

The impeachment of President Clinton

Is America drifting towards civil war?

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In the aftermath of Saturday's vote to impeach President Bill Clinton, it has suddenly become clear that the United States is in the throes of a political crisis of historic dimensions. Even the media—which throughout the year has covered the turmoil in Washington as if it were some sort of uproarious joke—is beginning to recognize that what is happening is deadly serious, and may have deadly consequences.

The most striking aspect of the debate that preceded the vote to impeach was its vitriol and viciousness. To find historical precedents for the bitterness of the political infighting one would have to go back, not simply to the last impeachment of a president in 1868, but beyond that—to the years that led up to the outbreak of civil war in 1861. In the aftermath of the vote, Rep. Richard Gephardt, the Democratic minority leader, warned that politics in the United States were approaching the level of violence.

There seems to be no obvious explanation for the ferocity of the political struggle between the Democrats and Republicans. This is—according to the pundits—a time of unprecedented prosperity, in which the United States, having 'won' the Cold War, exercises unchallenged power as the world's sole superpower. Why then, amidst these supposedly idyllic conditions, is the country's political system approaching a state of collapse?

To argue that this situation is merely the product of President Clinton's physical encounters with Monica Lewinsky and his subsequent denial of the relationship is patently absurd. If it were true that sex and lies were the real cause of this crisis, one would be forced to conclude that the American system of government was simply not viable. The genius of the 'Founding Fathers' of the American republic would not amount to much if the functioning of the government depended on the willingness of presidents to tell the truth about their sex lives.

The present crisis must arise from causes that are of a far more fundamental character. The conflict in Washington must, in the final analysis, reflect deep-rooted conflicts within American society as a whole.

In no other advanced capitalist country is the spectrum of political debate as narrow as in the United States. According to the political establishment, there is no class struggle in the US. Indeed, official ideology denies the very existence of antagonistic social classes.

But the denial of class conflict does not alter the fact that it exists. Precisely because there is virtually no avenue within the political system for the open and direct expression of class contradictions, they tend at first to manifest themselves in strange and even bizarre forms.

The crisis in Washington arises from an interaction of complex political, social and economic processes. Bourgeois democracy is breaking down beneath the weight of accumulated and increasingly

insoluble contradictions. The economic and technological processes associated with the globalization of the world economy have undercut the social conditions 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 influence of the traditional middle classes, and the growth of social inequality, reflected in the staggering disparities in the distribution of both wealth and income. The United States is the most unequal of the major industrialized nations, with a far greater gap between the financial elite and the rest of the population than 25 or even 50 years ago.

Though these processes have been visible throughout much of the twentieth century, they have vastly accelerated since 1975. That stratum of the population that works for a wage has steadily grown, and millions of white-collar, professional and middle management workers 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, reflected in record bankruptcy levels for both individuals and small businesses. These middle layers control a much smaller proportion of the economic and financial resources of American society than at any time this century.

The unprecedented degree of social inequality imparts terrific 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 which once provided a social buffer, and which constitute the main base of support for bourgeois democracy, can no longer play that role.

The two big business parties reflect in different ways the impact of these economic changes within the ruling elites. In an effort to develop and maintain a popular base for their attack on the working class and the legacy of New Deal social liberalism, corporate interests have increasingly turned for the political care of their interests to the extreme right wing. The Republican Party, once the open representative of Wall Street, has become the organ of fascistic elements, personified by Christian fundamentalists like James Dobson and Pat Robertson.

The strength of the Republican right consists in this: it represents, more consistently and more ruthlessly than any other bourgeois political faction, the requirements of the American financial elite. The radical right knows what it wants and is prepared to ride roughshod over public opinion in order to get it. The Republicans are not playing

by the normal constitutional rules, while the Democrats wring their hands as helpless and passive onlookers.

If the Republicans express the brutality of class relations in America, their bourgeois opponents in the Democratic Party, by contrast, embody a flaccid and demoralized liberalism, whose watered-down perspective of reform has been entirely discarded by the ruling class.

The social base of the Democratic Party has been affected by the same economic and social processes that have driven the Republican Party to the right. Its supporters and activists are wealthy businessmen and professionals, a layer of the black petty bourgeoisie—largely dependent on corporate and government handouts—and the trade union bureaucracy. These strata are for reform, platonically, as long as it involves no real struggle and does not affect their stock portfolios. They are just as distant from the working class as their Republican counterparts.

Clinton sought to conciliate the Republican lynch mob in the House, first with groveling apologies, then with bombing raids on Iraq. He will now seek to conciliate the Senate Republicans. His prostration before the impeachment drive is not just a personal, but rather a political phenomenon. Were he to denounce the congressional Republicans and make a serious appeal to the public, the congressional Democrats would desert en masse, sealing his fate in the Senate trial.

The Democratic Party is incapable of defending itself because a genuine struggle against the impeachment drive would require exposing the political significance of the right-wing campaign to destabilize the Clinton administration, identifying the social forces behind it, and arousing a popular movement of opposition among working people. As a bourgeois party that defends the profit system, the Democratic Party can make no such appeal.

Developments over the past quarter century have in effect turned the United States into two countries, which, as recent events make clear, do not 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 financial elite—the capitalists and a layer of the upper middle class—who monopolize the wealth and control the political system.

Up to now the conflict in Washington has been confined to the political and media elite, which has either ignored, misjudged, or, as in the impeachment vote, directly defied public sentiment. However, beneath the surface of this frenzied battle, enormous social forces are churning. Regardless of how the crisis plays itself out in the short term, these social contradictions must find their expression in a deep-going social conflict.

The breakup of the financial boom of the 1990s will give an enormous impetus to the growth of social tensions and the development of anti-capitalist political consciousness among working people. The soaring stock exchange has sustained illusions in the profit system and allowed Clinton and the Republicans to disguise the reactionary character of policies such as the abolition of welfare. But the dismantling of social benefits means that a downturn in the economy, let alone a full-scale slump or financial panic, will rapidly plunge millions into poverty.

The British *Financial Times* warned Saturday of the fragility of the American economy, based on fantastically inflated asset values. The overvalued US stock market is all that stands between world capitalism and a devastating global recession, it declared. It goes without saying that, torn by political infighting in Washington, the

American bourgeoisie is in no condition to organize a global response to the next round of financial or currency crises.

A few more serious voices in the American press have begun to express concern about the political repercussions of the present crisis. A columnist in the *New York Times* warned, “Should our civic institutions fail to adjudicate and purge deep national divisions in a fair, legal and completely open manner, Americans may be tempted instead to fight them out in the streets.”

An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* was headlined “Beware the wrath.” It warned: “A Capitol so out of step with the people it claims to represent, one so easily whipsawed by a group of small but vocal extremists, is a greater danger to the Republic than all of Bill Clinton's selfish lies. The House should heed an almost biblical warning from Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) issued earlier this year: ‘The American people are watching. Beware the wrath of the American people ... Beware.’”

No other ruling class has been so successful in blocking a social movement of the working class as the American ruling class. Utilizing the two-party system to manipulate public sentiment, tacking now to the left, now to the right, as required by circumstances, American capitalism has been able to prevent the emergence of an independent political movement among masses of working people. Particularly important has been the role of the mass media, which censors and declares illegitimate any expression of political opinion outside the right-wing consensus in Washington.

These methods, however, have their limits. Even the most subservient media and the most venal politicians cannot make the program of further enriching the wealthy attractive to the broad masses. The period when American politics was limited to a spectrum from conservative to ultraconservative, with socialism banned and even liberalism a dirty word, is coming to an end. The political coup by the radical right wing has already begun to provoke a political response from below.

There are three hallmarks of the emergence of a revolutionary situation. The old ruling class can no longer rule in the old way. The oppressed masses can no longer live in the old way. And the masses have become conscious of the necessity to take the road of political struggle, and concentrate the fate of society in their own hands. The first two conditions already exist in America, but the third has yet to mature. That is the task to which socialists must turn their attention.



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