

Clinton at the Gridiron Club: making light of a political coup

Martin McLaughlin
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The Gridiron Club dinner, sponsored by the Radio & Television Correspondents' Association, is an annual ritual of the Washington establishment. Two thousand journalists, politicians, judges, lobbyists and assorted celebrities gather for an evening of humorous speeches and skits.

President Clinton and his wife were the guests of honor at the Gridiron Club dinner last Thursday night, as is normally the case at this Washington extravaganza. But this time the circumstances were hardly normal, coming barely a month after Clinton narrowly escaped removal from office after his Senate impeachment trial.

In the course of his speech to the group Clinton made repeated jokes about the Lewinsky affair and his near political demise, drawing guffaws and three standing ovations from the audience. He even engaged in a brief skit. With the help of an actor posing as a foreign dignitary, Clinton made light of how he had used news conferences with visiting leaders to shield himself from embarrassing questions about Lewinsky.

The president addressed the group just after ABC correspondent Jackie Judd, who made her mark as one of the more prominent TV mouthpieces of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, accepted the Joan Shorenstein Barone award. She was singled out for breaking the story of Lewinsky's semen-stained dress. After Judd accepted the award, she gushed her appreciation for the president's "graciousness" and Clinton shook her hand.

Clinton's performance was neither clever nor amusing. It was an altogether disgusting exhibition, and what made it so was not simply Clinton's lack of personal grace and want of elementary self-respect. He saw fit to toy with an issue that went far beyond a conventional political scrap or purely personal misfortune.

The Starr investigation and the Senate impeachment trial constituted a deadly serious assault on the democratic rights of the American people. Through a crude dirty tricks campaign organized by a handful of right-wing political and media operatives, a powerful section of the ruling class sought to overturn the results of two presidential elections and lay the basis for more authoritarian and repressive forms of rule.

Clinton's performance had a definite political meaning. It was a display of utter cowardice in the face of right-wing forces which have sought to carry out a political coup. In the wake of the impeachment verdict, moreover, these elements have pressed ahead with new attacks on the White House, including claims--broadcast on national television without any substantiation--that Clinton raped an Arkansas woman, Juanita Broaddrick, 21 years ago.

While his right-wing opponents are irreconcilable, Clinton finds it necessary to prostrate himself continually before those who have sought his political and even personal destruction. Why? The answer must be found in Clinton's political and class orientation, and the degraded state of American politics.

Clinton and his political advisers considered it imperative that the president use the Gridiron Club dinner to truckle before his media persecutors, because the fetid milieu of the Washington establishment, and its corporate powerbrokers, constitute the audience to which they are attuned. For the Clinton White House--and the bourgeois political elite as a whole--this is the "public opinion" that matters. The thoughts and feelings of the great mass of the American people count for very little.

There is a great irony here, because Clinton owes his survival in office to the stubborn and widespread popular opposition to the Starr investigation and

impeachment drive. But as a defender of the profit system, Clinton dare not make an appeal to the masses, whose living standards and conditions of life are increasingly under siege. Rather he must move further to the right, as he has throughout his presidency, seeking to accommodate the most reactionary elements within the political establishment.



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