

The New York Times and Clinton's contempt fine: the impeachment cover-up continues

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4 August 1999

Nearly six months after the right-wing campaign to remove Bill Clinton from the White House ended with the defeat of two impeachment counts in the Senate, the opinion-makers of the ruling class are still working to obscure the political lessons of this experience. This is evident from the media reaction to the decision last week by a federal district judge in Washington to impose \$90,000 in costs on President Clinton.

Judge Susan Webber Wright issued a 19-page order Thursday based on her ruling last April that Clinton was guilty of contempt of court for "false, misleading and evasive" testimony in the Paula Jones lawsuit, when he denied any sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. As in her April ruling, Wright's language was scathing, but her sanctions against the president were modest.

Two sets of attorneys for Paula Jones, who had presented demands for nearly \$500,000 in costs, made no secret of their disappointment with Wright's sanction, while Clinton's lead attorney in the Jones suit, Robert S. Bennett, quickly announced there would be no appeal of the judge's decision.

The reaction of the television networks and the most important daily newspapers was to portray Wright's order as a vindication of the charges brought against Clinton in the Senate trial. Clinton was clearly guilty of lying under oath and obstructing justice in the Jones lawsuit, the chorus declared, whether or not the offense warranted removal from office.

The prize for sanctimonious moralizing—as was the case throughout the impeachment crisis—goes to the *New York Times* editorial page. Its editorial, "A Deserved Fine for Mr. Clinton," gave a world-turned-upside-down picture of the lessons of the Lewinsky affair.

"The \$90,000 penalty sends a clear message that even

a President cannot get away with intentional falsehoods under oath," the *Times* declared. "It may also deter ordinary citizens from emulating Mr. Clinton's abuse of the judicial system."

There was certainly "abuse of the judicial system," but that description far more applies to the actions of Clinton's right-wing political enemies. Let us recall the sequence of events:

- * A right-wing magazine, the *American Spectator*, published a salacious article on Clinton's alleged sexual affairs while governor of Arkansas, which mentioned a woman identified only as "Paula" as one of his liaisons.

- * Paula Jones came forward, held a press conference at a far-right political gathering in Washington, and demanded an apology by the president.

- * Jones filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against Clinton, one day before the deadline, with lawyers supplied by right-wing Republican circles.

- * A judicial panel headed by right-wing Appeals Court Justice David Sentelle, a former aide to Jesse Helms, removed Whitewater special prosecutor Robert Fiske and replaced him with Kenneth Starr, a longtime right-wing Republican activist.

- * The attorneys for Paula Jones went to the Supreme Court with their demand to take deposition testimony from Clinton, with assistance from key right-wing Republican figures including Robert Bork and former Reagan attorney Theodore Olson.

- * On the eve of the Supreme Court decision, FBI agents working at Starr's direction began questioning Arkansas women suspected of having past relationships with Clinton, in what one observer called "doing discovery for the Paula Jones suit."

- * The Supreme Court, headed by right-wing Republican Chief Justice William Rehnquist, decided unanimously to compel Clinton to testify about his sex

life in a civil lawsuit brought by his political enemies.

* The Paula Jones lawyers, underscoring the political motivations behind their suit, dumped into the public record thousands of pages of unsubstantiated charges of sexual improprieties allegedly committed by Clinton.

* A network of far-right attorneys, united by school ties and common membership in the right-wing Federalist Society, established back-channel contact between the Paula Jones lawsuit and Starr's investigation.

* Linda Tripp, egged on by longtime right-wing activist Lucianne Goldberg, tape recorded Monica Lewinsky. Both Tripp and Goldberg passed on information about Lewinsky to the attorneys for Paula Jones.

* Tripp and the Jones attorneys passed on information about Clinton and Lewinsky to Starr's office. Tripp was wired to obtain evidence of an alleged "crime"—i.e., Monica Lewinsky's effort to conceal her relationship with Clinton.

* Lewinsky was taken into custody by Starr's agents on the eve of Clinton's deposition in the Paula Jones lawsuit to insure that she could not contact Clinton and alert him to the effort to prepare a perjury trap.

* At the deposition, Clinton testified, against his will, about his private sexual activity, evading questions about Monica Lewinsky while admitting his relationship with Gennifer Flowers.

In the course of his dragnet, Starr sought to intimidate witnesses by threatening them with prosecution if they failed to provide incriminating evidence against Clinton. He carried out a legal vendetta against Susan McDougal and Julie Hiatt Steele, keeping the first in jail on contempt charges for more than a year and bringing a trumped-up obstruction of justice and perjury case against the second. Eventually juries hearing the charges refused to convict either McDougal or Steele.

Sympathetic judges, including the Supreme Court, backed up most of Starr's attacks on White House confidentiality and lawyer-client privilege issues. The courts have to date refused to sanction Starr for systematically and illegally leaking secret grand jury materials to the press.

Clinton's evasiveness at his Paula Jones deposition is what the *Times* characterizes as "abuse of the judicial system," hoping that no one will consider everything

that went before it. The editors would also like their readers to forget what happened after the Lewinsky affair became public, when the media, led by the *Times*, the *Washington Post* and the television networks, played the role of spearhead of the right-wing campaign to force Clinton from office.

What neither the right-wing conspirators nor the media counted on—nor the Clintons and their aides, for that matter—was the reaction to this press campaign by the broad mass of the American people. Instinctively suspicious of the implications for democracy of overturning two presidential elections, public opinion turned decisively against the effort to force Clinton from office. This dealt a fatal blow to the right-wing campaign, culminating in Republican losses in the 1998 congressional elections and the failure of the impeachment effort in the Senate.

The *Times* editorial is yet another effort by those who contributed to this failed political coup to cover their own tracks. There is not the slightest hint on their part of any concern about the threat to democratic rights demonstrated by the success of a narrow layer of extreme-right operatives in manipulating official Washington and bringing an elected government to the brink of ouster.

They are not alone in their indifference to the attack on democracy. The Clintons themselves have done their best to erase any memory of Hillary Clinton's initial, and perfectly accurate, description of the Lewinsky affair as the product of a "vast right-wing conspiracy."

How else can one interpret Mrs. Clinton's interview, released this weekend, in which she speaks at length about the supposed psychological roots of her husband's infidelity? As part of the preparation of her campaign for the US Senate seat in New York state, she is giving assurances to the ruling class that there were will no effort by a Senator Clinton to expose the right-wing forces which sought to overthrow the Clinton administration.



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