

US Senate debates impeachment behind closed doors

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It is fitting that the Senate impeachment trial of Bill Clinton should end with a debate behind closed doors, after the Republican majority blocked a move to open it to the public. From its inception the campaign to drive Clinton from the White House has been a secretive, back-room effort to overturn the results of two presidential elections. It concludes as it began, as a conspiracy against the democratic rights of the American people.

On its face the decision to hold the debate in secret is an affront to democracy. The question of removing an elected president--the most important constitutional function of the Senate, save perhaps declaring war--is being carried out without any public scrutiny.

The arguments given out for barring press coverage and public attendance were both cynical and transparent. Barely a week before the same Republican senators insisted that videotapes of Monica Lewinsky and other witnesses had to be shown on national television. It was not enough that every senator could view the videotapes privately. The American people, they insisted, had the right to see the videos as part of the evidence.

The Republican House managers, and many senators, argued that Lewinsky and other witnesses should be brought to the well of the Senate for interrogation so that the assembled senators and the public could "look her in the eyes" and judge her testimony. Apparently it was decisive for the American people to see and hear Lewinsky being questioned about her relationship with Bill Clinton for the twenty-third time, but not to see and hear the Senate deliberations in the first impeachment trial of a sitting president in 130 years.

For the past six months, the right-wing elements spearheading the impeachment drive have repeatedly sought to stampede public opinion against Clinton with

the wholesale release of salacious material. In each instance--Starr's 445-page pornographic report, the videotape of Clinton's grand jury interrogation, the thousands of pages of transcripts, the Lewinsky-Tripp tapes--the rationale for the release was the public's "right to know." In deciding to close the Senate deliberations, the right wing has made clear its real attitude to public accountability.

The closing of the Senate deliberations is more, however, than a demonstration of contempt for democratic procedures. It is bound up with definite political calculations. Trent Lott, Jesse Helms and the rest of the extreme right-wingers who control the Senate fear that, despite the collaboration of the Democrats, who have refrained from challenging the legitimacy of the impeachment drive, an open debate could lead to an exposure, before a broader public, of the real character of the Starr investigation and the Senate trial.

They were determined to prevent a repetition of last December's debate on impeachment in the House of Representatives, carried live on television and radio, where many Democrats criticized Starr and several spoke of a political coup. Indeed, Trent Lott denounced Iowa Senator Tom Harkin after Harkin went outside the closed chamber on Wednesday and gave a public reading of his Senate statement, which was broadcast on several cable TV channels. Harkin denounced the Starr investigation and House impeachment vote as a "political vendetta" and called the House managers' case against Clinton "counterfeit."

The mass media, which have from the outset played a key role in promoting the impeachment conspiracy, tacitly supported the decision to hold the final deliberations behind closed doors. The major TV networks did not even mention Harkin's speech in their

Wednesday evening news reports.



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