

The case of Julie Hiatt Steele: the human cost of the Kenneth Starr witch-hunt

David Walsh
9 March 2001

Julie Hiatt Steele, hounded and prosecuted by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr during the Clinton impeachment campaign of 1998-99, is facing severe financial and personal difficulties arising from Starr's vendetta against her.

Steele hasn't worked since February 1998, when she submitted an affidavit in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case undermining the credibility of Kathleen Willey, a one-time Clinton supporter who achieved notoriety by going on the *Sixty Minutes* television program in March 1998 and accusing Clinton of making unwanted sexual advances.

Steele lost her employment when the affidavit and her refusal to go along with Willey's version of events became public knowledge. Subsequently she became the target of an extraordinary campaign of prosecutorial terror and intimidation by Starr's office.

Steele was dragged before two grand juries. Her daughter and brother, as well as a former lawyer and accountant, were also interrogated. She was forced to turn over tax and bank records, credit reports and telephone records to Starr's investigators. Most despicably, the Office of the Independent Counsel threatened to move against Steele's parental rights, making public the fact that it was looking into the procedures—which were, in fact, entirely legal—by which she had adopted her son in Romania.

Ultimately, in January 1999, Starr indicted Steele on three counts of obstructing justice and one charge of making false statements. She faced the possibility of 35 years in jail and a one million dollar fine. Starr's office pursued its legally baseless and vindictive case against Steele to trial in May 1999. The case ended in a hung jury and mistrial, a humiliating defeat for Starr. His office decided not to pursue a retrial.

Starr's conduct toward Steele was of a piece with his

legal attack on other would-be witnesses against the Clintons, including Susan McDougal, whom he kept in prison for 18 months on contempt charges. In both cases, Starr used his legal powers to prosecute and harass people who refused to give testimony that supported his vendetta against Clinton. Both McDougal and Steele assert that Starr and his band of legal toughs persecuted them because they refused to give false testimony as demanded by the Independent Counsel.

Having run through her savings and unable to work for emotional and physical reasons since her trial ended, Steele, a divorced mother of two grown daughters and a 10-year-old son, now faces the loss of her house in Virginia. She also suffered a broken leg and knee in an accident at home in September, which left her immobile until recently.

Steele told a WSWs reporter on March 8: “The most recent thing is that I've just run out of money and credit, and the house is our anchor, it's all we have left, and it's going to go. I've lived here 22 years.”

Julie Hiatt Steele's sole crime was that, having become entangled in the web of prurient gossip spun by Starr and his Republican right co-conspirators, she had the courage and principle to stand up to the modern day “Grand Inquisitor.”

In March 1997 her friend Kathleen Willey told *Newsweek* magazine reporter Michael Isikoff that Clinton had groped her in the White House in November 1993. Willey asked Steele to confirm for Isikoff that she had told Steele of the incident at the time. Steele, trying to be helpful to a somewhat unstable acquaintance, did so, off the record and not under oath, without having any idea the story would go any farther.

When she realized in the summer of 1997 that Isikoff was going into print with Willey's allegation, Steele

told the reporter the truth, that Willey had never previously mentioned any such episode involving Clinton. Steele has stuck to the same story ever since, under withering questioning from Starr's prosecutors, as well as the FBI.

Steele's insistence that Willey had never told her about a groping in the White House was an obstacle to the Independent Counsel's campaign against Clinton. During Clinton's grand jury deposition in August 1998, one of Starr's underlings questioned the president about the Willey incident, and Clinton denied that it had taken place.

Starr could have indicted Clinton on perjury charges if Willey's claim had been substantiated. Moreover, the Willey story, if proven true, would have added a new charge to the list of Clinton's alleged improprieties and strengthened the effort of Congressional Republicans to remove him from office.

Ms. Steele told the WWS: "They intended to get me convicted and roll her [Kathleen Willey] back out. The [Paula] Jones thing was always flimsy. But they could have made this perjury, because Clinton sat straight up in his chair and leaned forward and said, 'That didn't happen [with Willey].' They took an hour on August 17 [1998] in questioning him about the Willey grope. To turn it into a perjury charge, they needed to convict me in order to raise her credibility. They needed to get me out of the way, so her charge against him would hold. And that was a federal venue, instead of a civil case, like the Jones case."

Having faced the Starr inquisitors and rejected their attempts to draw her in, Steele was hounded and financially devastated. Her present situation stands as a warning to every working person of the threat to one's rights and very existence embodied in the right-wing, conspiratorial methods which increasingly characterize the workings of the American political establishment.

While Steele's situation may be among the most severe, hundreds of innocent people were harassed, financially and emotionally devastated, and subjected to cruel and unfair media attention in Little Rock, Washington and elsewhere. They are the "collateral damage" of the right-wing war against the Clinton White House.

As the WWS explained at the time of Steele's indictment: "The Starr probe, both in its methods and political motivations, raises the specter of a police state.

The systematic abuse of civil liberties and democratic rights which has characterized the Starr investigation provides an indication of the type of governmental regime his political allies in the impeachment drive are aiming for."

Steele makes clear that the decision by Starr in May 1999 to drop the case against her was not the end of the ordeal. The media continued its attacks on her, presenting what Steele describes as "Chatty Kathy Willey week" on cable television news programs, when Willey was given a forum to claim that "I should be in jail, that Starr should come back at me. It was the most despicable, horrible week I could imagine."

She continues: "After the trial in 1999, I came home. I put a good face on it. I still thought, OK, we won. But I felt traumatized, violated. I thought I would come home and not be as isolated as I had been. It really hasn't worked out that way. The isolation has continued."



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