

Senate impeachment trial: a conspiracy of silence

By Martin McLaughlin
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As the Senate trial of President Clinton moves towards a decision, the policy of the White House and the Senate Democrats is to keep hidden from the American people the true implications of the political crisis that has dominated Washington for over a year.

It is increasingly clear that even if the Republican majority forces through a resolution approving the calling of witnesses, in the vote scheduled for Wednesday, the Democrats will not themselves offer any witnesses to provide evidence of the political conspiracy which set in motion the impeachment drive.

In the hearings before the House Judiciary Committee, the Democrats limited themselves to an interrogation of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, failing to call Linda Tripp, Lucianne Goldberg, or any of the other figures in the network of right-wing lawyers and political operatives who set the Paula Jones lawsuit into motion and used it, in concert with Starr's investigation, to prepare a perjury trap for Clinton.

In the Senate trial, the Democrats and the White House will do even less. In their television appearances on the weekend, one Democratic senator after another demanded that no witnesses be called. Senator Paul Wellstone, a liberal from Minnesota, appearing on a call-in program on CNN, flatly rejected a suggestion that Tripp and Goldberg be called as witnesses.

Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle declared that a Republican decision to call witnesses would be answered by "vigorous cross-examination." This threat makes little sense legally, since the three people on the Republican witness list--Monica Lewinsky, Vernon Jordan and White House aide Sidney Blumenthal--are all sympathetic to Clinton. More significant was what Daschle left unstated: that the Senate Democrats and the White House will not attempt to put on a counter-case by calling their own witnesses.

Clinton himself takes the same position. During

Tuesday's arguments before the Senate over whether witnesses should be called in the trial, his chief private lawyer David Kendall warned Republican prosecutors that a full airing of the circumstances surrounding the impeachment drive might have unforeseen political consequences.

The president's lawyers could choose to call witnesses like Wesley Holmes, the attorney for Paula Jones who interviewed Linda Tripp on January 16, 1998, after she had begun cooperating with Starr's office, and on the eve of President Clinton's deposition in the Jones case. "He would be a very interesting witness to depose," Kendall said.

"I think we could show that there were a number of connections between the independent counsel, Linda Tripp and the Paula Jones lawyers," he said. "But I don't think you need to get into that briar patch."

The Democrats' rejection of any serious effort to lay out the facts about the campaign to destabilize the Clinton administration comes under conditions where the right-wing conspirators are more exposed than ever. On Sunday the *New York Times* published a detailed account of the activities of a small group of right-wing lawyers who worked to set up the Paula Jones lawsuit as a vehicle for dragging Clinton into court, and then, with the crucial assistance of the US Supreme Court and the Office of Independent Counsel, leveraged the Jones suit into an impeachment trial before the US Senate.

These connections were first detailed in press accounts based on the documents released last fall after Starr filed his impeachment report with the House of Representatives. New information has been provided in the aftermath of Clinton's \$850,000 settlement of the Jones lawsuit, as attorneys begin filing their billings to claim a portion of the cash.

According to the *Times*, the billing records document the role of Paul Rosenzweig, a right-wing Washington

lawyer who discussed joining the Paula Jones legal team in 1994 and was a friend and law school classmate of Jerome Marcus, the Philadelphia attorney who did the bulk of the behind-the-scenes legal work on the Jones case over the next three years.

In November 1997 Rosenzweig was hired by the Office of Independent Counsel. OIC spokesman Charles Bakaly did not respond to an inquiry about the reason for Rosenzweig's hiring, but the action was certainly unusual, since at that point Starr's investigation was supposedly winding down.

The timing of Rosenzweig's joining the Starr investigation is extremely suggestive. November 1997 was the same month that Linda Tripp made anonymous phone calls to the attorneys for Paula Jones, naming Monica Lewinsky and describing her affair with Clinton. At the same time, Lucianne Goldberg supplied Tripp's name and phone number to the Jones lawyer David Pyke. Pyke called Tripp, and she gave another description of the Lewinsky-Clinton affair, this time without giving Lewinsky's name.

In short order, Lewinsky was being subpoenaed as a witness in the Jones lawsuit, Tripp was urging Lewinsky to demand a job as the price of concealing her past relationship with Clinton, and Rosenzweig, a camp follower in the Jones lawsuit, was working in the Office of Independent Counsel, helping to prepare the legal trap which was sprung on Clinton a month later. It was Rosenzweig who, on January 8, 1998, received a phone call from Marcus announcing that Linda Tripp was ready to provide her services to the Starr investigation. Seven months later, he was one of four lawyers for Kenneth Starr who interrogated Clinton before the grand jury.

The general outlines of this dirty tricks operation have been an open secret in Washington. Hillary Clinton was referring to the behind-the-scenes connections between the Jones suit and the Starr investigation a year ago when she attacked the "vast right-wing conspiracy" against her husband. But the details have remained largely unknown to the American people.

This is the result of an even more significant "conspiracy," the conspiracy of silence in which Clinton and the Democrats play the leading role. Together with the media establishment, they are engaged in an effort to conceal from the American people the degree to which the political and judicial system is being manipulated by extreme right-wing forces.

Any serious investigation of Starr, Jones & Co. would demonstrate that the real "high crimes and misdemeanors"

were committed by those who have sought to overthrow the Clinton White House by means of a quasi-constitutional coup. Such an investigation could not be limited, moreover, to the handful of lower-level right-wing activists whose names have already come to light.

It would have to go back to the origins of the Starr investigation itself, and decisions of highly placed figures, including Appeals Court Justice David Sentelle, a former aide to Jesse Helms, who fired Robert Fiske as special prosecutor and replaced him with Starr, and to Chief Justice William Rehnquist himself--now presiding over the Senate trial!--who selected Sentelle, passing over higher-ranking judges, to head the panel which chooses independent counsels.

It would examine the role of the Council for National Policy, the secret conclave of top Republican congressional leaders and representatives of the Christian Coalition and other far-right groups, which decided in the summer of 1997 to launch the impeachment drive.

The Senate trial of Clinton, far from being a solemn constitutional proceeding, is the end product of a shabby criminal enterprise, in which extreme-right and neo-fascist elements have played the main role. These elements have little mass support, as is demonstrated by the continued public hostility to the impeachment drive, but they have powerful influence in Congress, the courts and the media. They are aided above all by the complicity and cowardice of the Democratic Party liberals, from Clinton on down, who are incapable of any genuine opposition to the dangers revealed in the impeachment drive.

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