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When Team Clinton Was Subpoenaed, Reporters Found “Hard-Charging Partisans” Wasting Tax Money

Ten Years Ago, Subpoenas Drew TV Yawns

With the Democrats back in power, network anchors are dwelling lovingly on congressional hearings now with liberal stars like Al Gore and Valerie Plame. They’ve shown no loss of appetite for hearings on the U.S. Attorney-firings scandal, deemed a “constitutional crisis” by NBC Wednesday night. But ten years ago, when a Republican Congress prepared subpoenas for the Clinton White House on receiving political contributions from China, viewers heard the networks sing a very different tune.

ABC wondered whether subpoenas and hearings weren’t democracy in action, but a waste of America’s resources. On the April 10, 1997 *World News Tonight*, anchor Peter Jennings promoted a story: “When we come back, two investigations of fundraising abuse, two of them on Capitol Hill. Is it a waste of time and money?” Reporter John Cochran underlined the problem of GOP partisanship: “Dan Burton is a hard-charging partisan and has resisted investigating anyone but Democrats.”

ABC’s Linda Douglass insisted there was public boredom at the end of a story on the July 18, 1997 *World News Tonight*: “Democrats gripe that the hearings are too partisan, so next week the committee will focus on foreign contributions to Republicans, all the while wondering if the public is paying attention to any of this.”

CBS cast the House subpoena plans as a partisan food fight. On the April 11, 1997 *CBS This Morning*, substitute anchor Cynthia Bowers began: “Not long ago, there was a lot of talk on Capitol Hill about returning a sense of civility to congressional debate. Remember that? Well, forget it. When the debate is over money and politics, the gloves come off in the House of Representatives.”

Reporter Bob Schieffer warned: “The House committee trying to investigate campaign irregularities has broken into complete partisan disarray over how much power to give

Republican Chairman Dan Burton....Democrats did everything but throw food when Burton laid out ground rules for the investigation, under which he could subpoena witnesses and documents without the Democrats’ permission....Democrats say Burton is destroying the committee’s credibility by concentrating only on Democratic irregularities....Democrats fear the probe is already out of control.”

On June 17, 1997, *Today* co-host Katie Couric asked reporter Bob Woodward: “But are members of the media, do you think, Bob, too scandal-obsessed, looking for something at every corner?”

On July 31, 1997, the Senate committee probing the Asian money scandal voted unanimously to subpoena the White House after they took months to release documents about illegal donations to the DNC. The only network mention came from Bob Schieffer on the July 30 *CBS Evening News* – but nothing after subpoenas were issued.

NBC theorized that the media were too Clinton-scandal obsessed in 1997. [See box.] On August 1, even as the Senate moved to subpoena the White House, co-host Matt Lauer professed: “But there aren’t any major storm clouds on the horizon for Bill Clinton, other than maybe Medicare reform.” *Newsweek*’s Jonathan Alter replied: “Yeah, but of course there are these possible scandals, but when the economy is doing well, the public really doesn’t seem to care much about anything else.”

On October 8, *Today* co-host Katie Couric framed the hearings for Sen. Arlen Specter: “Perhaps this is an intentional effort to embarrass the Democratic Party?” On the November 7 *Today*, NBC’s Lisa Myers pressed Senator Fred Thompson: “Your hearings clearly reinforced the public’s already low opinion of politicians and politics. Beyond that, what did it accomplish?” — *Tim Graham*

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