

Impeachment on FX: Mini-series depicts the right-wing conspiracy against Bill Clinton

Patrick Martin
27 September 2021

Impeachment, a mini-series on the affair between President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky and how it was weaponized by the American ultraright, began showing on the FX channel on September 7 and will extend over 10 hour-long episodes into November. The program has considerable impact and, at least judging by its first three episodes, is well worth the viewer's time.

The program is based on the book by Jeffrey Toobin, *A Vast Conspiracy, The Real Story of the Sex Scandal That Nearly Brought Down a President* (1999), an intelligent and, within certain limits, politically acute account written by Toobin when he worked for the *New Yorker* and was a legal affairs commentator for ABC News.

Like many well-financed television series, *Impeachment* is technically accomplished in terms of make-up and set design, recreating the look and feel of the White House, the Pentagon and other Washington locations in the decade of the 1990s, and the people who inhabited them.

The casting is particularly brilliant, with veteran actors Sarah Paulson as Linda Tripp and Clive Owen as Bill Clinton, and less well-known performers Beanie Feldstein as Monica Lewinsky and Annaleigh Ashford as Paula Jones.

This review is not, however, primarily concerned with assessing the artistic or dramatic merits of a television mini-series, particularly one which is still taking shape and where any judgment must be tentative, although the series is well done so far and has much to recommend it.

A political crisis, not a "sex scandal"

Our overriding interest here is to review the historical period brought to life in this mini-series, in which the Clinton impeachment took place, the political forces which first surfaced in the course of these events, and the record of the WSWS itself. We understood from the beginning that this was not a "sex scandal," but a political crisis, in which fascistic forces within the Republican Party were seeking to overturn the results of two presidential elections through conspiratorial and anti-democratic methods. Our politically hostile attitude to Clinton and the Democratic Party did not entail endorsing such a right-wing political coup.

Impeachment begins actually in the middle of the story, in January 1998, when Lewinsky is lured by her confidante and supposed friend, Linda Tripp, to a food court in Pentagon City, a mall near the headquarters of the US military, where they both worked. There she is accosted by federal agents, working for Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, in a scene which is extremely chilling: an individual, young and apparently naïve, taken by surprise, confronting the full power of the state.

From there, the narrative cuts back and forth in flashbacks, depicting episodes involving various groups of characters. This includes:

- Linda Tripp in her White House job, where she worked as an aide to

White House Counsel Bernie Nussbaum and his deputy Vincent Foster, before his 1993 suicide, and where she made the acquaintance of Kathleen Willey, a future accuser of Clinton

- Paula Jones and her husband Steve, provoked into filing legal action by the notorious "Troopergate" feature in the right-wing magazine *American Spectator*, which described an incident in a Little Rock hotel, where then Governor Bill Clinton made a crude sexual advance to a female desk clerk (Jones, although she was not actually named in the article)

- Monica Lewinsky, working as a White House intern during the government shut-down in the fall of 1995, where she first met Clinton and began a relationship, facilitated by the absence of most of the paid staff, who would otherwise have been an obstacle

- The group of ultra-right lawyers, including Ann Coulter and George Conway, plotting against Clinton and hitting on the tactic of leveraging a civil suit to compel him to testify under oath about his sex life (and likely perjure himself)

Lewinsky and Tripp were both transferred from the White House to the Pentagon, where they became acquaintances and Tripp eventually learned of Lewinsky's affair with Clinton and began to cultivate her as a means of undermining a president whom she despised.

The timeframe for each new scene is clearly labelled, but it could be confusing to a viewer not familiar with the sequence of events. By the end of the third episode, we have still not yet progressed back to January 1998. But the basic framework of these events and the characterization of the main participants is well defined.

Toobin's attitude to Clinton is critical but sympathetic, and his attitude to the right-wing conspirators is hostile. He wrote in his book: "The president's adversaries appeared literally consumed with hatred for him. ... They were willing to trample all standards of fairness—not to mention the Constitution—in their effort to drive him from office."

The two main figures in the drama are Tripp and Clinton, partly because one is the instrument for the would-be destruction of the other, partly because the casting makes it almost inevitable.

Sarah Paulson was previously best known for her portrayal of prosecutor Marcia Clark in the first mini-series on *American Crime Story*, "The People vs. O.J. Simpson," for which she won an Emmy as best actress in 2016. In *Impeachment*, Paulson portrays Tripp as calculating, remorseless and vengeful. She ensnares and manipulates Lewinsky without any concern for the impact on the younger woman whose life is about to be shattered.

As for Owen, his Clinton has an edge, the ruthlessness required to survive and excel in the brutal arena of capitalist politics. This is apparently true of his wife as well, although Edie Falco has not yet made much more than a cameo appearance in the series. When his personal lawyer Robert Bennett urges him to settle the Paula Jones lawsuit and avoid a trial, Clinton replies, "She'll never let me settle." Bennett is incredulous. "Paula?" No, Clinton says, "Hillary."

Contrary to moralizing critics at the time, like the disgusting Senator Joe Lieberman, and more recent #MeToo advocates, like Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, the mini-series treats Clinton's affair with Lewinsky in a mature and apparently honest way. Lewinsky was infatuated with him. Clinton, presented as lonely and isolated, was moved by her enthusiasm, and a relationship began. It was, to be blunt, a relationship between two consenting adults. It is not portrayed as exploitative or based on Clinton's power over Lewinsky as her employer—here Lewinsky's role as a co-producer and contributor to *Impeachment* adds weight.

Leveraging the Paula Jones lawsuit

The right-wing conspiracy against Clinton can be summed up briefly, from the point where it came to a head after Clinton's reelection victory in November 1996. The "elves" (the cabal of right-wing lawyers working behind the scenes) aimed to leverage the Paula Jones lawsuit to put Clinton through a deposition under oath, then have him prosecuted for perjury by the lawyers working for Kenneth Starr, or else be impeached for the same offense by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

In May 1997, the Supreme Court ruled, in a 9-0 decision, that a president can be sued for actions taken before he took office. The opinion written by John Paul Stevens, then the court's liberal standard-bearer, argued that that lawsuit "appears to us highly unlikely to occupy any substantial amount" of the president's time, a staggering underestimation of the right-wing conspiracy enabled by the court's ruling.

In contrast, at the time of the Supreme Court decision, the *International Workers Bulletin*, the US predecessor of the WSWS, warned that the Jones lawsuit had to be understood in its political context.

In America, sex scandals have long served as a means for contending factions within the ruling class to push their hidden agendas and settle political scores. In this particular case, the political motivations of those who have most vociferously promoted Jones's suit were evident from the beginning, when she went public with her allegations at a Washington, DC convention of the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Clinton understood that he must settle the case and offered \$700,000 to Jones and her husband Steve. Another right-wing activist, Susan Carpenter-McMillan (wonderfully portrayed by Judith Light), a millionaire anti-abortion fanatic, who had wormed her way into the confidence of Paula and Steve Jones, induced them to reject Clinton's offer. The original legal team for Paula Jones resigned, to be replaced by lawyers committed more to targeting the president, rather than the best outcome for their client.

What followed is well known and presumably will be the subject of future episodes. The perjury trap snaps shut. Clinton gives a sworn deposition and lies about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky (the "elves" know of Lewinsky through Linda Tripp and pass on that information to Jones's lawyers). Lewinsky, likewise deposed, lies in turn about Clinton. Lewinsky is then threatened with a long prison term for perjury and obstruction of justice. Despite 12 hours of nonstop browbeating, during which Lewinsky was denied her right to see a lawyer, she refuses to cooperate, a decision of some courage.

The case became public through the Drudge Report, a right-wing news site, and Michael Isikoff, the "sex beat" reporter for *Newsweek* magazine.

A political firestorm erupted, and both the right-wing conspirators and congressional Democrats fully expected Clinton to resign. Instead, he refused. In probably her last public statement that was entirely truthful, Hillary Clinton denounced the "vast right-wing conspiracy" to force her husband out of office—Toobin took the title of his book from this comment, and he clearly agrees with it.

Bill Clinton resisted the pressure to resign coming from the media and his own party. In August 1998, he gave a nationally televised speech in which he admitted his past relationship with Lewinsky and his concealment of it, denounced his attackers and declared that his private life and his public life were separate spheres. The right-wing campaign culminated in the release of the Starr report, in September 1998, a 400-page salacious recounting of every sexual encounter between Lewinsky and Clinton, which was delivered to the House of Representatives and provided the pretext for impeachment.

There are incidents here that still resonate. Democrat Joe Lieberman, in a sanctimonious speech to the Senate, condemned Clinton's violation of his marriage vows (before an audience of war criminals, thieves, and liars ... i.e., his fellow senators, who applaud).

Vice President Al Gore virtually disappeared rather than defend the man who chose him as his running mate. In 2000, he was the Democratic nominee for president, with Lieberman as his running mate. He again avoided Clinton, the most popular Democrat, and lost narrowly to Republican George W. Bush because of the Supreme Court intervention to halt vote-counting in Florida.

The Republicans rushed towards impeachment, confident that Clinton had been discredited, only to lose seats in the 1998 midterm elections. Republican Speaker Newt Gingrich was forced to step down. His chosen successor, Representative Robert Livingston, did likewise, after a half dozen women came forward to confirm past extramarital relationships with him. The same was true of the leader of the impeachment drive, Representative Henry Hyde, although he did not resign, instead describing his past affair, at age 41, as a "youthful indiscretion."

At every point, the Democratic Party, completely out of touch with the underlying political dynamics and misreading public opinion, responded to the attempted political coup against Clinton with pathetic moralizing, apologies and an utter refusal to investigate and expose the right-wing conspiracy. This cowardice on impeachment foretold their prostration before the theft of the 2000 election with the Supreme Court's notorious decision in *Bush v. Gore*.

The record of the WSWS

Cynicism and hypocrisy, particularly about sexual matters, are hardly novel. But the driving force of impeachment was not sex, but politics, as the *World Socialist Web Site* explained and analyzed throughout 1998.

An Editorial Board statement published January 22, 1998, warned, "Behind the lurid facade of a sex scandal, a political struggle is raging between competing factions of corporate power for control over the state, a struggle that has reached a level of ferocity unprecedented in the history of the United States. ... It is not here a question of defending Clinton, a capitalist politician and political leader of American imperialism. But it must be stated, the present state of affairs—which has many of the elements of a political coup—exposes the fragile and worm-eaten character of democratic institutions in America."

Another statement by the Editorial Board, published February 14, 1998, made a careful sociological characterization of the roots of the political crisis, in the shift in American capitalism away from realizing profits through industry and commerce, in favor of financial manipulation—what

we today call the “financialization” of the US economy. Sections of the US ruling class were prepared to oust Clinton as insufficiently aggressive in his attacks on the working class and the overseas opponents of American imperialism. We concluded this editorial, headlined “The social roots of the Clinton crisis,” as follows:

The present political crisis in America brings to mind certain historical precedents. This is not the first time that decadent ruling classes have resorted to methods of conspiracy and subversion in an attempt to claw back privileges which they believed to have been eroded. Such periods of virtual civil war within the highest circles of society and the state have often been the prelude to social upheavals of revolutionary proportions.

At each stage in the unfolding crisis, the WSWS analyzed the conflicting forces within the US ruling elite, explaining the necessity for the working class to oppose the ouster of a twice-elected president through the methods of sex scandal and backroom conspiracy and to defend its democratic rights. At the same time, our condemnation of the right-wing palace coup did not entail any lessening of our opposition to Clinton as the leader of world imperialism, as when he launched missile strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan in August and bombed Iraq in December, attacks timed to win support from the ruling class at key turning points in the political crisis.

The commentaries in the WSWS on the Clinton crisis during 1998, nearly 100 in all, would fill a sizable book. Links to a selection are appended at the end of this review.

The most important statement, drawing a balance sheet of the entire impeachment campaign, was published December 22, 1998, after the impeachment vote in the House of Representatives had ensured that 1999 would begin with a Senate trial, in which Clinton was acquitted.

The WSWS Editorial Board posed the question: “Is America drifting toward civil war?” We answered this in the affirmative and made an analysis that has been entirely vindicated by the deepening crisis of American democracy, culminating in Trump’s failed coup attempt of January 6, 2021, and his ongoing efforts to develop a full-fledged fascist movement in America. We wrote:

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.

We pointed to the transformation of the Republican Party, from the main representative of Wall Street in capitalist politics, to one which has become an “organ of fascistic elements.”

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 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.

The Democrats in Congress refused to expose the Republican impeachment drive for what it was—a right-wing attempt to overthrow the results of two presidential elections by methods of backroom conspiracy and scandal-mongering—and, as the Lieberman example showed, actually joined in the moralizing attack. Clinton, to their surprise, stubbornly refused to resign. By comparison to the Democrats of 2021, who embrace the coup plotters and allies of Trump as “our Republican colleagues,” he appeared positively combative. But both Clinton and the Democratic Party as a whole have moved far to the right since the Lewinsky scandal. When even more bogus scandals were whipped up by the #MeToo campaigners in 2017-2018, Senator Al Franken and Representative John Conyers were purged without the slightest concern for the presumption of innocence, due process or democratic rights in general.

The Editorial Board statement concluded, in words that apply even more directly to the conditions of today:

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.[

We have perhaps come rather far from the merits of the FX television mini-series on the Clinton impeachment. But the issues raised by the impeachment crisis in 1998 are not only relevant to the America of the January 6 attempted political coup by Donald Trump; they are critical to understanding it. There is a direct line that connects the right-wing conspiracy to overthrow Bill Clinton in 1998 and the fascist attempt to overthrow the incoming Biden-Harris government in 2021. And the impossibility of defending democratic rights through the Democratic Party is on display under conditions of even greater political dangers to the working class.

The strength of the Republican right consists in this: It

Further reading from the WSWS analysis of the impeachment crisis

(All dates in 1998)

February 28: "What is the meaning of the political warfare in Washington?" A comment on Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr seeking to suppress media and White House criticism of his investigation, using subpoenas and gag orders.

March 21, April 4, April 14: "The crisis in Washington: what history tells us." A three-part series comparing Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair and the Clinton scandals, showing the decay of American democracy.

June 16: "Destabilization campaign targeted White House: Report charges illegal links between Starr and media." An examination of how the Starr investigation was coordinated with the media attacks on the Clinton White House, through selective and illegal leaks.

July 28: "New stage in White House crisis: Starr subpoenas Clinton in Lewinsky investigation"

August 19: "Clinton speech signals intensification of Washington political warfare." An analysis of Clinton's defiant speech, generally dismissed as a disaster by the media—but not by Toobin, who said Clinton had grasped intuitively that the American people were opposed to the right-wing witch-hunt.

August 22: "The Sudan-Afghanistan attack: Clinton uses cruise missiles to placate political opponents." A statement denouncing the US missile attack as an effort by Clinton to stave off political collapse at home.

August 25: "Ringmasters of political pornography." A comment on the role of the media in the attack on Clinton.

September 9: "Lieberman delivers 'the most unkindest cut of all'." A comment on the sanctimonious speech by the Connecticut senator.

September 13: "Spearhead of a right-wing coup." An analysis of the decision to release in full the Starr report on Clinton's sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

September 30: "Seven days in January: A chronicle of Kenneth Starr's coup." A detailed account of the week of January 12-18, as Tripp, Starr and Jones's attorneys worked in concert to bring down Clinton.

November 11: "The political significance of the Republican debacle." An analysis of the outcome of the US mid-term election.

November 24: "The impeachment hearing: What a socialist would have said." A response to the hearing before the Republican-controlled House Judiciary Committee.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact