

# Historians slam GOP impeachment perfidy

by Jeffrey Steinberg

America's most prominent historians, of all political persuasions, have weighed in strongly, in opposition to the House Republican drive to impeach President William Clinton, on the basis of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's referral. At a Washington, D.C. press conference on Oct. 28, Princeton University professor Sean Wilentz, City University of New York professor Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., and Yale University professor C. Vann Woodward released a statement on behalf of Historians in Defense of the Constitution, with the signatures of 400 of the country's leading historians.

The statement read: "As historians as well as citizens, we deplore the present drive to impeach the President. We believe that this drive, if successful, will have the most serious implications for our constitutional order.

"Under our Constitution, impeachment of the President is a grave and momentous step. The Framers explicitly reserved that step for high crimes and misdemeanors in the exercise of executive power. Impeachment for anything else would, according to James Madison, leave the President to serve 'during the pleasure of the Senate,' thereby mangling the system of checks and balances that is our chief safeguard against abuses of public power.

"Although we do not condone President Clinton's private behavior or his subsequent attempts to deceive, the current charges against him depart from what the Framers saw as grounds for impeachment. The vote of the House of Representatives to conduct an open-ended inquiry creates a novel, all-purpose search for any offense by which to remove a President from office.

"The theory of impeachment underlying these efforts is unprecedented in our history. The new processes are extremely ominous for the future of our political institutions. If carried forward, they will leave the Presidency permanently disfigured and diminished, at the mercy as never before of the caprices of any Congress. The Presidency, historically the center of leadership during our great national ordeals, will be crippled in meeting the inevitable challenges of the future.

"We face a choice between preserving or undermining our Constitution. Do we want to establish a precedent for the future harassment of Presidents and to tie up our government with a protracted national agony of search and accusation? Or do we want to protect the Constitution and get back to the public business?"

"We urge you, whether you are a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent, to oppose the dangerous new theory of impeachment, and to demand the restoration of the normal operations of our federal government."

## A powerful institutional message

In the question and answer period that followed the release of the statement, Dr. Wilentz emphasized that the overwhelming majority of leading American historians signed the statement. In a matter of just three days, after he and Dr. Schlesinger decided to launch the initiative, they had received endorsements from 300 historians. Ultimately, only one of the people approached refused to sign the statement, delivering a powerful message to Congressional Republicans, to Kenneth Starr, and to those cheerleading for the destruction of the Clinton Presidency, that they face major institutional opposition.

Dr. C. Vann Woodward, Civil War historian and, at 90 years of age, the dean of American historians, emphasized that the actions of the House Republicans have created the greatest Constitutional crisis since the attempted impeachment of President Andrew Johnson, 130 years ago. At the time of the Johnson impeachment trial (the Senate voted down the bill of impeachment), Dr. Woodward noted, the United States was not yet a world power. Today, the implications of "a protracted national agony" pose a grave threat to the well-being of citizens of every nation around the globe.

In response to a question, Dr. Schlesinger warned that the actions by the Republican majority in the House threaten to destroy the checks and balances at the heart of the U.S. Constitution, and render the United States a parliamentary democracy, in which prime ministers can be unseated by a vote of no confidence, based on the flimsiest of excuses.

When one reporter at the press conference tried to cast the historians' action as a partisan maneuver by "liberal academics" who all support President Clinton, Wilentz responded, harshly, that, among the signators were a large number of Republicans, and some prominent figures who had called for President Clinton's resignation and made other strong criticisms of the President. He cited author Gary Wills of Northwestern University, who has penned a series of anti-Clinton commentaries, and Franklin Roosevelt biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin, who has also spoken out publicly, criticizing the President's behavior. "This was nonpartisan or bipartisan or transpartisan, however you want to put it," Wilentz said.

The same day that the Historians in Defense of the Constitution released their statement, former Rep. Peter Rodino (D-N.J.), who chaired the House Judiciary Committee during the Watergate hearings, issued a statement to the *Newark Star Ledger*, that the evidence presented to Congress by Kenneth Starr fails to meet the standard of "high crimes and misdemeanors" set forth by the Founding Fathers.