Congress Should Make Clinton's Testimony Public Now

by Phyllis Schlafly *September 2, 1998*

Friends and critics alike are shaking their heads at the way Bill Clinton mishandled his four-minute speech to the nation following his grand jury testimony. He was defiant, not contrite, and spent half of his precious minutes before an awesome audience of millions trashing Kenneth Starr.

But Bill Clinton doesn't make public relations mistakes. He has no current peer in political communications skills, and he certainly is capable of giving his version of Richard Nixon's career-saving "cloth coat and Checkers" speech.

Furthermore, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, who would play a key role in any impeachment trial, practically promised Clinton a free pass out of his predicament if he would just say he was sorry. But Clinton didn't bite at the bait.

Maybe Clinton's speech wasn't a mistake, after all, but was a calculated rebuttal to his sworn testimony before the grand jury earlier that day. Clinton likely had rehearsed several different versions of the address over the previous weekend, and made his selection based on the content of Starr's lines of questioning.

Had Clinton been pleased with his grand jury performance, he could simply have requested that Kenneth Starr release the record of Clinton's testimony to the public. The mere request to make it public would have had an exonerating effect.

Apparently Clinton's testimony went badly for him, and he needed to address the nation to avoid public pressure to release the record. At that point, an apology would not help because it would conflict with his sworn testimony, which will surely become public eventually.

The best Clinton could do was to divert public attention away from his grand jury appearance and obtain precious delay in the release of his testimony. Clinton can now be expected to manipulate the judicial process to delay its release, and likewise delay any requirement of further testimony by Clinton or his aides on questions he refused to answer.

While most commentators criticized Clinton's address as a PR mistake, the reality is that his speech reflected the same delay-and-divert strategy that has worked for him so far. It also was a signal to his still loyal segment in the public opinion polls that they can remain in denial by continuing to hammer on "it's a private matter," "everybody does it," "Starr is politically motivated and out of control," and "let's forget it and move on."

Using half his address to express vitriol towards Starr was an example of Clinton's intimidation at work. Anyone who crosses Clinton will find himself or herself vilified in front of millions.

Unfortunately, Speaker Newt Gingrich's wimpy response signals that he may intend to have the House sit on its hands and do nothing. Congress's response should be: demand the immediate release of Clinton's grand jury testimony.

The public will support Congress in that demand because we have a right to know what Clinton told the grand jury so we can compare it with his public statements. There is obviously no national security reason to keep his August testimony secret.

We are told that, midway through Clinton's August 17th grand jury testimony, he became befuddled and/or angry and stomped out, apparently insisting on an hour to consult with his attorneys about how to respond to the line of questioning. Other witnesses in a criminal grand jury hearing never receive that special advantage.

We're also told that no questions about Monica were asked until the last half hour of the four-hour grand jury session. That makes it probable that Starr has a lot more damaging evidence unrelated to the Monica soap opera.

We want to know if Clinton's testimony revealed that he induced witnesses to lie under oath or conceal evidence. We already know that he induced his wife, his Cabinet, and his political flacks to lie for the last seven months (based on his January television statement about "that woman").

Can we allow America's military forces and nuclear arsenal to be entrusted to him if he did? We can't afford to wait until Starr's "final report" is submitted, which may be based on incomplete testimony because Clinton refused to answer questions he should have answered.

No doubt Clinton will use every legal shenanigan to oppose the inclusion of incriminating evidence in Starr's report to Congress, just as the attorney for the Secret Service has already done. That's a further reason why Congress should demand the release of Clinton's testimony now.

The American public overwhelmingly wants to bring closure to the Monica matter. The best and fastest way for that to happen is for Clinton to resign.

The second best and fastest way is for Congress to demand the release of Clinton's grand jury testimony. If Congress allows Clinton to continue to stonewall through November 3, Congress will be the loser.