

The US elections and the lessons of the Clinton impeachment crisis

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The following is the text of a report given by WSWs editorial board member Barry Grey to a meeting of the Socialist Equality Party held February 13, 2000.

One of the most remarkable features of the current presidential race in the US is the absence of any discussion of the events that convulsed the entire political system the previous year. February 12 marked one year since the conclusion of the Senate impeachment trial of Bill Clinton, yet one searches in vain amid the reams of political commentary for a single article noting this significant anniversary.

It is as though the political crisis that wracked Washington and came very close to toppling the president holds no lessons for today, and has no bearing on the political landscape of the 2000 elections. But if one surveys the electoral process—dominated as it is by corporate money, media pundits and pollsters—and if one considers the political personae competing to head the tickets of the Democratic and Republican parties—men who share essentially the same right-wing program and are incapable of addressing any of the social concerns of the broad masses—it is impossible to believe that the political malaise revealed in the impeachment drive has simply vanished.

The impeachment ordeal was one of those episodes that suddenly erupt and reveal to the light of day subterranean processes which have long been in the making, like the sudden appearance on a person who appears reasonably healthy of noxious symptoms that disclose the spread of infection throughout the body.

For more than a year—from mid-January 1998 to mid-February 1999—every branch of government and every media outlet was dominated by the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal and the investigation of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. Each day hoards of reporters gathered outside Starr's grand jury, as Clinton's closest aides and advisers, including the First Lady, were brought in and grilled by Starr's prosecutors.

The American people were inundated on a daily basis with new and ever more salacious bits of gossip about the occupant of the Oval Office. This political pornography culminated in the voyeur's delight known as Starr's referral to Congress. The entire affair, with its motley cast of characters—Linda Tripp, Lucianne Goldberg—was a concerted attempt to destroy the Clinton administration by pandering to the worst instincts of the public. It included the demeaning spectacle of Clinton's grand jury deposition, carried across international airwaves. This was followed by the House Judiciary Committee hearings and the Yuletide impeachment vote. Finally, there was the Senate trial.

Viewed with loathing by most Americans, who deplored his witch-hunting methods and obsession with sex, Kenneth Starr was the darling of the media, including the liberal press. Yet one year later, in the midst of a national election campaign, there is nary a word about an eruption of political warfare within the American establishment without precedent, unless one goes back to the Civil War. This silence in its own way testifies eloquently to the fact that the social and political crisis that produced the impeachment not only lives on, but grows deeper—so deep, in fact, no one

dare speak about it.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated at the time, the failure of the drive to remove Clinton from office by no means signified an overcoming of the morbid tendencies that produced the impeachment crisis in the first place. Clinton's acquittal—while in an immediate sense a setback for the extreme right—was not conclusive.

Here is what the WSWs said on February 13, 1999:

"The vote to acquit President Clinton in the Senate impeachment trial was followed by a fusillade of self-congratulatory declarations, hymns to bipartisanship, compliments on the senators' sagacity and variations on the theme that the proceedings had once again demonstrated how well 'the system works.'

"It is difficult to square these celebratory remarks with the facts. A political conspiracy, hatched by extreme right-wing and fascistic elements in and around the Republican Party, came very close to effecting a political coup d'etat.... Virtually no resistance to this conspiracy emerged from within the institutions of American bourgeois democracy, least of all the so-called 'free press'

"The stubborn refusal of the vast majority of Americans to succumb to the salacious gossip, half-truths and lies from Starr and his Republican allies has prompted these quarters to issue virulent denunciations of the people. Right-wingers from Pat Robertson to Robert Bork have condemned the public for being immoral and ignorant, and House Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde has decried the "low standards" of the populace. The implication, broadly hinted by some, is that the people are unworthy of democracy, and that democratic rights are a political millstone best dispensed with....

"This entire episode constitutes a vast warning to working people in America and around the world. The government of the most powerful capitalist country has revealed itself to be fractured and virtually dysfunctional. What is touted as the world's most stable democracy has shown itself to be highly vulnerable to the methods of conspiracy and coup....

"A political system so diseased and corrupt cannot and will not cure itself. The major political lesson that emerges from the impeachment crisis is the extreme fragility of the democratic rights of working people under the existing social and political order."

What were the most salient features of the impeachment crisis and its most important political lessons?

The highest levels of the state and the media were involved in a right-wing conspiracy to use a sex scandal to bring down an elected president. It was a combination of sting operation and covert action straight out of the pages of Phillip Agee's exposé of CIA operations in Latin America. Only for the first time, these methods were applied to a sitting president.

The conspiracy extended to the uppermost echelons of the federal judiciary, including the Supreme Court. It embraced the media at the highest levels—from the TV networks to the liberal establishment press: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*. Indeed, the

liberal press played a decisive role in legitimizing the Starr investigation and sanctioning as proper a rather clumsy attempt to exploit intimate details of Clinton's sex life for the purpose of destabilizing and, if possible, destroying his administration.

The political dysfunction embodied in the impeachment crisis pointed to a profound social malaise and major changes in social relations that underlay the seizing up of the political system. The very fact that this bizarre and transparent cabal went as far as it did—the first-ever impeachment of an elected president, and a Senate trial in which half of the Senate voted for Clinton's removal from office—speaks volumes about the diseased state of the American body politic.

In particular, the impeachment crisis exposed the deeply compromised and impotent character of American liberalism. The main preoccupation of the Democratic Party, beginning with Clinton himself, was to conceal from the American people the reactionary social forces that were behind the Starr investigation, their political links to the highest levels of the Republican Party and the judiciary, and the anti-democratic and anti-social platform which they sought to advance. A serious struggle against the impeachment drive would have required exposing the threat to democratic rights and arousing a popular movement of opposition among working people. As a bourgeois party that defends the profit system, the Democratic Party could make no such appeal.

The WSWS predicted at the time that if Clinton survived the impeachment cabal, he would move further to the right. One need only look at last month's State of the Union address and Clinton's fiscal year 2001 budget to see that this prognostication has been richly confirmed.

Historically the erosion of democratic institutions has been bound up with the growth of militarism. The impeachment crisis is no exception. The Lewinsky scandal and Starr investigation were both framed and punctuated by episodes of US military aggression: the aborted campaign against Iraq in January and February of 1998, the missile attack on Sudan and Afghanistan in August of 1998, the five-day air war against Iraq in December 1998, the war against Yugoslavia barely a month after Clinton's Senate acquittal.

From the eruption of the Lewinsky scandal in late January 1998 to Clinton's Senate acquittal in February of 1999 the disjuncture between the political establishment and the general public emerged in sharp relief. The media relentlessly strove to whip up public support for the Starr inquiry and the impeachment campaign, and was both baffled and angered over its lack of success. The Republican leadership likewise miscalculated in spectacular fashion the impact that its impeachment drive would have on the broad masses of Americans. Both demonstrated a combination of perplexity and contempt for the views of the people. In a country where politicians normally live and die by opinion polls—and manipulate them to create the appearance of consensus behind right-wing policies—Republican leaders took to proclaiming their irrelevance.

The Democrats, intimidated by the right wing and deathly afraid of provoking it, were no less baffled by the public opposition to Starr's witch-hunt. The indications of public anger only filled the handwringers of the Democratic Party with greater fear. They scrambled to condemn Clinton's behavior at every possible opportunity and sought, unsuccessfully, to convince the Republicans to join in passing a resolution censuring him.

Despite the polls, despite the Congressional elections in November 1998, which were a smashing defeat for the Republicans and were followed by the resignation of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the Republicans in the House of Representatives went ahead and impeached Clinton the following month.

In the end, public opposition played a significant role in the failure of the Senate to convict. But there was another major factor—the decision of the Federal Reserve Board to prevent a collapse of the stock market in the late summer and early fall of 1998 by dropping interest rates three times in rapid succession. In the final analysis, the more traditional centers of

economic and political power decided that saving Clinton was an acceptable price to pay for preventing a global financial crash.

What is the significance of the widening gap between official politics and the broad masses of the people? First, there is the enormous influence—out of all proportion to its actual popular support—of the Republican right on the highest levels of the state. The strength of this extreme-right element is that it represents, more consistently and ruthlessly than any other bourgeois political faction, the requirements of the American financial elite. In the impeachment crisis the radical right showed that it knows what it wants and is prepared to ride roughshod over public opinion and the traditional rules of bourgeois democracy to get it.

Indeed, the political warfare in Washington revealed a widespread conception within American ruling circles that elections themselves—the sine qua non of American democracy—are not definitive. They are considered something of a sideshow in the struggle of corporate giants for control of markets and influence over the state.

Secondly, the disconnect between the political establishment and the masses highlighted the division of the United States—in terms of economic status, social environment and even one's perception of reality—into two countries, which barely speak the same political language. There are the working Americans, the vast majority, who face a continual struggle against the destruction of jobs and erosion of living standards, and there is the economic elite—the capitalists and a layer of the upper middle class (from which the top personnel of the media and political establishment are recruited)—who monopolize the wealth and control the political system.

The stability of bourgeois rule in America, and the art of bourgeois politics, have largely consisted in the ability of the two capitalist parties to develop a base of support within wide layers of the population. Insofar as these parties, both answerable to the corporate and financial elite, were able to maintain a mass base, it was possible for the ruling class to maintain an overall political consensus, tacking when necessary a bit to the left or to the right, bringing forward first the Democrats and then the Republicans. In this manner the two-party monopoly served American capitalism remarkably well.

Over the past quarter century, however, both parties have found it increasingly difficult to sustain their traditional appeals to broader social layers. Profound changes in world economy and the international position of American capitalism have produced an ever-accelerating shift to the right in the social policy of the bourgeoisie. In adapting themselves, both the Democrats and the Republicans have largely alienated their former strongholds of popular support.

The Republican Party for most of the twentieth century was the preeminent party of the corporate and financial elite, but one which had a mass base of support among layers of the middle class—better-off farmers, small businessmen, professionals, civil servants, middle management. As it has adopted policies ever more openly geared to the interests of the top 10 percent of the population, it has largely lost that base. Its policies of deregulation, tax cuts for the rich and support for corporate downsizing have played a major role in economically destabilizing and even ruining broad layers of the middle class. It has attempted to compensate for the political impact of its economic policies by relying on so-called “social issues”—abortion, crime, pornography, school prayer—to whip up support within the most reactionary and backward social layers.

To a large extent, big business, beginning in the 1980s, franchised out the running of its political affairs to extreme right-wing elements. In the process, the Republican Party has increasingly become dominated politically by the very elements it brought forward—the Christian right and other ultra-right and fascistic elements. The impeachment drive revealed the degree to which the Republican Party has been transformed from the party of Wall Street Brahmins into one whose Congressional leadership and active base are dominated by extreme-right petty-bourgeois elements.

The Democrats have undergone a parallel process of decay. It was

traditionally the bourgeois party of social reform, basing itself primarily on urban middle class people and workers, poorer farmers and, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt, oppressed ethnic minorities. The specific role of the Democratic Party was to subordinate the working class to American capitalism and integrate sections of the middle class behind a program that defended the profit system. It had the support of trade unions that held the allegiance of tens of millions of workers.

This party has undergone a process of protracted decline, which began in earnest in the 1970s. In that decade the breakdown of the postwar economic boom took the form in the US of both mass unemployment and soaring inflation, and large sections of the middle class, as well as sections of workers, turned away from reformist policies that had quite clearly exhausted themselves. The unions, which had based themselves on these very policies, began the precipitous decay that has undermined their political influence.

The more decisively the financial elite, beginning in late 1970s, rejected the liberal reformist policies of the postwar boom, the more the Democratic Party sought to accommodate itself, adapting itself ever more openly to the anti-working class program of the Republicans. As a political tendency within bourgeois politics, liberalism has abandoned any association with the social aspirations of workers and become a sounding board for the narrow and self-centered concerns of layers of the upper middle class, whose interests are reflected in various forms of identity politics, i.e., black nationalism, feminism, etc. The Democratic Party has largely alienated its former working class base, and instead depends for active support on a section of the corporate and financial elite and wealthy upper-middle-class layers: Hollywood, upper-middle-class blacks (whose wealth is highly dependent on government protection and subsidy), and the trade union bureaucracy.

None of the social forces which form the active base of these two parties have any serious commitment to democracy. At most, the prospect of authoritarian rule is an inconvenience. One of the most important lessons of the impeachment crisis was its demonstration—albeit in a limited and politically unfocused way—that the only mass constituency with a genuine commitment to democratic rights is the working class.

The narrowing of the base of bourgeois politics means the exclusion of the masses from political life. In a real sense, the entire political superstructure is today devoted to the further enrichment of the top 5 or 10 percent of the population. But along with this narrowing comes instability.

The lack of political alternatives to the agenda of big business, the decades of right-wing propaganda against socialist and radical thought, the absence of a genuinely critical intelligentsia, the lack of mass organizations of the working class with any independence from big business, the exclusion and alienation of the broad masses of working people from political life: all these leave the political structure increasingly fragile and subject to manipulation by a handful of people. In such an environment conspiracy comes to the fore as a method of political struggle.

It is important to place the political situation in the US—with its many signs of decay and outright decadence—within its proper international context. In one major capitalist country after another over the past decade, longstanding political parties—pillars of the postwar bourgeois order—have been reduced to a ghost of their former selves, or disappeared altogether. In Canada we have seen the marginalization of the Tories; in Italy—the collapse of the Christian Democrats, the downfall of the Socialists and the breakup of the Communist Party; in Britain—the electoral rout of the Tories; in France—the splintering of the Gaullists; and now in Germany—the demise of Helmut Kohl and threatened implosion of the Christian Democrats.

Clearly we are dealing here with an international trend, which must have profound objective roots. In the broadest sense, the crisis of traditional bourgeois parties, the weakening of the political consensus that had

prevailed within capitalist ruling circles, the signs of internal division and disorientation—all are expressions of a crisis of the nation-state itself. The past 25 years have seen an unprecedented globalization of production and exchange, embodied in the domination of huge transnational corporations over every aspect of economic life.

The nation-state system, the basic political framework of the profit system, has come into ever sharper conflict with world economy. One form of this contradiction is the immense and growing power of transnational behemoths that stride the globe and take as their point of departure not the national, but rather the world market.

The power of transnational corporations, alongside the emergence of global stock, bond, currency and commodities markets and international investors backed by enormous pools of capital, begins to rival the economic power of leading national states. The revolution in computer-based technologies, and associated advances in telecommunications and transportation, have heightened the domination of the world market over national markets. Instantaneous global communication via the Internet spells the end of national narrowness and provincialism. These vast changes weaken the power of older industries and the social weight of traditional centers of political power within the bourgeoisie.

Within even the most dominant countries, such as the US, corporate institutions wielding massive sums of capital compete for influence over the state. The centrifugal tendencies arising from the struggle of these economic giants have been compounded by the emergence of a new species of multimillionaires and billionaires, who have grown fabulously wealthy from the rise of hi-tech industries and e-commerce, and the massive inflation of share values on the stock market. The old “sixty families” in the US find themselves somewhat overshadowed by the likes of Bill Gates. Nouveaux riches in the thousands and tens of thousands are suddenly in a position to wield enormous influence over the bourgeois parties.

These developments have contributed to a fracturing of the political system in the US and many other countries. But in America, more than any other major capitalist country, the social policy pursued by succeeding governments has exacerbated these destabilizing tendencies.

In order to grasp the economic and social impulses behind the impeachment drive it is necessary to consider the social policy pursued by US governments, beginning with the Democratic Carter administration, and accelerated under Reagan and his successors. With the appointment of the Wall Street banker Paul Volcker as head of the Federal Reserve Board in 1979, US big business undertook a sharp turn—inaugurating an offensive against the American working class that continues to this day.

At the heart of this turn was a strategy for creating the conditions for a steep and sustained rise in the stock market, which was to become the central vehicle for effecting a vast redistribution of wealth from the working masses to the uppermost layers of society. Social policy was concentrated on enhancing investor share value. This entailed an attack on the social position of the working class, by means of union-busting, corporate downsizing, wage-cutting and speedup on the one hand, and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, deregulation of industry and the slashing of social programs on the other.

To the extent that corporate profits and the accumulation of wealth were shifted from a general expansion of production to the short-term rise of corporate stocks on Wall Street, the benefits of economic growth were monopolized by the richest layers to a far greater degree than in any other period since the Second World War. While the top layers saw their wealth soar, the living standards of the masses either stagnated or declined.

This offensive against the working class was relentless. Workers had to be kept in a perpetual state of economic insecurity, so as to preempt any mass movement for higher wages. This was a precondition for the entire edifice of inflated stock values and the vast fortunes derived therefrom.

Precisely because the success of corporate America over the previous

period had been based so directly on the repudiation of liberal reform, and the suppression and intensified exploitation of the working class, the election of Clinton in 1992 evoked a reaction within sections of the financial elite bordering on hysteria. One could argue that this reaction involved something of a misunderstanding, given Clinton's credentials as a conservative "New Democrat" and governor of an impoverished, antiunion Southern state.

But within the ruling elite there was an enormous fear of any relaxation of the austerity policies of the Reagan-Bush era. This reaction was epitomized by the *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial pages launched a campaign to discredit and destabilize the new administration from the day of its inauguration. This effort, marked by a parade of scandals—Whitewater, Travelgate, Filegate—succeeded in shifting the administration ever more to the right. Nevertheless, Clinton's reelection in 1996 was seen by sections of big business as a dangerous defeat, which proved the inefficacy of normal parliamentary and constitutional methods. Following the 1996 elections, the attack on the White House turned to the methods of political coup.

Bourgeois democracy is breaking down beneath the weight of accumulated and increasingly insoluble contradictions. The economic processes associated with the globalization of the world economy have undercut the social and class relationships upon which the political stability of America has long depended.

The most significant aspects of this erosion are the proletarianization of vast strata of American society, the decay in the size and economic weight of the traditional middle classes, and the growth of social inequality, reflected in the staggering disparities in the distribution of both wealth and income.

Particularly since the mid-1970s, that stratum of the population that works for a wage has steadily grown, and millions of white-collar, professional and middle management employees have been affected by corporate downsizing and restructuring, with their salaries, benefits and job security dramatically eroded. The economic stability and social significance of the traditional middle classes—small businessmen, farmers, middle managers, independent professionals—have declined precipitously. These middle layers control a much smaller proportion of the economic and financial resources of American society than at any time in the past 100 years.

The unprecedented level of social inequality imparts enormous tensions to society. There is a vast chasm between the wealthy and the working masses that is hardly mediated by a middle class. The intermediate layers that once provided a social buffer, and which constitute the main base of support for bourgeois democracy, can no longer play that role.

The wild gyrations on the stock market, the piling up of record trade deficits and the enormous growth of both corporate and consumer debt are sure signs of the impending breakup of the financial boom of the past decade. The instability of the political system revealed by the impeachment crisis—at the height of the boom—is certain to be compounded under conditions of a full-scale slump or financial panic, or even a serious downturn in the economy.

Popular illusions in the profit system sustained by a soaring stock exchange, which enabled Clinton and the Republicans to mask the reactionary character of their attack on social benefits, will rapidly turn into disillusionment with the market and anger over the depredations of big business when millions are suddenly plunged into poverty. The inevitable deflation of the speculative bubble on Wall Street will give an enormous impetus to the growth of social tensions and the development of anti-capitalist political consciousness among working people.

The period when American politics was limited to a spectrum from conservative to ultra-conservative, with socialism banned and even liberalism a dirty word, is coming to an end. The most important legacy of the political coup by the radical right will prove to be its role in provoking

a political response from below. The task of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party is to foster the intellectual and political conditions for the coming movement of mass opposition to take the form of a conscious political struggle for socialism.



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