

American History: President Clinton's Legal Problems



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President Clinton thanks Democrats in the House of Representatives who opposed his impeachment, as first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton watches, on December 19, 1998

STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we continue the story of America's forty-second president, Bill Clinton. He was a popular and successful president who was re-elected in nineteen ninety-six. But he also became only the second president in American history ever to be put on trial in Congress.

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Clinton's past in Arkansas became the source of accusations and questions about his character as he was running for president. These included questions about financial dealings with a land development company called Whitewater.

In January of nineteen ninety-four, President Clinton asked Attorney General Janet Reno to appoint an independent lawyer to lead an investigation. She named

a Republican, but some critics said her choice was too friendly to the Clinton administration. He was replaced by another Republican, Kenneth Starr.

In nineteen ninety-five the Senate Judiciary Committee began its own investigation of the president. The committee later reported that it had not found evidence of any crimes. However, because the committee was led by Democrats, there was continuing suspicion of the president among Republicans.

The main cause of that suspicion dated back to a purchase of land in Arkansas years earlier. Bill and Hillary Clinton had bought the land in nineteen seventy eight -- the year he was first elected governor of that state. The Clintons formed the Whitewater Development Company with Susan and James McDougal. The goal was to sell vacation homes along a river. However, the company did poorly.

James McDougal also owned Madison Guaranty Savings and Loan, for which Hillary Clinton did legal work. Madison failed during the nineteen eighties. The McDougals were found guilty of wrongdoing in connection with that failure.

A former local judge in Little Rock, the state capital, also became part of the story. In nineteen ninety-four David Hale pleaded guilty to charges of cheating the federal government. That case was in connection with a lending company he owned and was not connected to Whitewater. But Hale accused Bill Clinton of having pressured him while governor to loan money to Susan McDougal and other politically influential people. Clinton denied the accusations.

During the president's first term, investigators sought billing records for Hillary Clinton's past legal work for James McDougal. They wanted to know, in connection with the Whitewater investigation, how much time she had spent on that work. The first lady said she could not find the records. Then, in January of nineteen ninety-six, the billing records appeared without explanation in the White House.

That mystery only added to the suspicions of some Americans. Others thought Kenneth Starr was just wasting taxpayer money on his investigation of the Clintons. They felt it was just for political reasons.

The Whitewater investigation became increasingly complex and difficult to follow. In the end, President Clinton was never charged with any wrongdoing in connection with his financial dealings. But his legal problems did not stop there.

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In nineteen ninety-four, a former Arkansas state employee named Paula Jones sued President Clinton. She brought a civil action accusing him of sexual

harassment while governor of Arkansas. In her lawsuit she said he had asked her for sex. A federal judge dismissed her case for lack of evidence.

Paula Jones appealed that ruling. Her lawyers said they wanted to prove that Clinton had a pattern of such behavior with female employees, including while president. They suspected that these included a twenty-one-year-old woman named Monica Lewinsky. Lewinsky had worked as an unpaid intern in the White House.

Kenneth Starr was still investigating the Whitewater case early in nineteen ninety-eight. He received permission to include Lewinsky in his investigation.

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Monica Lewinsky leaving a Washington
restaurant on February 21, 1998



MONICA LEWINSKY: "Hi.

LINDA TRIPP: "How'd you know it was me?"

MONICA LEWINSKY: "I have Caller ID."

LINDA TRIPP: "What's it say?"

MONICA LEWINSKY: "Linda Tripp."

A former friend of Monica Lewinsky, Linda Tripp, had given Starr tape recordings of her telephone conversations with the younger woman.

MONICA LEWINSKY: "I hate him."

LINDA TRIPP: "No you don't."

MONICA LEWINSKY: "I do."

LINDA TRIPP: "You hate his behavior, at times."

In the recordings, Lewinsky talked about her relationship with the president. What she told her Linda Tripp conflicted with the information she gave to lawyers for Paula Jones. She had told them that the relationship had not been sexual.

Lawyers for Paula Jones also questioned President Clinton. He too denied that the relationship with Monica Lewinsky had been sexual. On January twenty-sixth, nineteen ninety-eight, the president stated his denial to the American public.

BILL CLINTON: "But I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie. Not a single time. Never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for the American people."

Later in the year, the president agreed to answer questions before a federal grand jury.

BILL CLINTON: "The opening statement I made is that I had inappropriate intimate contact. I take full responsibility for it. It wasn't her fault; it was mine. I do not believe that I violated the definition of sexual relations I was given by directly touching those parts of her body with the intent to arouse or gratify. And that's all I have to say."

This was the first time an investigating jury had ever called a president to testify while in office.

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BILL CLINTON: "This afternoon, in this room, from this chair, I testified before the Office of Independent Counsel and the grand jury. I answered their questions truthfully, including questions about my private life, questions no American citizen would ever want to answer.

"Still, I must take complete responsibility for all my actions, both public and private. And that is why I am speaking to you tonight."

After his appearance, the president went on national television and admitted the nature of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. He said his actions were a personal failure, but he denied trying to get her to lie about the relationship.

BILL CLINTON: "As you know, in a deposition in January, I was asked questions about my relationship with Monica Lewinsky. While my answers were legally accurate, I did not volunteer information. Indeed, I did have a relationship with Ms. Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong."

He said his actions were a personal failure. But he denied trying to get her to lie about the relationship.

BILL CLINTON: "But I told the grand jury today and I say to you now that at no time did I ask anyone to lie, to hide or destroy evidence or to take any other unlawful action. I know that my public comments and my silence about this

matter gave a false impression. I misled people, including even my wife. I deeply regret that."

(MUSIC)

Kenneth Starr sent his final report to the House of Representatives. The report suggested that President Clinton may have committed impeachable crimes in trying to hide his relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

In the United States, to impeach a president means to bring charges in the House of Representatives. The charges result in removal from office if the president is found guilty in a trial in the Senate. The chief justice of the United States serves as the judge and the senators serve as the jury.

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In December of nineteen ninety-eight, the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Clinton. The House sent the charges to the Senate to hold a trial. The two articles of impeachment accused him of lying to a federal grand jury and obstructing justice.

Only one other president had ever been impeached. In eighteen sixty-eight, the House of Representatives brought charges against Andrew Johnson. The case related to his removal of a cabinet member. The Senate held a trial, but Andrew Johnson's presidency survived by one vote.

The threat of impeachment led President Richard Nixon to resign in nineteen seventy-four over his cover-up of political wrongdoing in the Watergate case.

BILL CLINTON: "It is up to the members of the House of Representatives to vote their conscience on the Constitution and the law, which I believe are clear. And I have no intention of resigning. It's never crossed my mind."

Bill Clinton still had two years left as president. In public opinion surveys, two-thirds of the people said they opposed removing him from office.

BILL CLINTON: "What I want the American people to know, what I want the Congress to know, is that I am profoundly sorry for all I have done wrong in words and deeds.

"I never should have misled the country, the Congress, my friends, or my family. Quite simply, I gave in to my shame. I have been condemned by my accusers with harsh words.

"And while it's hard to hear yourself called deceitful and manipulative, I remember Ben Franklin's admonition that our critics are our friends, for they do show us our faults."

The Senate decided President Clinton's future in February of nineteen ninety-nine. The one hundred senators held a trial to consider the charges and decide if he should be removed from office. Each charge required sixty-seven votes to find him guilty.

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Ten members of the Republican majority joined Democrats in voting to clear Clinton of the perjury charge. The Senate was evenly divided on the charge of interfering with justice. Thus, no guilty verdict.

Bill Clinton remained president of the United States.

As a historical footnote, as it turned out, Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich was himself cheating on his wife while leading the impeachment action against President Clinton. The difference, Gingrich would say years later, was that Clinton was charged with lying after he legally swore to tell the truth.

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In October nineteen ninety-nine, Kenneth Starr resigned as the independent counsel. An assistant, Robert Ray, completed a final report on the Whitewater investigation. He issued his report in September two thousand. The report said there was not enough evidence to prove any wrongdoing by Bill or Hillary Clinton.

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The Clinton presidency covered much of the decade of the nineteen- nineties. The American cultural and social landscape of the nineties will be our story next week.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.

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