

Clinton's act of contrition

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12 August 2000

Bill Clinton's performance Thursday before a gathering of 4,500 evangelical ministers in suburban Chicago was an appalling spectacle of personal and political capitulation to the extreme right. In the course of answering questions put to him by Bill Hybels, senior pastor at the Willow Creek Community Church and his "spiritual advisor" for several years, a contrite Clinton expressed remorse for the Monica Lewinsky scandal, calling his actions a "terrible mistake."

The president's remarks are of a piece with the strategy employed by Vice President Al Gore, the Democratic presidential candidate, in selecting Senator Joseph Lieberman as his running mate. Gore has chosen to respond to the Republican attempts to portray the Clinton administration as immoral and ungodly by moving even farther to the right. According to press reports, Gore aides had hoped Clinton would save his act of contrition for his speech to the Democratic Party convention in Los Angeles. Apparently unwilling to perform that particular act of self-abasement, Clinton took the opportunity of an appearance in front of several thousand Protestant fanatics to oblige the Gore camp.

His choice of venue was not accidental. There are no significant differences on major policy matters between Gore and his Republican opponent, Texas Governor George W. Bush. Instead the campaign has been degraded to a contest over which party's ticket is more God-fearing. Religious cant, from which US politics has never been entirely free, has already played a greater role in this election campaign than any other in the modern era. There is something particularly hypocritical and noxious about well-heeled candidates, servants of the wealthiest and most corrupt social layers, preaching to the population, including those hovering on the edge of the economic abyss, about eternal moral values.

As one press report had it, Clinton spoke "in

confessional tones" about the pastoral counseling sessions he began two years ago, after his affair with Lewinsky was leveraged into a national political scandal. He said, "I'm now in the second year of a process of trying to totally rebuild my life from a terrible mistake I made... I had to come to terms with a lot of things about the fundamental importance of integrity and character."

In his public breast-beating Thursday Clinton went beyond anything he has said before. When Hybels questioned whether he had ever truly apologized, Clinton obliquely referred to the virulent campaign waged by the Republicans and the media against him, and expressed regret for having ever defended himself at all: "There were a lot of things going on at the time, as you remember, that were unrelated, I think, to the fact that I did something wrong that I needed to acknowledge and apologize for and then begin a process of atonement for. And there were a few days when I basically was thinking more about what my adversaries were trying to do than what I should be trying to do."

Later, when asked his response to the attacks on him, Clinton said: "But I suppose there was a time when I was upset about it. But then I realized that was another form of defensiveness; that if I really thought about that, that was just another excuse not to be doing what I should be doing, which is to work on my life, work on my marriage, work on my parenthood, work on my work with the White House and the administration, and work on serving the American people."

Setting the psycho-babble aside, there is something quite sinister about Clinton's performance. During the year-long impeachment scandal, the broad mass of the American people stubbornly resisted the barrage of prurient gossip, which was aimed at poisoning the political atmosphere and whipping up public support for a de facto political coup. The public's unwillingness

to buy Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's moral crusade, organized by extreme right-wing elements, frustrated and embittered the media and the Republican leadership, and astonished and bewildered the Democrats, including Clinton.

The effect of Clinton's confession—on the eve of the Democratic convention—is to rehabilitate Starr and legitimize his legal witch-hunt and subsequent impeachment drive. The broad public, lacking any real understanding of the social forces at work, has a short memory. No one in the political or media establishment, least of all the Democrats, reminds people of Starr's methods—the illegal leaking of grand jury information to the press, the browbeating of witnesses, the persecution of individuals such as Susan McDougall and Julie Hiatt Steele, the subpoenaing of bookstore records, the trampling on due process—in sum, the methods of a Grand Inquisitor. No one points out that the millions of dollars Starr spent on investigations turned up nothing of substance, that he lost virtually all of the cases he brought to trial, that the first person to be convicted in relation to the Lewinsky scandal could very well be his former spokesman, Charles Bakaly, for lying to a judge about grand jury leaks.

How will masses of people fix the impeachment crisis in their collective memory? At one point Thursday Clinton spoke of the “two-thirds of the American people [that] stuck with me.” He would have us believe that there was no political content to the resistance to Starr, that it was merely a question of the public's loyalty to him personally. Here Clinton shows a combination of blindness, contempt for the intelligence of the people, and political complacency.

The healthiest instincts of the population permitted them to see through the moral smokescreen thrown up by the independent counsel and the media. There was a general sense that Starr, with individuals like Newt Gingrich behind him, was up to no good—that he was trying to overturn the results of an election that he and his ilk didn't like.

Everything Clinton, Gore, Lieberman and the Democrats are currently doing is aimed at suppressing those democratic instincts and substituting a false picture for the real one. The population is being encouraged to remember simply that Clinton sinned, lied, and got away with it. To the extent that the masses

of people accept this version of events, they are disarmed in the face of an ongoing assault on their democratic rights.

The imperviousness of the Democrats to the instinctive popular opposition to Starr points to underlying social processes. From the standpoint of common sense, it seems inexplicable that the Gore campaign, with Clinton's assistance, should refuse to tap into popular anger and thereby limit its own appeal and its chances for victory. But there is a social and class logic at work here. The Democrats' principal aim is to placate or even outflank the ultra-right and assuage the big business media, i.e., the “public opinion” that counts—that of the privileged elite. The thoughts and feelings of the broad masses are nothing but background noise, or the occasional fodder for pollsters.

In “baring his soul” as he no doubt thinks he's doing, Clinton appears humbled, a penitent. Objectively, however, his self-flagellation makes him an accomplice of Starr and the right-wing cabal, and an accessory in their assault on the democratic rights of the American people. What saved Clinton from removal was the mass sentiment of working people, who proved themselves the only social force with a serious commitment to democratic principles. To the extent that this is not developed into a conscious, political understanding of the historical and social issues involved in the impeachment episode, this democratic instinct can be shifted or undermined.

In bizarre episodes such as the one that took place Thursday, the axis of official political life in America is continually being moved further to the right. Clinton's performance underscores the critical lesson of the impeachment crisis: there is no element of the establishment, right-wing or “liberal,” that can be entrusted with the defense of democratic rights. For this, what is required is the independent political organization and mobilization of the working class.



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