The Wall Street Journal demands Clinton's indictment

Patrick Martin
15 January 2001

In an extraordinary editorial published January 5, the *Wall Street Journal* has demanded that Independent Counsel Robert Ray indict President Clinton on criminal charges as soon as he leaves the White House. The page-length diatribe in the leading US right-wing newspaper is headlined “Yes, Indict Clinton.”

The *Journal* does not claim that putting a former president on trial for the first time in US history would be justified by the magnitude of the alleged crime—lying about a private sexual relationship, Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. Rather, it advances explicitly *political* reasons to justify a *criminal* indictment. This only underscores the essential character of the Lewinsky affair and all the supposed “scandals” of the Clinton administration, which arose out of a politically motivated campaign by the extreme right to destabilize and drive from office an elected president, using phony investigations and manufactured lawsuits.

The most important paragraph of the editorial reads: “The facts and the law, of course, must be major factors, but prosecutors, especially in important cases, also bear a general responsibility for the public good. History's burden on Mr. Ray is that a decision not to indict serves the Clinton revisionism-that it was all about ‘nothing'.”

The “of course” in the first sentence demonstrates the contempt of the *Journal* editors for constitutional procedures. The facts and the law be damned, they really mean, when there are political fish to fry. The second sentence states the right-wing agenda quite baldly: Clinton must be indicted in order to provide retroactive political legitimacy to the impeachment campaign. An indictment would be a weapon against what the *Journal* terms “Clinton revisionism,” i.e., the belief, shared by the vast majority of the American people, that the charges against Clinton were trumped up by his right-wing enemies.

The editorial amounts to an ultimatum to Ray to carry out the bidding of the extreme right. It is all the more significant appearing in the *Journal*, which has already helped engineer the removal of one independent counsel, Robert Fiske, the first Whitewater investigator, after he indicated that Vincent Foster's death was a suicide and that there was little substance to the Whitewater allegations.

Fiske was sacked by a three-judge panel, headed by a former aide to Republican Senator Jesse Helms, after his preliminary findings were denounced by the *Journal* and other right-wing spokesmen. He was replaced by Kenneth Starr. The same three judges chose Ray to succeed Starr when he resigned as independent counsel after the failure of the impeachment coup d'etat and the acquittal of Clinton at his Senate trial.

There is an undertone of grumbling about Ray's failure to keep up the pressure on the Clintons. According to the *Journal*, Ray “gave the First Lady every benefit of doubt in his inquiry into whether she improperly exerted influence in the White House Travel Office firings, and then lied to federal investigators in denying any role.”

Admitting that Ray could find no evidence sufficient to sustain a criminal prosecution on the Travel Office, Whitewater or any other of the myriad probes which kept Starr's investigators busy for years, the *Journal* nonetheless clutches at straws, suggesting “there remain possibly telling open details” about Whitewater which could yet justify a case.

The balance of the editorial consists of that staple of extreme-right rhetoric, charging your opponent of exactly the crimes which you yourself are committing. The *Journal*, which has served as the leading organ of right-wing antidemocratic conspiracies for the past decade, portrays Bill and Hillary Clinton as conspiratorial masterminds in the White House.

The Clintons are denounced for “the vicious smear job on a hapless yet determined former Arkansas state employee named Paula Jones,” for “a permanent campaign of witness intimidation and rhetorical assaults by an attack machine operating out of the White House counsel's office,” for “unsubstantiated smears” and, again, “witness intimidation.”

These charges are themselves unsubstantiated smears. But substitute “Independent Counsel” for “White House counsel's office,” and it all makes perfect sense. Intimidation of witnesses and vicious smears were Kenneth Starr's hallmarks. Take the jailing of Susan McDougal on contempt of court charges for nearly two years, in an effort to compel her to give false testimony against the Clintons, or the threats against Julie Hiatt Steele that the legality of her son's adoption could be in question if she did not cooperate.

As for destroying reputations, the Office of Independent Counsel became so notorious for leaking distorted, false and inflammatory material to the press that there was a judicial investigation into possible breaches of grand jury rules, and Starr's chief press aide was forced to resign over improper contacts with the media.

At one point the *Journal* observes: “For sheer brazenness, no one in contemporary political life can beat Mr. Clinton.” In fact,

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the editorial itself is brazen almost beyond belief. The *Journal* deplores “vicious smears,” while it has subjected dozens of Clinton administration officials to one-sided and slanderous attacks on its editorial page—for which it is essentially immune from libel suits. This continues in the January 5 editorial, which refers to incoming Democratic National Committee chairman Terence McAuliffe as “tainted,” and former Clinton adviser Harold Ickes as “scandal-plagued,” without offering any substantiation of either smear.

Citing Clinton's interview last month with *Esquire* magazine, one of a handful of occasions where the outgoing president has directly criticized the campaign of destabilization against his administration, the *Journal* declares: “This continuing corruption of our national discourse certainly serves no larger public interest.” This from a newspaper that has employed the methods of slander, character assassination, innuendo, gossip and outright lies to pollute public opinion in the pursuit of an unstated and reactionary agenda.

The editorial ends with a suggestion that reveals the political cynicism at work. “If Mr. Clinton would stop denying his wrongdoing,” the *Journal* concludes, “he could be considered for a Presidential pardon.” The *Journal* made no such stipulation when it endorsed the pardoning of Richard Nixon by Gerald Ford. Nixon never admitted his responsibility for Watergate, which involved real crimes against democratic and constitutional rights.

More recently, in 1992, the *Journal* attacked Iran-Contra special prosecutor Laurence Walsh, charging—falsely, it turned out—that he was planning to indict former president Reagan for his role in the illegal war against Nicaragua and the illegal arms sales to Iran. Not only did the *Journal* denounce the possible indictment of an ex-president as outrageous, it enthusiastically backed the pardon of former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and four other former Reagan administration officials issued by the elder George Bush, who had just lost the presidential race to Clinton. Bush's aim was to insure that none of these officials was compelled to turn state's evidence under threat of prosecution, and become a witness against himself or Reagan.

The *Wall Street Journal* served as the press spearhead of the right-wing campaign against the Clinton White House, and it played a similar role in the Florida election crisis. It was the first major newspaper to charge that Gore, rather than Bush, was stealing the Florida vote, and the first newspaper to call on the US Supreme Court to intervene (in a column by editor Robert Bartley only six days after the election). It constantly urged the Republican Party to put aside any “squeamishness” and use raw power—from right-wing thugs on the streets of Miami to the Florida legislature to the US Supreme Court—to override the will of the voters and install Bush in the White House.

The *Journal*'s role underscores the essential continuity between the 1998-99 impeachment campaign and the theft of the 2000 election. These represent two phases in the same political struggle, a right-wing conspiracy to override traditional democratic and electoral norms, usurp political power and install an administration whose policies are opposed by the vast majority of the American people.

The newspaper's call for an indictment of Clinton reveals much about the social and political character of the incoming Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress. The editorial provoked immediate comment, with one Senate Republican leader, Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, calling on Bush to pardon his predecessor, while Bush dismissed that suggestion with a cynical joke, saying Clinton had not asked him.

The Republican Party is a peculiar and unstable alliance of big business interests and deranged middle-class elements of a fascistic character, to whom Clinton is a symbol of evil incarnate. The *Journal* speaks for the first group but addresses the second. This perhaps accounts for the striking divergence between the newspaper's editorial policy, which consists of hysterical vituperation against the Democrats, and its news coverage, which strikes a tone of sober appreciation for the conservative, pro-business policies of the Clinton administration.

One suspects that right-wing obsessions like abortion, pornography, school prayer, homosexuality and the like are of as little real interest to the *Wall Street Journal* as they are to the average Fortune 500 CEO. But these issues have served to provide a political base in sections of the American population for policies which will benefit only the most economically privileged.

The Bush administration incorporates this same contradiction. It must feed the frenzy of the ultra-right, even while pursuing economic policies that will inevitably disappoint those sections of the middle class and working class who supported Bush in the election—all the more so under conditions of recession.

This underlying instability must give the Bush administration a volatile and adventuristic cast. Internationally it will have to mount military attacks to satisfy the bloodlust of the chauvinists and anticommunists who considered Clinton too “soft” on Iraq, China, North Korea, etc. Domestically, it will have to mount provocations against the demons of the extreme right, perhaps beginning with a witch trial with the chief “demon” in the dock.

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