. Asked by CNN's Judy Woodruff, "Why did you decide to come forward now?" the journalist responded, "Well, I didn't decide to go forward. I was

approached by the House Judiciary Committee." This answer says a great deal.

First of all, it omits what Hitchens himself has admitted, the fact that *he raised the issue of his conversation with Blumenthal* to Republicans. He acknowledges, in the *Nation*, that in the course of preparing an article, "I had a number of conversations with staffers at various House committees. One of them evidently called the House Judiciary Committee, which contacted me on Friday, February 5." Asked by Jeff Greenfield on CNN, "Why did you decide to go ahead and answer--and issue this affidavit rather than simply saying: I refuse to answer," Hitchens hemmed and hawed, claiming that the individual he was talking to might have been aware of the story anyway, so that it would have been "idle to say I don't know what you're talking about." If prosecutors had known about it, why hadn't they questioned him before, particularly in the light of their zeal to find a charge to hang on Blumenthal?

Hitchens supplemented his explanation with this comment: "We are on day whatever it is of an impeachment trial of the president for some pretty serious offenses, and it seemed to me that I would be in a position of possibly withholding evidence if that was true. Also, what I knew revolted me [i.e., Clinton's alleged attempt to smear Lewinsky]."

According to those in the know, Hitchens is extremely bitter about the failure of the effort to remove Clinton. Here was an opportunity for him, with the additional appeal of another opportunity for self-aggrandizement, to make a last-ditch effort to bolster the Republican case.

In this light, his willingness to collaborate with the ultra-right takes on the character of open and eager cooperation. Of course, Hitchens wants to have it both ways. They asked him a question--what was he to do? Even to Greenfield it was apparent that all Hitchens had to do was say, "It's none of your business," and hang up the telephone. His instinctive response, however, was to accede to the demands of the Republican prosecutors.

Cementing a political alliance with the extreme right, on the one hand; spinelessness, on the other--this is what Hitchens' action amounted to, although it's unclear in which precise proportions.

Most interesting is what the incident reveals about Hitchens and the circles in which he travels. The journalist, who came to the US in 1980, has made a name for himself, in countless publications, as something of an "iconoclast." One needs an Oscar Wilde to provide the appropriate definition for that grossly misused term. Hitchens has taken on Mother Theresa and Princess Diana. He has criticized the US bombing of Iraq. He is an opponent of the death penalty. He takes positions, in other words, that draw attention to himself, allow him to stand out in a crowd, but don't threaten his social position or standing. To get on in the world it helps sometimes to raise a few eyebrows. In some circles, a British accent, a little sauciness (but nothing too profound) will do the trick.

Hitchens' affidavit created a controversy. But the reaction, on the whole,

from his colleagues in liberal and media circles has been remarkably muted.

The editors of the *Nation*, the weekly for which Hitchens has written a column for more than a decade, feebly criticized him for his action. "The moral issues involved in Hitchens' actions are clear: We believe there is a journalistic (and ethical) presumption against using private conversations with friends for a public purpose without first obtaining permission; and against a reporter cooperating with, and thus helping to legitimize, a reckless Congressional prosecutor (in advance of receiving a subpoena, no less)." Does this rise to the level of a slap on the wrist? Katha Pollitt, associate editor of the publication, devotes her column to a more substantial attack, raising the issue of McCarthyism, but it comes across as a piece of relatively friendly advice from one colleague to another.

Fellow *Nation* columnist Alexander Cockburn, another officially anointed nonconformist, has denounced Hitchens as a Judas, but this may fall somewhere under the heading of over-compensation. Cockburn, a pro-Stalinist radical, and Hitchens, a left-liberal, have found themselves on the same side of the barricades in supporting the impeachment drive and ridiculing the notion that it has anything to do with a right-wing conspiracy. Now that Hitchens has followed the logic of their argument to its conclusion, and joined forces with Starr and the House Republicans, Cockburn draws back. No one, however, should forget his repugnant article in the *Wall Street Journal*, the house-organ of semi-fascist Clinton haters, some months ago ("The Left Has Forgotten How to Enjoy a Good Scandal") in which he suggested that radicals who are hesitant "to join in the fun on the Lewinsky scandal ... should learn from ordinary Americans who ... have been enjoying the sex scandal, without taking it too seriously."

A survey conducted by *Salon* among left-liberal and media personalities produced a mixed response. A few supported Hitchens, more criticized him, and a number were too cynical to express an opinion. (Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's*, for example, observed: "Maybe if I were Sally Quinn, I'd know whether to discuss this subject before the soup, with asparagus or before the sorbet.")

At any rate, it's clear that Hitchens will not suffer for his action. The sales of his new book on Clinton, due out in April, will not be hurt by the publicity. A *Washington Post* profile of Hitchens noted that the inhabitants of his exclusive world of journalists and politicians "attack one another all the time, and then sit down and laugh about it over a drink or three."

It has become obvious over the course of the past year that the decisive control of the political parties, the state apparatus and the media resides in the hands of a small number of wealthy, reactionary individuals, intimately linked by a variety of social, professional and personal networks. Remarkably, the world Hitchens belongs to, of journalists and bureaucrats, is depicted in much the same terms: tight-knit, incestuous, prosperous. It's worth citing a few of these accounts.

Lloyd Grove in the February 8 *Washington Post* describes these circles as forming "an elite subset of Washington society--the crowd of journalists, intellectuals, authors and policymakers, mostly in their thirties and forties, who regularly dine together and dine out on each other." In *Salon*, James Poniewozik refers to "a claustrophobic media-government sewing circle whose interconnections would put the [right-winger Richard Mellon] Scaife network to shame--an inbred nightmare community where every pseudopod of the elite-opinion amoeba dines, drinks, goes to bed and marries with another." Peter Carlson, also in the *Post*, depicts "a rarefied world where the top pols and bureaucrats sup with the media and literary elite at exclusive dinner parties. It's a cozy little club of confidential sources and off-the-record confidences, and both Hitchens and Blumenthal are members." In his profile, Carlson has Hitchens desperate to catch a plane "so he can get to Elaine's, the famous Manhattan literary watering hole, where he's supposed to have dinner with

Graydon Carter, his editor at *Vanity Fair* magazine. And he'd like to call ahead so *Vanity Fair* can send a limo to pick him up at the airport."

Some scenes speak for themselves. But then one comes across Hitchens' claim that he is an "extreme leftist" and the obvious question arises: what does "leftism" mean to Hitchens, to Cockburn, to those at the *Nation*, the *Village Voice*, *Salon* and to many others? It seems largely devoid of content. If it means anything, it is generally associated with feminism, gay rights, black nationalism, ecology. This is a "leftism" that, a priori, has no association with the needs and concerns of the broad masses of the population. Hitchens and his circles are nearly as removed from the lives and problems of ordinary Americans as are Bill Clinton, Kenneth Starr and Trent Lott.

How else can one explain Hitchens' position on the drive to remove Clinton? His visceral personal hatred of the current president, despite its "left" components, has nothing in common with socialist opposition. His railing about Clinton's "trashing" of women, including Lewinsky, is nearly demented. He is a disappointed and bitter liberal, a "libertarian," in his own words, willing now to make common cause with fascistic elements.

Individuals like Hitchens, more than anything else, are mesmerized by the apparent strength of American imperialism. What they don't see--in their smugness and comfort--is any social force capable of conducting a successful struggle against the existing order. A mention of the working class would simply evoke a sneer. They believe deeply in the permanence of the system that they pretend to criticize. Behind the nonconformism is a deep conformism. They long for acceptance. As Hitchens told the *Washington Post*, "The fact is: It's true what they say about the United States. It is the land of opportunity."

The McCarthy era produced more than its share of stool pigeons and scoundrels. They played a filthy and destructive role. The lessons of their conduct should be burned into the consciousness of anyone concerned with the fate of society. Now Hitchens has turned informer the first time someone tapped him on the shoulder. He belongs to a social layer without principles, except the defense of its privileges, and without perspective, except the preservation of its social status. It's scoundrel time again.

In Latin America, they tell of a radical who dabbled in revolutionary politics. One day he was arrested by the secret police. His conduct earned him the alias of the Man of a Thousand Blows--one to start him talking, nine hundred and ninety-nine to shut him up.



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