

Right-wing conspiracy continues: new grand jury to investigate Clinton

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The report that Independent Counsel Robert Ray has impaneled a new grand jury to look into evidence against President Bill Clinton in the Monica Lewinsky affair demonstrates that the conflict within the American ruling elite that resulted in Clinton's impeachment continues to rage.

News of the grand jury was leaked to the Associated Press on the day of Vice President Al Gore's acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention. Democrats were quick to condemn the story. "The timing of this leak reeks to high heaven," said White House spokesman Jake Siewert. "Given the record of the Office of the Independent Counsel, the timing is hardly surprising," he added. Rep. Charles Rangel of New York called it "probably just another Republican dirty trick."

Ray's officials denied leaking the story, which the AP attributed to anonymous sources outside the office of the Independent Counsel. Ray was appointed last October to succeed Kenneth Starr as independent counsel after Starr resigned the post.

The camp of Republican candidate George W. Bush reacted nervously to the report. Karen Hughes, Bush's press spokeswoman, commented, "It's not appropriate for this type of announcement to be made on a day that the vice president is going to accept the Democratic nomination." Rep. Nancy Johnson of Connecticut, a Republican, remarked, "I think the timing is terrible. I wish he hadn't done this in a political season." Another Bush spokeswoman, Mindy Tucker, said, "I think that most Americans are getting tired of all these scandals and investigations and are ready for it to go away.... We do think the timing is suspicious."

Considerable effort was made at the recent Republican Convention to keep Republican congressmen identified with the impeachment drive out of the spotlight (only one House impeachment manager, Rep. James Rogan, spoke, and not in prime time). At the same time, the Republicans have sought to exploit the media presentation of the Lewinsky affair to tarnish both Clinton and Gore.

No doubt the grand jury story was circulated to wound the vice president politically. However, Ray's machinations have a significance that goes beyond Gore's presidential hopes.

Until Thursday afternoon the vast majority of the US population believed the Clinton-Lewinsky matter had finally been put to rest. The news that Ray is considering indicting Clinton after he leaves office for statements he made in a deposition in the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit will come as an unpleasant shock.

The fact of Ray's expanding operation—he hired new officials to

replace those who departed, including six new lawyers and one new investigator—underscores the sinister and anti-democratic essence of the entire affair. The drive to remove Clinton, overseen by Ray's predecessor, was thoroughly rejected by the American people, in opinion poll after opinion poll and in the 1998 congressional elections.

A mass of evidence points to the role of extreme right-wing elements in the judiciary and the political establishment—angered by Clinton's reelection in 1996—in organizing the scandal. There is enough proof of collusion between Starr's staff and the Paula Jones attorneys in the days before Clinton's January 1998 deposition to show that the latter was a legal trap into which the president fell. Clinton couldn't be charged with having a sexual relationship, so he was maneuvered into denying having had one in sworn testimony.

Out of this denial of adultery, a massive national scandal, which ended in Clinton's impeachment by the House of Representatives and acquittal by the Senate, was mounted. While the Republicans fell considerably short of the two-thirds majority required to convict Clinton in the Senate and eject him from office, half of the Senate voted for Clinton to be removed.

The Starr investigation mesmerized the media and the Washington establishment, but evoked indignation among tens of millions of Americans, and, from a prosecutorial standpoint, ended in failure. A series of trumped-up scandals was manufactured starting only months after Clinton's inauguration and coinciding with his proposal for health care reform. The investigation of the Whitewater real estate development deal in Arkansas was followed by "troopergate," "travelgate," "filegate" and finally the Lewinsky affair. Clinton was obliged to give a sworn deposition in the Paula Jones case, a sexual harassment lawsuit (eventually thrown out as not having merit) filed by a former Arkansas state employee that was taken up and financed by extreme right-wing millionaires and Christian fundamentalists.

Ray has been forced in recent months to drop the "travelgate" and "filegate" scandals. No criminal charges resulting from the Starr investigation have been brought against anyone in the Clinton administration. Susan McDougal, who served 18 months in prison because she refused to give in to Starr's intimidation, was acquitted last April. McDougal had refused to answer questions put by a federal grand jury in 1996 investigating the Whitewater affair. She claimed that Starr's prosecutors wanted her to lie to implicate Bill and Hillary Clinton. The trial of Julie Hiatt Steele,

accused of obstructing justice for refusing to corroborate Kathleen Willey's claim that she had been sexually harassed by Clinton, was declared a mistrial last May in Virginia. The US Supreme Court recently ruled that Starr's prosecutors could not use financial documents against Webster Hubbell, a former Clinton administration official, that he was forced to produce under a limited grant of immunity. In each case Starr's office used its subpoena power to intimidate witnesses, threaten them with prison and impose huge legal costs in an effort to compel them to provide damaging testimony.

The public sensed the insidious political motives behind the campaign of Starr and the Republican leadership long before the legal and congressional denouement. Great numbers of people were appalled by the violation of privacy rights and sensationalized accounts of personal relationships, as well as the sanctimonious claims by Starr and his allies that they were only pursuing the cause of truth and morality.

The Clinton-Lewinsky investigation was so discredited that Congress was obliged to let the independent counsel law expire in June 1999. Starr resigned in semi-disgrace.

Ray, once a registered Democrat and now an independent, has a right-wing history of his own. In 1993 he ran as a candidate for school board in Brooklyn, New York on the so-called Children's Slate, a coalition of Christian fundamentalists, backed by Pat Robertson, and right-wing Catholics, organized on a platform of hostility to gay rights and a school curriculum that advocated tolerance of gays and other minorities.

Rudolph Giuliani, now New York City's Republican mayor and then district attorney for the southern district of Manhattan, hired Ray as a prosecutor in 1988. He subsequently worked four years on independent counsel Donald Smaltz's investigation into the activities of Clinton's former agriculture secretary, Mike Espy, who was acquitted. Ray joined Starr's office in April 1999.

Ray remains in office as "lame duck" independent counsel thanks to ultra-right elements on the federal bench, who were deeply implicated in the impeachment plot. Only a day before the grand jury's existence was leaked to the press, a panel of federal judges gave Ray permission to continue his investigation for another year. This is the same panel that appointed Starr six years ago to look into Whitewater. Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist, a right-wing Republican, appointed David Sentelle to chair the three-judge panel that selects the independent counsel. Sentelle is a notorious right-winger and former assistant to Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina.

How is it possible, in the face of public and legal repudiation, that Ray is continuing the anti-Clinton drive?

First, there is the role of the media, which has stoked the scandal since it erupted in January 1998. Television newscasters and pundits never deviated from presenting the Clinton-Lewinsky matter as a sex scandal pure and simple and refused to probe into the political and social forces at work in the background. The liberal press, including such newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, backed Starr and sought to legitimize his investigation and the subsequent impeachment drive. They continue to insist that the scandal was not the right-wing Republican plot to topple an elected president, but rather the

supposed moral turpitude of Clinton.

Second, there is the absence of any significant opposition from the liberals. Ray's operations would arouse the opposition and ire of the liberal intelligentsia, if such a social layer worthy of the name still existed in the US. Prosperity, complacency and a general lack of interest in democratic principles have largely overtaken the halls of academia and the cultural establishment.

Finally, the Democratic Party leaders have done everything in their power to obscure the real character of the scandal and disarm the American people in the face of the threat to their basic rights. Throughout the impeachment crisis, the Democrats were neither able nor willing to mobilize any serious opposition to the attempted coup d'état. To do so would have meant raising issues that they have no interest, any more than their Republican opponents, in bringing to the public's attention—the enormous role of fascistic elements within the Republican Party and the federal judiciary, and the general erosion of the institutions of American democracy.

Clinton has been one of the chief culprits, attempting to conciliate the right wing at every turn and thereby facilitating its dirty work. Only a few days before the grand jury story appeared, a "contrite" president went before several thousand evangelical ministers and confessed his "terrible mistake" in the Lewinsky matter. During his speech at the Democratic convention Monday night, Clinton consistently referred to "my Republican friends," i.e., the same people who would like to see him not only disgraced, but thrown in prison.

Gore has taken pains to distance himself from Clinton and the supposed stain of scandal. His choice of Sen. Joseph Lieberman as his running mate epitomized that effort. Lieberman made a name for himself at the height of the Starr investigation by becoming the first Democratic senator to publicly denounce Clinton for his relations with Lewinsky.

One political fact stands out in the reemergence of the Lewinsky probe in the midst of the stage-managed conventions of the two parties: the more the political establishment resorts to religious and "family values" cant to chloroform public opinion, the more it resorts to the methods of "dirty tricks" and conspiracy in fighting out its internal differences.



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