Alexander Cockburn on the Clinton crisis:

Prostration before reaction

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2 September 1998

Alexander Cockburn is a radical journalist whose work appears regularly in *The Nation*, the weekly liberal magazine in the US. An article recently appeared under his byline in the *Wall Street Journal*, to whose Viewpoint column he contributed regularly in the 1980s, that makes one's skin crawl. The general tone and theme of the piece, concerned with the Starr-Clinton crisis, are summed up in its title, 'The Left Has Forgotten How to Enjoy a Good Scandal.'

Cockburn writes: 'What the stuffy left forgets is that sex scandals can be an important component of the seditious ridiculing of Established Power, one of the prime tasks of any leftist.' He suggests that radicals who are hesitant 'to join in the fun on the Lewinsky scandal ... should learn from ordinary Americans who ... have been enjoying the sex scandal, without taking it too seriously.' Later, he observes 'that any good leftist should want impeachment to be a staple of every presidency.'

Misplaced frivolity in this case is merely the form taken by prostration before reaction.

Cockburn, first of all, accepts uncritically the framework within which the American media have presented the Starr investigation. In what sense is the present affair a 'sex scandal'? There was nothing illegal about the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky relationship. To talk in such terms, even to introduce the question of 'character,' as Cockburn does, is to adopt the hypocritical language of Gertrude Himmelfarb, William Bennett and the like, the neo-Victorians.

The Lewinsky affair has been essentially a dirty tricks operation financed and mounted by reactionary elements, with the aid and support of the venal media, to paralyze the Clinton administration and open the door to an even more anti-working-class regime. The details of the conspiracy have been outlined in the *Observer*, the British newspaper, and the complicity of the US media has been partially documented by Stephen Brill. Cockburn is well aware of this material, yet he ignores it. He heaps scorn on Gore Vidal for declaring, in Cockburn's words, that the Starr inquiry 'is a Big Business payback to Mr. Clinton.'

The immediate target of the *Journal* piece seems to be those 'liberals and leftists,' principally environmentalists and feminists, who are politically in bed with the White House and therefore have gone soft on Clinton, according to Cockburn. It is hard to imagine a more trivial political concern under the present circumstances. This simply underscores the fact that Cockburn is so embroiled in such circles he imagines their activities to have earth-shaking consequences. That Cockburn construes resistance to the right-wing conspiracy as giving aid and comfort to Clinton indicates how uncertain he is about his own opposition to the Democratic president.

He is quite blind to the significant political issues posed by the crisis that has swirled around the White House for seven months without interruption. Socialists are opposed to Clinton because of the policies of his government: his collaboration with the Republican right-wing in destroying social welfare programs, his role in initiating US military aggression overseas, including the recent raids on Afghanistan and Sudan, and his generally wretched track record, which includes, as a not insignificant component, the cowardly refusal to oppose the Starr investigation.

But Cockburn's cavalier attitude seems to be that the overturn of the Clinton administration, no matter who or what replaces it, must be a positive good as a thing in itself. This is absurd, and reckless. The *World Socialist Web Site* has offered an ongoing analysis of the crisis and its implications. On 30 July we wrote: 'An increasingly frenzied political struggle is being waged within a narrow circle at the top of American society. While Clinton may fall victim first, the real danger is to the democratic rights of working people. In this atmosphere of backroom infighting and conspiracy, in which a handful of politicians, media tycoons and other corporate bosses vie for control, political life has been stripped of virtually all democratic content. It is an atmosphere which can, in the future, fuel the rise of political adventurers, right-wing demagogues and movements of a fascist or militarist character.'

I would dispute the claim that wide layers of the population are 'enjoying' the current political crisis. Their

general attitude, on the contrary, might be summed up as disgust with the whole business. The corrupt and prurient American media, however, are fixated on the scandal and could be said to be enjoying it. These people can think and talk about nothing else. For them the 'sex scandal' is the opportunity to bring political life more fully into line with their own practices and concerns. As they see it, the Starr investigation is politics as it ought to be. And Cockburn, notwithstanding his amorphous 'left' views, fits right in with this crowd.

Behind the lightmindedness lies deep political demoralization. It is obvious both from what he says and what he doesn't say that Cockburn cannot conceive of a movement developing against Clinton and the Democrats from the left. He is incapable of distinguishing between socialist working class and extreme right-wing opposition to the present administration because the former has no meaning to him. He would consider it an ultra-left fancy.

Arguing that the 'left' has missed the boat on populism, Cockburn has been expressing interest in right-wing militia-type movements for several years. His June 12, 1995 column in *The Nation*, 'Who's Left? Who's Right?' for example, described a visit to the Gun Stock '95 rally in Michigan organized by the far right, including members of the Libertarian Party. While such movements attract confused workers, given the worthlessness of the official labor movement, they represent the potential nucleus of a fascist movement in the US.

Cockburn's attitude of 'Après Clinton le déluge--and a good thing too!' might remind someone familiar with the history of the workers movement in the twentieth century of another strident, but demoralized slogan advanced some 65 years ago. The German Communist Party proclaimed 'First Hitler, then us' as it was careening toward catastrophe in the early 1930s. Its ultra-leftism, summed up in the refusal to organize a United Front with the Socialist workers to combat the Nazis, concealed a deep-seated resignation and fatalism.

And Cockburn, prominent in the New Left and anti-Vietnam War protests in Britain in the 1960s, indeed has family roots in the Stalinist milieu. His father, Claud Cockburn, played a leading role in the British Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. Under the name Frank Pitcairn he covered the Spanish Civil War for the British *Daily Worker*, producing scurrilous articles about the POUM and other left-wing opponents of Stalinism. At the time of the bourgeois-Stalinist suppression of the POUM in 1937 he justified the jailings and murders of its leaders, describing the party as "Franco's Fifth Column'--a 'Trotskyist' organization working in league with the Fascists.'

While in Spain, according to the editor of a volume of his writings, Claud Cockburn formed a close relationship with Mikhail Koltsov, 'then the foreign editor of Pravda and at that time, in Cockburn's view, 'the confidant and mouthpiece and direct agent of Stalin in Spain'.' In other words, Cockburn made friends with one of the GPU's chief spokesmen in Spain, while leftists were being hunted down, tortured and murdered in special GPU prisons.

This is Alexander Cockburn's heritage. Far from repudiating it, he revels in it. In a recent piece in *The Nation* he brought together a number of his political themes and passions: "Between the crisis and the catastrophe,' said Mikhail Koltsov to my father at Munich time in 1939, 'we may as well drink a glass of champagne.' Monica, so zaftig and endearing, has been our champagne. With any luck, Bill Clinton's impeachment will be our caviar. How I yearn for it!'

Sipping champagne with an executioner? Yearning for a right-wing conspiracy to reach its climax? There is something deeply disoriented about this, nearly deranged. What do Cockburn's ravings have to with the interests of the working class? The notion that anything violent or disruptive in political life, regardless of its class character or trajectory, deserves support (Cockburn recently celebrated India's nuclear tests) is the hallmark not of a socialist, but of a petty-bourgeois adventurer or worse. Benito Mussolini emerged from this sort of milieu, and so did a good number of his middle class supporters. Cockburn's article in the *Wall Street Journal*, which has spearheaded the pathological campaign against Clinton, says a good deal about the evolution of an entire layer of New Leftists and assorted ex-radicals. It is by no means a pretty picture.

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