

The disappearance of Chandra Levy: how the US media turned a family tragedy into a sex scandal

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1 September 2001

The disappearance of Chandra Levy, a 24-year-old intern with the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Washington DC, is a tragic event that raises disturbing questions about life in the nation's capital. The fact that she was romantically linked with a prominent Democratic congressman, Gary Condit of California, legitimately arouses concerns that her proximity to the corridors of power may have had something to do with her fate.

A vigilant and conscientious media would feel obliged to undertake a serious investigation. How is it, and why is it, that a young woman working in the capital should vanish without a trace? Is there a connection between her disappearance and the deeply corrupt atmosphere that pervades the institutions of state power and their environs?

Vote buying, political intrigue, a *fin de siècle* ambience of excess, self-indulgence and contempt for the public, all of it sustained by vast sums of money obtained both legally and illegally—such is the general state of affairs at the summit of American politics. Under such conditions, it is by no means unthinkable that a politician, or some other government official, would be prepared to eliminate a person who threatened his position of power.

If one were to seriously probe the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Ms. Levy, one might very well expose some damning facts about the relations that prevail within official Washington.

Alternately, it is possible that the young intern's disappearance was "just" one of the many cases of people falling victim to the crime and violence that abounds in a city blighted by poverty. Even the DC police acknowledge they have no evidence linking Congressman Condit to Chandra Levy's disappearance. Was the young woman the victim of a sexual predator, or a crazed thief?

The seat of the US government resembles more than ever an island of white marble in a sea of social misery. Washington DC has some of the country's most luxurious housing, but 40 percent of DC children live below the poverty line, 21 percent "under extreme economic deprivation" and 39 percent in "high-risk families."

This level of poverty breeds crime. In 1999 there were 241 homicides, 248 sexual assaults and 4,616 aggravated assaults in the nation's capital. Chandra Levy is not the first young woman working for the government to meet a tragic fate. Since 1998 two

such women, both in their twenties—one of them an intern—have been murdered in Washington DC.

The number of missing people in the capital and nationally tells a story by itself. Nearly one hundred thousand people go missing a year in the US. Some 443 of the DC residents reported missing this year have yet to be found.

If the solution to Chandra Levy's disappearance lies in these conditions of decay and desperation, rather than her relationship with Condit, is that any less an indictment of American society?

These are some of the issues raised by Chandra Levy's apparent abduction that deserve to be investigated. What, however, has been the response of the American media? Thanks to their efforts, the story has shifted from the fate of Chandra Levy and the conditions surrounding her disappearance to a tabloid scandal about sex.

One question has become the focus of the TV networks and much of the print media: did Gary Condit have sex with Chandra Levy? Condit is being trashed by media commentators and disavowed by leaders of his own party for refusing to admit, on camera, that he is a fornicator.

That he has already told police investigators he had an intimate relationship with the missing intern is common knowledge. The Washington police leaked that information weeks ago. But the modern-day Cotton Mathers of the media are not satisfied. Either Condit submits to their demand that he tell all—publicly and in lurid detail—or he is to be condemned before the bar of public opinion as a liar at best, a murderer at worst.

The mere fact that Condit has thus far refused to make such a public admission—his acknowledgment of a "close" relationship with Levy is dismissed as inadequate—is sufficient grounds for sections of the media, spearheaded by Rupert Murdoch's Fox Network, to demand his resignation. Right-wing Republicans like Congressman Bob Barr, a leader in the anti-Clinton impeachment drive, have joined the call for Condit's resignation. Judicial Watch, the ultra-right legal group that was involved in endless litigation against Clinton, has intervened on behalf of flight attendant Anne Marie Smith, who has accused Condit of asking her to lie about their relationship in an affidavit. Judicial Watch and similar forces that backed Paula Jones's sexual harassment suit against Clinton are lining up behind Smith in the current sex scandal.

In this bizarre and unseemly spectacle, no one in the media has

felt obliged to address a simple question: how would a public acknowledgment by Condit of a sexual relationship, given the fact that he has already admitted as much to the police, in any way contribute to solving the mystery of Chandra Levy's disappearance? The media does not pose this question, because the obvious answer exposes the fact that their obsession with Condit has little or nothing to do with concern over the fate of the missing intern. For them, the tragedy of the Levy family is an opportunity to mount yet another sex extravaganza.

Condit's August 23 appearance on ABC's "Prime Time Live" with Connie Chung was a high point of the media furor. Chung pressed Condit repeatedly as to whether his relationship with Levy was sexual in nature. When Condit refused to answer, Chung was at a loss. She later acknowledged she was surprised by Condit's silence on the sex question. It is reasonable to assume Chung was flustered because all of her follow-up questions centered on the all-important question of sex.

Following the Chung interview, the news coverage was almost universally hostile to Condit. The media establishment is apparently incensed over Condit's refusal to make a public confession of fornication, and his temerity in offering criticisms of its campaign against him. Condit told a local interviewer in northern California that the media had something to apologize for. When asked about this comment by *Newsweek* magazine, Condit replied: "I think the misinformation that they put out, the accusations that they've made with unnamed sources, with innuendoes, hearsay.... You're not the church, you are not the court."

There is an element of self-justification in the media's behavior. In hammering Condit for alleged sexual misconduct, they are defending themselves after the fact for their role in the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal. The disreputable and discredited crowd of television talking heads associated with the impeachment drive against Clinton is surfacing once again. Last Sunday's edition of NBC's "Meet the Press" included a panel discussion on the Condit issue that featured Michael Isikoff, the *Newsweek* reporter who worked with Linda Tripp and Lucianne Goldberg to set Clinton up over his affair with Monica Lewinsky, and Lisa Myers, the NBC reporter who was one of the leading media bloodhounds during the impeachment drive.

As in the anti-Clinton witch-hunt, the current frenzy evinces the media's contempt for democratic rights. The *World Socialist Web Site* is no more supportive of Gary Condit's politics than it was of Clinton's. Condit is a dime-a-dozen bourgeois politician, who has made a career serving agribusiness and other corporate interests in his Central Valley, California district. Politically, he is on the right wing of the Democratic Party, and was, up to now, considered a political asset by the Bush administration. To oppose the anti-democratic nature of the media campaign against him is to grant neither political support, nor a clean bill of health in relation to Chandra Levy and the investigation into her disappearance.

Whatever one may think of the congressman, there are fundamental issues of democratic rights involved in the Condit affair. One of these is the right to privacy. If there is no evidence that Condit's relationship with Chandra Levey—a relationship between two consenting adults—has any connection to her

disappearance, then the nature of that relationship is nobody's business but his own. He has every right to reject the demands of the media that he publicly admit to a sexual affair.

Moreover, the media takes the position that one is guilty until proven innocent, and that any attempt to assert one's constitutional rights against demands by the police—for example, for lie detector tests—are tantamount to an admission of guilt. The very fact that the Washington police publicly ask Condit to submit to a police lie detector test, while acknowledging that he is not even a suspect, is a violation of civil liberties.

Finally, the notion that an elected official should be forced to resign by media hysteria over an extra-marital affair is an affront to democratic principles. Condit's constituents in California elected him; if they disapprove of his conduct, they can vote him out of office. It is not the business of the media to determine the make-up of the US Congress.

Involved here are the democratic rights not of one individual, but of the entire population. The inability of any section of the political establishment, least of all the Democratic Party, to stand up against such witch-hunting methods is one more demonstration of the debasement of American democracy and the lack of any serious commitment within ruling class circles to the defense of basic rights.

The media—owned and controlled by huge corporate interests—organically frames public issues in such a manner as to undermine democratic rights. Involved here are crass commercial interests—the exploitation of events to build circulation and win a bigger market share. But more fundamental and reactionary motives are at work.

The basic role of the mass media today is to obscure the socially significant element in every event, to pollute public consciousness and appeal to people's basest instincts, and divert attention from the critical issues they face. In a country that has just witnessed the theft of a national election, with a government rightfully considered by millions to be illegitimate—a country that is lurching into a profound economic and social crisis—is it any wonder that a debased media should grab at the opportunity to bombard the public with yet another sex scandal?



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