

The New York Times and the case of Wen Ho Lee

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On September 26 the *New York Times* published an extraordinary statement concerning its coverage of the case of Wen Ho Lee, the Taiwanese-born nuclear scientist who was the center of a federal investigation into alleged Chinese espionage at the Los Alamos, New Mexico laboratory. The collapse of the case against Lee earlier this month has prompted congressional hearings and sparked recriminations and finger-pointing within the political establishment.

Two days after federal prosecutors dropped all but one of 59 felony charges against Lee and allowed the scientist to go free, having already forced him to spend nine months in solidarity confinement, Bill Clinton made a public statement attacking his own Justice Department's handling of the case. His press spokesmen singled out the role of the *New York Times* in fomenting an anti-China spy scare and witch hunt against Lee. Both White House Press Secretary Joe Lockhart and Deputy Press Secretary Jake Siewert implied that Lee had been made a scapegoat as part of a political campaign directed against the White House by Clinton's Republican opponents and the media.

Lockhart spoke of "a climate generated by some very explosive and near hysterical investigative reporting," and Siewert pointed directly to the *Times* story of March 6, 1999 that first reported an FBI probe into espionage at Los Alamos, singled out a Chinese-American employee as the prime suspect, and compared the investigation to the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 on charges of handing over US atom bomb secrets to the Soviet Union.

Siewert noted that FBI agents used the *Times* story to scare Lee during his interrogation and compared the *Times* reportage to the "yellow journalism" employed by William Randolph Hearst to push the US into war against Spain in 1898.

These remarks reverberated broadly because it is well known among the politically literate public that the *Times* has played a central role in the scandals fabricated over the past eight years to destabilize the Clinton administration. Besides the collapse of the Lee case, the *Times'* credibility was dealt a further blow last week with the independent counsel's announcement that he was closing the six-year Whitewater investigation, having found insufficient evidence to charge the Clintons with any crime.

Just as the *Times* launched the witch hunt against Lee, it initiated the Whitewater provocation with an article published in March of 1992. Jeff Gerth, a leading reporter for the newspaper, authored the initial Whitewater stories and co-authored the stories eight

years later that led to Lee's incarceration.

In between, the *Times* supported Republican charges of campaign finance abuses in the 1996 Clinton reelection campaign, promoted the media frenzy over the Lewinsky sex scandal and served as an apologist for Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted on many occasions, throughout the impeachment campaign the *Times* refused to undertake any serious analysis of the political forces that were aligned with Starr, and instead served to legitimize a quasi-judicial coup attempt organized by extreme right-wing elements.

The *World Socialist Web Site's* opposition to the politics of scandal has never been from the standpoint of defending the policies of Clinton or supporting the Democratic Party. On the contrary, the *WSWS* has repeatedly exposed the cowardice of the White House and the complicity of the Democrats in concealing from the American people the enormous threat posed by an unconstitutional attempt, employing the methods of provocation and conspiracy, to manipulate the political process and undermine democratic rights.

An important aspect of bringing to light the political forces behind the Clinton scandals has been an exposure of the role of the media. Now the collapse of the government's case against Wen Ho Lee has laid bare the involvement of the *New York Times* in a major conspiracy not only against Lee himself, but against democratic rights in general, which was mounted in pursuit of a definite political agenda. It has brought to the surface a deeply corrupt environment in which the *Times* has placed itself at the service of reactionary forces.

This is the political context which led the *Times* to publish its highly unusual, if not unprecedented, statement on its own reporting. The September 26 statement was an effort at damage control. In an attempt to demonstrate concern for responsible reporting and journalistic standards, the newspaper admitted to a number of "failures" and "oversights" in its coverage of the case.

From the standpoint of honest and responsible journalism, these admitted failings were highly damning. But the essence of the statement was an attempt to cover up the *Times'* complicity with right-wing and anti-democratic forces.

The *Times* editors wrote they regretted not having taken "a more thorough look at the political context of the Chinese weapons debate, in which Republicans were eager to score points against the White House on China". Yet their statement made no mention of the role of the *Times* in either the Whitewater scandal or the

impeachment campaign.

In fact, the newspaper's initial articles on Wen Ho Lee appeared less than a month after the Senate trial of Clinton, which fell short of the two-thirds vote required to convict the president and remove him from office. The China spy scare initiated by the *Times* was a direct continuation of the political war against the Clinton administration that had just suffered a defeat in the Senate.

The Republicans had raised a hue and cry about Chinese nuclear espionage during the climactic months of the Starr investigation. It was a second front in their war to drive Clinton from office.

Secret congressional hearings chaired by Republican Congressman Christopher Cox were convened in the autumn of 1998 into allegations of Chinese espionage at US nuclear facilities. The star witness was Notra Trulock, who fingered Wen Ho Lee, declared that “tens of millions of people” were threatened by Lee's spy activities, and criticized the White House response.

Among the problems acknowledged by the *Times* editors in their September 26 statement was a failure to take “a closer look at Notra Trulock, the intelligence official at the Department of Energy who sounded some of the loudest alarms about Chinese espionage”. This would not have required a great deal of digging. Trulock is a political opponent of Clinton who has participated in chat room discussions on the extreme right-wing web site “FreeRepublic.com.” Organizers and followers of this web site staged a number of rallies in Washington in 1998 calling for Clinton's impeachment.

The Republicans linked their charges of Chinese espionage and White House security laxness to their attempts to scandalize the administration over alleged campaign finance abuses. A central component of their agitation on this issue was the charge that the Democrats had accepted donations from Chinese nationals. In the China spy scare of 1998-99, Republican leaders suggested that Clinton was guilty of a treasonous quid pro quo with “Communist” China—political cover for Chinese spies in return for campaign cash.

The *Times* provided credibility to such far-fetched charges. On March 9, 1999, three days after it published the initial broadside by Jeff Gerth and James Risen charging Chinese theft of nuclear secrets at Los Alamos, the *Times* published an editorial citing the Gerth-Risen story and charging that the Clinton White House had refused to aggressively investigate Chinese spying. “The White House should have been especially vigilant,” the *Times* wrote, “because its handling of China was already under scrutiny by Congress after allegations of illegal Chinese campaign contributions in 1996.”

This was typical of the *Times* editorial page, which repeatedly denounced the Clinton administration for alleged laxness on nuclear security and attacked the Justice Department for refusing to allow the FBI to place a wiretap on Lee's telephone.

The *Times* would have us believe that it was guilty of nothing more than inadvertent lapses and omissions in its reporting of the Wen Ho Lee case. This, however, does not hold water. The notion that there was something accidental in the *Times*' reportage over an extended period of a major domestic and international political issue is not credible.

This is, after all, a highly experienced news organization with the

closest ties to the political, military, intelligence and financial establishments in the US. Nor is it a question of a few rogue reporters. The *Times* made a conscious decision to slant the news and engage in a gutter campaign of character assassination. Its primary target was Clinton; Lee was part of the collateral damage.

There is nothing anomalous about the *Times*' record in the frameup of Wen Ho Lee. The newspaper's role as a media mouthpiece for reactionary forces in this particular case is consistent with its trajectory over the past eight years. Nor is it a matter of journalistic lapses. What is involved is a modus operandi.

The very “failings” which the *Times*' September 26 statement acknowledges in relation to the Lee case—failure to examine the political context, failure to adopt a tone of “journalistic detachment,” failure to investigate the politics of sources, failure to present a balanced view of the facts—pervaded its reporting on every scandal directed against the Clinton White House from Whitewater to Monica Lewinsky. The same unscrupulous methods that were employed to provide credibility to a right-wing conspiracy against an elected president were used to witch-hunt Wen Ho Lee.

The *Times* statement on its role in the Wen Ho Lee case is a cynical evasion. It does not begin to account for or explain the newspaper's actions over an entire period. Who made the decision to launch an anti-China spy scare? With whom did the *Times* editors consult and collaborate in mounting their attack on Lee? Who is Jeff Gerth, and what are his relations with the right-wing forces that organized the Whitewater provocation? These and many more questions need to be pursued.

The events of the past two weeks have vindicated those like the *World Socialist Web Site* who have warned continuously of the mass media's contempt for democratic rights and the deep-going corruption of the journalistic establishment.



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