

Julie Hiatt Steele obstruction of justice trial opens in US District Court

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The trial of Julie Hiatt Steele, the only person to be charged with a crime in connection with the Monica Lewinsky investigation by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, opened May 3 in US District Court in Alexandria, Virginia. Steele, a 52-year-old single mother, faces three counts of obstruction of justice and one count of making false statements, charges that could send her to prison for up to 35 years if convicted.

The prosecution of Steele is a vindictive attempt by Starr's office to punish a recalcitrant witness. She is accused of falsely undercutting claims of former White House volunteer Kathleen Willey that Clinton made an improper sexual advance toward her in the Oval Office in 1993. Reports of the alleged incident, which first surfaced in 1997, helped fuel the attempt by extreme right-wing forces to destabilize the Clinton administration.

In 1997 Willey told *Newsweek* magazine about the alleged advance by Clinton. Steele initially backed up Willey's story, telling a *Newsweek* reporter that Willey had confided in her about the incident shortly after it occurred. Later Steele recanted, saying that Willey had asked her to lie, and that they had never discussed the subject until early in 1997.

In an attempt to pressure Steele into backing Willey's claims of improper conduct by Clinton, Starr's office resorted to intimidation, including the questioning of her daughter and brother, as well as a former lawyer and accountant. Investigator's even questioned the legality of the adoption of her Romanian-born son. When these tactics failed to secure Steele's cooperation, Starr brought criminal charges against her.

In opening statements at the trial prosecutors recounted in some detail Willey's allegations against Clinton, mentioning the name of the president 37 times in the course of a two-hour presentation. They asserted

that Steele changed her story because she sought to profit from the publicity surrounding the case. However, the prosecution failed to spell out how Steele, who is now unemployed and facing the loss of her home, hoped to reap financial gain by lying.

In her opening remarks Steele defense attorney Nancy Luque said the prosecution's charges are based on the "false assumption" that Willey is credible. "There is a woman in this case that is not telling the truth, and it isn't Julie Hiatt Steele," she said. "Julie Hiatt Steele has committed no crime. She just got in the way of a runaway train."

The state called several former associates of Steele in an attempt to undermine her version of events. However prosecution witnesses revealed no serious contradictions in Steele's account. One witness, Mary Highsmith, a former friend of Steele, in fact backed her on a crucial point. Highsmith testified that in one 1997 phone call Steele told her that a *Newsweek* reporter was on her way to her home to corroborate Willey's charge of misconduct by Clinton and "Julie told me that [Willey] had asked her to lie to the reporter."

In an April 30 ruling US District Judge Claude Hilton refused to quash subpoenas by Steele's attorneys who are seeking to obtain the notes and testimony of the *Newsweek* reporter Michael Isikoff, who interviewed Steele and Willey. The defense is also seeking the full videotape of the CBS "60 Minutes" interview last year in which Willey made public her allegations against Clinton. Both *Newsweek* and CBS are contesting the subpoenas.

However Judge Hilton turned down a defense request to delay the trial in order to evaluate new material acquired from Starr's office that undercuts the credibility of Willey.

Starr's credibility has already been seriously

undermined by the recent acquittal of former Clinton Whitewater partner Susan McDougal, who was found not guilty of obstruction of justice charges by a Little Rock, Arkansas jury. McDougal successfully argued that her prosecution by Starr represented a pattern of harassment of uncooperative witnesses by the independent counsel. Steele testified as a defense witness at the McDougal trial, detailing Starr's inquisitorial methods. McDougal is attending the trial of Steele in a show of solidarity.

The case against Steele is of even less substance than the one against McDougal. Its success depends entirely on the credibility of Willey, whose truthfulness has been called into question from many sides.

Perhaps the most damaging statements against Willey have come from Linda Tripp, hardly an enemy of Starr. According to Tripp, Willey actively sought a relationship with Clinton and was thrilled by his attention. Tripp and Willey discussed ways to pursue Clinton, including what to wear. Tripp also provided suggestions on where Willey could meet the president.

Letters released by the White House show that Willey, who was seriously in debt, repeatedly wrote Clinton asking for paying jobs. Even after the alleged improper advance Willey continued sending cordial letters to the president. However Willey, who wanted to work on the 1996 Clinton reelection campaign, turned down what she felt was an unsatisfactory job offer from the White House. It was only then that she began raising allegations about sexual misconduct. During the course of 1997 and 1998 Willey contacted publishers and tabloid reporters in an evident attempt to cash in on her story.



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