

Congress: While you were out, racists ran amok

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While President Clinton spun a web of deceit about a reckless and sordid sexual affair, while Ken Starr obsessively pursued a holier-than-thou impeachment crusade, while Democrats and Republicans bickered and dithered and dragged out the spectacle of impeachment, other events and trends in the public domain -- some more important than Clinton's mendacity -- went largely unnoticed.

At least one is deeply troubling: the emergence of articulate, energetic networks of white racists with high-profile political and business connections. The Council of Conservative Citizens, a throwback to the segregationist white citizens' councils of the Old South, has members who are well-placed in the Democratic and Republican parties. The leader of a similar group, an outspoken, self-avowed white racist named Matthew Hale, is filing a lawsuit to gain the right to practice law in Illinois, so that he can represent "the interests of white people" in court. (Given the First Amendment, he probably should win the right to practice law, repugnant though he is.)

Now that the ugly impeachment ordeal is over, perhaps the leaders of this country -- from President Clinton to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott -- will come to grips with this threat more dangerous to the republic than Clinton's sex life. Lott especially has a duty to speak out forcefully against these out-of-the-closet racists: He has long consorted with the Council of Conservative Citizens in his home state of Mississippi, thereby granting them political respectability.

Let's be clear about who these people are and what they represent. These are not brain-dead, tattooed ex-convicts of the sort accused of dragging a black man to death in Jasper, Texas, last year. Nor are they the wild-eyed lunatics of the sort who make up those Montana and Idaho militias, brought to national attention during the trial of Oklahoma City mass murderer Timothy McVeigh.

The Council of Conservative Citizens is made up of upstanding, upright, church-going folk -- doctors, dentists, lawyers, businessmen. And its members -- some Republicans, some Democrats -- have claimed important political positions. Across the South, especially Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina, its members are state legislators, city council members, state officials.

But this is not limited to the South. Hale, who calls himself a minister of the World Church of the Creator, believes all nonwhites should be deported and uses a flag of Israel as a doormat. He's from East Peoria, Ill.

Again, let's be clear: These are not garden-variety conservatives opposed to affirmative action and abortion. These are white supremacists who oppose the legacy of the civil rights movement and would bring back the day of white-only restaurants and hotels. The Council of Conservative Citizens, for example, maintains a Web site full of racist venom.

Among other rants on the Web site, "An Open Letter to White People," by writer K. Patton, says, "The presence (in Congress) of even one white person with our interests foremost in his mind is simply unacceptable to the issues-obsessed conservative race traitors. Texas Governor George Bush and his brother Jeb in Florida have manifested their self-hatred by embracing Hispanics ahead of whites. Somehow we must find a way to relieve whites of their self-hatred."

The council's Web site also denounces the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a "liar, sex addict and fellow traveller," bemoans the immigration of people of color with their

"false religions" and "inferior cultures" and frets about "race-mixing," which the council believes will lead to the demise of the white race.

This nation -- diverse as it is -- can survive and prosper only if it honors the principles of equality. Now that Congress is through with the impeachment, maybe it can get to the important business of ferreting out and denouncing a real danger: racists in high places.

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