

Kenneth Starr and the right-wing politics of sexual witch-hunts

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Kenneth Starr, the right-wing prosecutor who spearheaded the investigation that led to the 1998 impeachment of Democratic President Bill Clinton, died Tuesday at a Houston-area hospital of an undisclosed illness. He had been hospitalized since May. Starr's death provides an occasion for reviewing the evermore sinister role of media witch-hunts and manufactured sex scandals in American political life.

For more than a year in 1998-1999, Starr was one of the most reviled figures in American life, as his Office of Independent Counsel, originally established to investigate Clinton for a failed land development in Arkansas, became the instrument of a sordid conspiracy to drive Clinton from office.

Clinton was being sued by a former Arkansas state employee, Paula Jones, who claimed that he had sexually harassed her while he was governor of that state. The case was picked up and largely financed by right-wing groups which sought to use it to attack Clinton's presidency.

When they learned of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern, from Lewinsky's confidante Linda Tripp, the right-wing lawyers set a perjury trap. Clinton was compelled to give deposition testimony on the Paula Jones suit, and her lawyers asked him about Lewinsky. He denied a sexual relationship, thus lying under oath. It was a setup, and Clinton was the patsy.

Starr and his prosecutors worked closely with the group of right-wing lawyers, making Clinton's lies about a sexual relationship the center of an investigation that had begun before Lewinsky and Clinton had even met. Salacious details were leaked to the press, and a firestorm of media scandal-mongering ensued, aimed at forcing Clinton to resign.

When he stubbornly refused, the Starr investigators subpoenaed both Clinton and Lewinsky and questioned them at length, eventually submitting a 450-page report to Congress comprising largely of a pornographic account of the relationship and Clinton's efforts to cover it up. This became the basis of a vote by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives to impeach Clinton. The Senate failed to convict him, however, and he remained in office for another two years.

The impeachment drive came into conflict with the instinctive feelings of millions of working people, who opposed the effort

to remove Clinton from office by means of a sex scandal and were hostile to the anti-democratic methods and prurience of the witch-hunting. The Republican Party unexpectedly lost ground in the House of Representatives in the November 1998 mid-term elections, held on the eve of the vote on impeachment, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who had promised landslide gains from "getting" Clinton, had to step down as Republican leader.

The obituaries of Starr appearing Wednesday in the corporate media have been compelled to acknowledge the hostility which his investigation into Clinton aroused, although this is largely attributed to partisan feeling among supporters of the Democratic Party. There is no serious account of the right-wing conspiracy for which Starr served as a front man.

Setting the tone was the *New York Times*, which noted Starr's subsequent role as the president of Baylor University, removed by the Board of Regents for failing to act on cases of well-documented sexual assault involving the college's football team, and then as part of the defense team for the multi-millionaire procurer of young girls for wealthy clients, Jeffrey Epstein. The *Times* did not draw the obvious conclusion: That Starr targeted Clinton, not because of outrage over alleged sexual improprieties, but for political reasons.

The *Times* also made no mention of how Starr came to be the independent counsel in the first place. The first independent counsel, Robert Fiske, had largely wound up the Whitewater probe in 1994, as well as an associated investigation into the death of White House counsel Vince Foster, which he concluded was a suicide. Fiske was abruptly removed by a three-judge panel of the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, headed by David Sentelle, who had been a top political aide to ultra-right Senator Jesse Helms before his elevation to the most important circuit court. Sentelle and another judge on the panel were seen lunching with Helms the day before they fired Fiske and replaced him with Starr, a reliable right-wing Republican who had been Solicitor General in the first Bush administration. The independent counsel investigation continued for another six years, until Clinton left office.

Throughout the political crisis produced by the Clinton-Lewinsky "scandal," the *World Socialist Web Site*, then in its first year of publication, provided indispensable analysis of the

social and political forces behind the attack on the Clinton administration. We published almost daily on the crisis, sharply criticizing the witch-hunt. While opposing Clinton and US imperialism politically, the WSWS warned that the right-wing effort to remove a twice-elected president through methods of backroom conspiracy and media scandal-mongering was a threat to democratic rights. We called on the working class to oppose this campaign, warning that any government brought to power through such a palace coup would represent a major step towards dictatorship in the United States.

A quarter century on, the decay of American capitalist democracy has gone much further. The congressional Democrats criticized Clinton in 1998 and rejected claims of a “vast right-wing conspiracy” voiced by Hillary Clinton, but they voted against impeachment and against the conviction and removal of Clinton, calling it an excessive punishment for his “misconduct.” Today they would be at the front of the line demanding his immediate resignation.

It is not a hypothetical. Congressional Democrats forced out Senator Al Franken of Minnesota in 2017 over allegations so flimsy as to be preposterous and without allowing him to defend himself before the Senate Ethics Committee. Allegations of sexual harassment led to the swift ouster of Representative John Conyers, one of the longest-serving members of the House, again before any actual adjudication of the claims made against him. And last year, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo was forced out over allegations of sexual harassment that he continues to deny.

The launching of the #Metoo campaign has led to an across-the-board rejection of democratic norms, such as the presumption of innocence, due process and the right of an accused to confront the accuser. Charges based on anonymous sources, laundered through a compliant media, have been sufficient to end the careers of elected officials, university professors, musicians, and virtually anyone working in the television and movie industry. In this campaign, liberal media like the *New York Times* and liberal Democrats like Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York have played the leading role.

At the same time, lawyers mentored by Starr hold the highest positions in the American judiciary. Chief Justice John Roberts was deputy solicitor-general under Starr in the first Bush administration. Another Supreme Court justice, Brett Kavanaugh, was part of Starr’s Office of Independent Counsel and wrote much of the vile report to Congress on the Lewinsky affair.

Twenty-five years ago, the WSWS published an editorial board statement headlined, “Kenneth Starr, the American media and the pursuit of ‘truth’.” We wrote:

There is more than ample evidence to demonstrate that the Starr investigation is the spearhead of an immense subversion of democratic processes. It is

financed by extreme right-wing elements with enormous wealth at their disposal, organized with the active collaboration of the mass media, and implicating the highest levels of the judiciary, up to and including the Supreme Court. It is, in essence, the first systematic attempt to effect a political coup d’etat in US history.

Five months later, after Clinton’s impeachment by the House of Representatives, a WSWS Editorial Board statement posed the question, “Is America drifting towards civil war?” We explained that the political crisis could not simply be attributed to Clinton’s unwillingness to tell the truth about a private sexual matter. A conflict that threatened to overturn the US government had to have profound social and class roots.

We traced this back to the erosion of the social position of the middle class that once provided a stable basis for bourgeois democracy. America was increasingly divided into two class camps: the vast majority, proletarianized and struggling for survival, and a fantastically wealthy and privileged ruling elite, whose internal conflicts had become charged with terrific social tensions.

What was a drift then has become a slide, if not an avalanche. The attempted palace coup against Clinton by the Republican right has become an armed coup attempt by a violent mob, instigated by the fascistic President Donald Trump, on January 6, 2021. The Republican Party has become, in all but name, a fascist party directed by Trump as its *Fuhrer*.

And the working class is emerging into conflict with the corporate elite, the two capitalist parties that take their orders from the elite, and the entire capitalist social order. The central task is to develop the understanding among working people of the necessity for an independent, political and revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system.



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