

The corporate media misses the boat on *American Crime Story: Impeachment*

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The FX series *American Crime Story: Impeachment* ended its ten-part run on Tuesday, November 9, with a 100-minute finale that took its account of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair through the actual impeachment and the Senate trial and acquittal of the US president in February 1999, and then the aftermath for the main characters portrayed: Monica Lewinsky, Linda Tripp, Paula Jones and the Clintons.

This writer reviewed the series after the first three parts were broadcast, and the first impressions of the series were borne out over its entire duration. It is a valuable recounting of an unprecedented political crisis, and while it focuses more on the personal than on the political, it gets the main events right and captures a side of this complex political drama that goes almost unmentioned in the American media.

The script is based on the book *A Vast Conspiracy* by Jeffrey Toobin, a contemporary account of the 1998–99 events which was hostile, as the title suggests, to the organized effort of right-wing lawyers and political provocateurs to leverage a private sexual relationship into a crime, and then drive out of office a twice-elected president.

Toobin's account is supplemented and refracted through Lewinsky's own recollections, as she is a co-producer and reportedly read through every episode before it was shot, correcting details and asking questions about the selection and ordering of events being depicted. Now 48 years old, Lewinsky seems to have developed a remarkable objectivity about events that had a shattering impact on her 24-year-old self.

As noted in the initial review, the acting is uniformly excellent, not only on the part of the main characters—Beanie Feldstein as Lewinsky, Sarah Paulson as Linda Tripp, Clive Owen as Clinton, Annaleigh Ashford as Paula Jones—but in those who play only subsidiary roles. It is worth noting the high-profile actors who took such parts, including Judith Light, Mira Sorvino, Blair Underwood, Rae Dawn Chong and many others.

Edie Falco, who as Hillary Clinton played only a minor role in the first three episodes, is a central figure in the concluding ones, as would be expected. Her performance, like that of Clive Owen as Bill Clinton, which we have already praised, manages to present a well-known character as both a human being and a ruthless political operator.

The final seven episodes follow the arc of the story: Clinton's deposition in the Paula Jones lawsuit in which he is questioned about his sex life, the media firestorm which follows the

subsequent exposure of his relationship with Lewinsky, and Clinton's dogged refusal to resign, despite overwhelming political and media pressure. Ultimately, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives impeaches him, but the Senate refuses to convict, so the political coup orchestrated by his right-wing opponents fails to achieve its goal.

There are criticisms to be made of the FX series, mainly relating to the decision of executive producer Ryan Murphy to focus on the impact of the media-fueled scandal on Lewinsky, Tripp, Paula Jones and Hillary Clinton, thus making the final episodes something of a feminist soap opera, in which all of the female protagonists suffer, albeit some more than others.

Clinton himself recedes into the background. There is little or nothing about the events surrounding the actual impeachment vote and the Senate trial and acquittal. And there is no reference at all to the utter capitulation of the Democratic Party to the right-wing campaign to drive Clinton from office. Vice President Al Gore, for example, simply does not appear in *Impeachment*, nor does any Democratic congressional leader or party official, except for influence-peddler Vernon Jordan, who had offered Lewinsky a job on Clinton's recommendation.

This is not surprising, given the pro-Democratic Party politics that generally prevail in Hollywood. Depicting the spinelessness of the Democrats of 1998–99 would invite the audience to reflect on the even greater prostration of the Democrats of today before the fascist provocations of Trump and the Republicans. For a genuinely accurate account of the events of that period, as of today, readers must rely on the socialist press.

Nonetheless, the account provided by *Impeachment* is valuable. It portrays the lawyers of the Starr investigation as a gang of politically motivated cutthroats, seeking to manufacture a case against a president whom they "know" is guilty of something, when his main crime, as far as this section of the political establishment is concerned, is moving too slowly in dismantling the welfare state and attacking democratic rights.

Perhaps the foulest in this group—although it is neck and neck—is Brett Kavanaugh, elevated to the Supreme Court by Donald Trump nearly 20 years later. He was the author of the Starr report, with its obsessive focus on the prurient details of the Clinton-Lewinsky relationship. Kavanaugh's role in the attempted political coup against Clinton was barely touched on at his 2018 confirmation hearing, with the Democrats preferring to focus on unproven allegations that Kavanaugh committed a sexual assault as a

teenager.

Assisting the Starr investigation is a cabal of right-wing lawyers, including media provocateur Ann Coulter and her associate George Conway, who obtain evidence of Clinton's affair with Lewinsky and supply it to the lawyers for Paula Jones and to the Starr investigation.

This is the "crime" in *American Crime Story*: the construction of a perjury trap, in which Clinton will be compelled to testify under oath, in a sworn deposition taken by Jones' attorneys, and asked about his affair with Lewinsky. Since he wishes, for both personal and political reasons, to keep the affair secret, he lies, thereby committing the crime of perjury, for which he will ultimately be impeached.

Lewinsky is also deposed, and also lies about the affair. She is detained by FBI agents, hauled before a gang of Starr's lawyers, denied the right to contact her own lawyer and threatened with decades in prison if she does not cooperate. This would involve wearing a wire to ensnare the president even further in a "criminal" cover-up of their relationship. Despite 12 hours of browbeating—depicted effectively in Episode Six—Lewinsky refuses to turn on Clinton. The contrast between her actions and Linda Tripp's could not be more damning.

It is notable that the media reviews and the coverage of *Impeachment* in the entertainment press are almost entirely silent on this aspect of the program. Not one reviewer accurately answers the question, what is the "crime" that *Impeachment* is depicting? Some suggest that the crime is Clinton's conduct, or Linda Tripp's, or that there is no crime at all, or they avoid the question altogether.

One remarkable review—here the adjective is intended entirely in the negative sense—manages to suggest that Bill Clinton, as a president who broke the law while in office and escaped punishment, is the forerunner of Donald Trump! The reviewer appears entirely oblivious to the clear connection between the impeachment plotters of 1998 and the coup plotters of 2020–2021.

Two reviews deserve special censure. In the *New York Times*, James Poniewozik wrote in September, when seven of the 10 episodes had been made available to reviewers, that *Impeachment* resembled "a star-packed Wikipedia entry." He ridiculed the make-up used to change the appearance of Sarah Paulson and Clive Owen to more closely resemble Tripp and Clinton.

What follows is a torrent of disparagement: the program provides "somber hours skipping around the 1990s"; it does little but "recap familiar points"; those who lived through the scandal "may struggle to stay interested"; in his view, "the series lacks a clarifying focus"; in its portrayal of the Clintons "Opportunities are left on the table"; Owen's Clinton is "more an impression than a performance."

Poniewozik only displays enthusiasm for the actors who portray the right-wing conspirators, including Cobie Smulders as Ann Coulter, Billy Eichner as Matt Drudge and Margo Martindale as Lucianne Goldberg. He observes, "If nothing else, it's exciting to be around people who love their work." Perhaps this is a suggestion as to where his political sympathies lie.

In the *Washington Post*, Inkoo Kang, writing after the conclusion of the series, declares that *Impeachment* "was the

buzziest show of the fall—then died on arrival." Kang had dismissed the program in a review published in September, calling it full of "repetitive scenes and underdeveloped characterizations."

In her second commentary she indicates her strong preference for the earlier seasons of *American Crime Story*, which treated the murder trial of O. J. Simpson and the murder of Gianni Versace, writing that "the absence of a clear focal event in the scandal adds to the series' narrative diffusion."

She continues, suggesting "there's a smallness to *Impeachment* that there wasn't in its predecessors, which tackled larger issues of race, class and homophobia. Lewinsky and the women associated with Clinton's sexual misdeeds were certainly victims of sexism, but for too much of the season the show is more interested in underscoring Linda's betrayal than in indicting systemic issues."

Here identity politics runs wild. Race, class and homophobia are the "larger issues," the "systemic issues." The attempted overthrow of an American president by a right-wing palace coup, manipulating the legal system to do so, that is an example of "smallness."

Later she refers to the "relative insignificance" of the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal. This is to miss the point entirely. The significance is not the ordinariness of the personal relationships—older man, lonely, is attracted to a young woman, while she, admiring, responds—it is the use of this relationship by ultra-right political forces to reverse the outcome of two presidential elections.

Kang continues, "After an insurrection egged on by the president, the power struggles of the '90s have never felt quaintier."

In truth, however, the attempted coup of 1998–1999 was the starting point of a series of political convulsions that led inexorably to the insurrection of January 6, 2021. Who does not recognize this connection is politically blind, and in this case, the blindness seems willful.



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