



Transcripts

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## Weekly Roundtable

### Roundtable Discusses Lewinsky and Iraq

(This is an unedited, uncorrected transcript.)

Feb. 8, 1998

**COKIE ROBERTS** Well, all of these allegations and new allegations and attacks coming from the White House have got everybody in this town, certainly, up in arms. And George Stephanopoulos, Bill Kristol, ABCNEWS analysts, joining us. Are you up in arms?

**BILL KRISTOL, ABC NEWS** No. (Laughter)

**BILL KRISTOL** I'm shocked that there might be leaks coming from various sources.

**COKIE ROBERTS** Shocked? Shocked?

**BILL KRISTOL** Shocked. Shocked. I mean, the thing about the grand jury investigation is if you testify before the grand jury, you're entitled to go out and tell your lawyer about it. Your lawyer is entitled to tell other people's lawyers about it. In fact, President Clinton's lawyers have routinely debriefed all the White House witnesses, and as has the White—Bruce Lindsey, apparently, who works for the President in the White House. Plenty of people know what's been said there. And the notion that Kenneth Starr's office is the only source of leaks strikes me as implausible.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS, ABC NEWS** Well, but the White House does have a valid point about Ken Starr going a little bit overboard on the leaks. And it seemed like Thursday's leak was an attempt to squeeze Monica Lewinsky. But the White House is also ...

**COKIE ROBERTS** "Thursday's leak" meaning Betty Currie ...

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Betty Currie's leak. But the White House is also being a bit disingenuous. When a real damaging charge comes out, someone on background tries to answer it, which is another form of leak. And the leaks work both ways.

**SAM DONALDSON** We know what the White House tactics are. I mean, they've been almost open about it. Attack the press—and perhaps with good reason—attack the independent counsel—perhaps for some good reason—and stonewall on the central issue, which is the President of the United States. And if he has nothing to hide, why is he hiding?

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** I agree with that. And there's a different, long-term strategy, which I think would be far more explosive. White House allies are already starting to whisper about what I'll call the Ellen Roemech (ph) strategy.

**SAM DONALDSON** I remember her.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** You remember her.

**SAM DONALDSON** Oh, yes.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** She was a girlfriend of John F. Kennedy, who also happened to be an East German spy. And Robert Kennedy was charged with getting her out of the country and also getting John Edgar Hoover to go to the Congress and say, don't you investigate this, because if you do, we're going to open up

everybody's closets. And I think that in the long run, they have a deterrent strategy on getting a lot of ...

**GEORGE WILL** Monica Lewinsky is an East German spy? (Laughter)

**SAM DONALDSON** No, but that's a good point. Are you suggesting for a moment that what their beginning to say is that if you investigate this too much, we'll put all your dirty linen right on the table? Every member of the Senate? Every member of the press corps?

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Absolutely. The President said he would never resign, and I think some around him are willing to take everybody down with him.

**SAM DONALDSON** Well, may I just say, let the games begin.

**GEORGE WILL** Well, it's called mutual assured destruction in strategic language.

**COKIE ROBERTS** Or MAD.

**GEORGE WILL** We may assume that we have heard from the President everything that is helpful to him. Now we haven't heard much, and then you draw an inference from that. But the man to watch here, is watch the mailbox of Henry Hyde, who's the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, to whom must come — must, under the law—what Ken Starr decides when he decides he's got all he's going to get.

**BILL KRISTOL** Well, George, I think there's one step before that, if I could interrupt for one second—one step before that, which is this t some point, Kenneth Starr is going to subpoena Bill Clinton to testify in this case as a witness. Clinton has testified before Starr in Whitewater. There's not much precedent for a president refusing to testifying in a criminal case. He's done it before under oath from the White House. But the reason for the attack on

Starr, I believe, is to lay the predicate for the President to say, I will not testify in this case, because if he testifies under oath with Kenneth Starr and his deputies grilling him ...

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** That's just not true. He knows he can't get away with that and not testify. Maybe he won't go to the grand jury, but he'll certainly be questioned in the White House. I think what their trying to lay the predicate for, though, is mainly to get a special counsel to investigate the special counsel. They're trying to get an investigation going.

**COKIE ROBERTS** Why not just fire the special counsel?

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Because it's Saturday night massacre. He knows he can't survive that.

**COKIE ROBERTS** The question of what happens next, though, is a very serious one. And George, you've raised the question of the independent counsel reporting to the Judiciary Committee. But the problem there is — and he does have to, but he can just report I've found nothing or whatever.

**SAM DONALDSON** And he should. Cokie, may I just say that if he doesn't have a strong case, he should report that he doesn't have a strong case? And I think he should do that within a very short period of time. This should not drag out for months and months on the question of whether the independent counsel has evidence.

**COKIE ROBERTS** But the other question is, does he bring what he's got now, boxes of testimony, tie them all up and deliver them to the House of Representatives, which is in terror of that happening? Or does he bring a criminal case against somebody so that they are then dealing with the prosecution, which they much prefer.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** It depends on what he's doing with Monica Lewinsky, which is impossible to

figure out, day to day. But I think in the long run they've determined that this is going up to Henry Hyde. He's not going to bring this in court. And then you have to ask another question. What's going to happen to the rest of the congressional agenda? Is anything going to happen domestically?

**SAM DONALDSON** Not if there's going to be an impeachment investigation. I'm interested in the polls which continue to say the President is popular in this country. Yes, there are some polls about we don't think he's telling the truth and all of that. And I was thinking, that's not so dumb at this point, on the American people to think that way. I'm reminded of that great story about they came to Abraham Lincoln - - they said Grant's a drunkard; it's abysmal; it's terrible; your general. And Lincoln said, well, find out what kind of whiskey he's drinking, I want to send a case of it to my other generals. (Laughter) So at the moment, I think it's reasonable for the country, not seeing any evidence, to say, it's OK with us. But I bet you if the evidence exists, the country won't say that.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** And then what will the Congress do in response?

**BILL KRISTOL** Well, and what will individual congressmen and senators, and especially Democratic ones, do in response? Again, I think there's a step before we get to Henry Hyde, the Republican chairman of the Judiciary Committee, which is what the Democrats—Senator Torricelli, who was here, is not up for re—election this year.

**SAM DONALDSON** He's a brave man, too.

**BILL KRISTOL** Well, you know that he's got five years to go. What does a Senator Patty Murray in Washington, who's got a tough race against Linda Smith, what does Senator Hollings in South Carolina—how do they—what do they feel three or four months from now ...

**COKIE ROBERTS** Well ...

**BILL KRISTOL** ... if there continue to be a stream of revelations, which it looks to me as if there are going to be, that continue to provide lots of corroborating evidence.

**COKIE ROBERTS** We can tell you right now you're not finding any of them in here defending him.

**GEORGE WILL** When the President says "never" to resign, Richard Nixon said "never," in fact. And then one day Barry Goldwater, Johnny Rhodes and Hugh Scott came to him and said, you can't do this to us. And it's very hard—it's impossible, I think, for anyone to resist that. The question is, does the emergency in the Democratic Party occur? And that—I can't ...

**COKIE ROBERTS** But the question is that the polls, though, do make a difference here. I mean, there is a lot of terror on the part of Republicans right now about going forward with this, about having public impeachment hearings. And all ...

**SAM DONALDSON** But impeachment is a political process.

**COKIE ROBERTS** That's right. Inherently political.

**SAM DONALDSON** And it requires the country's acquiescence.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Impeachment is a big, big step. But the closer you get to election day, what do Democrats say? If more and more stories come out, they don't want this to be the only issue in their election in November — whether or not they believe the President, and if so, why? That's why he's got to come out with a more full statement before the election.

**SAM DONALDSON** George, I just have to ask you ... (Laughter) ... you are being accused in the public prints by your former colleagues in the White House of being a

turncoat, or worse.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Yes.

**SAM DONALDSON** How do you feel about that?

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Well, I don't love it. I don't think anybody likes being called a traitor. I don't think that's what I'm doing. I've said that I hope this isn't true. I've said it's heartbreaking. I've said if the President is telling the truth, he'll be vindicated. And I hope he's telling the truth.

**SAM DONALDSON** There's a line in the paper this morning that said that they're angry because you keep saying that the evidence and what the truth is what ought to control it.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** You know, and I'm glad there aren't any names on that, because this can only go so far. You know, I was really amused this week that Fidel Castro has come out and said that the right—wing conspiracy is at work here. And he's blaming the whole thing on Jesse Helms. (Laughter) The best—it's the best ally that the White House has had, I suppose, yet. But people aren't saying this on the record. And I think this also goes to Betty Currie. The reason the Betty Currie story, if true, was so damaging is she's unimpeachable. She's — everybody loves her. Everybody thinks she tells the truth. And that's one more reason why the President has to tell the story.

**COKIE ROBERTS** Well, this will not end this week. But Iraq is also before us. And we'll be back to talk about that in just a minute. (Commercial Break)

**COKIE ROBERTS** The situation in Iraq seems to be getting tenser. Secretary Cohen is now in the Middle East,

trying to convince Arab states that it's a good thing for the United States to attack. George Will, what do you make of this?

**GEORGE WILL** Well, it is an awful problem with an awful man there, but it's always, always possible to make matters worse. And at some point, someone has to ask the "then what" question After we do this, then what? When Yamamoto was asked, could you sink the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, he said yes, and I'll run wild in the Pacific for six months to a year. Then what?

**SAM DONALDSON** Yes, I think there are two things at work here. On one side, Saddam has won. On the other side, I think the President is right to limit, at this point, before it gets any farther down the track, particularly with all this talk about let's assassinate—George, to limit our goals, because if we cannot achieve the goals, it's silly of us to keep saying that we can. And apparently we can't.

**BILL KRISTOL** I think we can achieve the goals if we're willing to use the means.

**SAM DONALDSON** Yes, that's right. But what means would you stop at?

**COKIE ROBERTS** You'd have to use ground troops.

**BILL KRISTOL** You'd have to use ground troops.

**SAM DONALDSON** Whose?

**BILL KRISTOL** American ground troops. What the President said this week—there was an important change in administration position. On Friday, the President abandoned his claim that air strikes could deny Saddam Hussein the capacity to have weapons of mass destruction. He said we could only delay his getting them. That means that the position of the United States is going to be we can live with Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction. I think we should debate that. I mean, the



President's position is coherent. Air strikes, punish him a little, but basically we can't do anything about it. The alternative is to send ground troops over there and go after Saddam Hussein and get rid of him. And I am for that, and the American people, amazingly enough, in a poll, though no one has made this case to them yet, by 46 to 44 say they would support using ground troops.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** But Bill, that poll doesn't mean anything. I mean, I think that's the real problem here. The President is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. He can't achieve ...

**COKIE ROBERTS** And in fact, that poll was half and half. (Laughter)

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** ... yes, the bigger goal. And the public isn't prepared for the ground troop debate. Remember, it took six months before George Bush went in to talk about sending in 500,000 troops. And it was still pretty split. The public is ready for an air strike. They're not ready for a ground war.

**SAM DONALDSON** Five—hundred thousand troops of a dozen nations.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Right.

**SAM DONALDSON** Even though our's was the bulk. We had a lot of support. Look at Saudi Arabia here. It's stunning to me that they're saying no.

**GEORGE WILL** But Sam—Sam, for 40 years we deterred and largely contained a far more dangerous nation, the Soviet Union. Granted their leadership wasn't as reckless as this man, but deterrence and containment did work. And we held on until the regime changed itself organically. Now, that's one alternative strategy for dealing with Iraq. But if not ...

**COKIE ROBERTS** But we held on with ground

troops in Germany.

**GEORGE WILL** Exactly. But if not, if the man is as dangerous as the administration says he is—and they can make a plausible case — then that's why you have military, is to fight.

**SAM DONALDSON** George, your point is very good. The bag of sugar. They keep making the case, and I think a lot of us believe they have a strong case, that he is that dangerous. And yet, the thought that we can mobilize US ground forces in some reasonable short period of time, and go in and get him is one that I agree maybe the end solution, but the American people, at the moment, I don't think, are prepared for it.

**BILL KRISTOL** Well, they haven't been prepared for it, but the job of leadership is to prepare them. It wouldn't take nearly as many troops as it would last time. He's much weaker. But think about this. We're going to launch air strikes, apparently, in a couple of weeks, is the current plan. We don't have even minimal ground troops there. It is irresponsible to launch air strikes without at least having a division or two there. What if you have two or three days of air strikes, there's insurrection in the south. Saddam goes in in the North against the free zone, the no-fly zone there. You need to at least have a division there to help out.

**COKIE ROBERTS** We have a lot of aircraft carriers.

**SAM DONALDSON** And a division wouldn't do it.

**BILL KRISTOL** A division or two would do it. And we have very troops on the ground there. I mean, I really think what's going to happen in this ...

**SAM DONALDSON** You think two division can do it?

**BILL KRISTOL** I think four divisions can do it.

**SAM DONALDSON** I'd like to hear from the military.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** So are you arguing for a delay in the air strikes?

**BILL KRISTOL** Well, I'm not. But I do think there's a serious problem that the administration's getting itself into now, which is, at some point, people are going to say, half-hearted air strikes is worse than doing nothing. I really think that may be the case.

**COKIE ROBERTS** What about the problem of diplomacy, because the people that are working toward diplomacy seem to be the French and the Russians. Now if they come up with some solution, is that in our national interest?

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Well, it could be. And both the President and Prime Minister Blair said that if it were a workable diplomatic solution, then it would be OK ...

**SAM DONALDSON** Why would Saddam agree? I mean, he's won.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** That's the question.

**GEORGE WILL** But any solution has to be couched in terms of Saddam saying something—X, Y or Z. And nothing he says is believable.

**BILL KRISTOL** For four years we had UN inspectors in there. We didn't know that he had biological weapons. We didn't learn that he had biological weapons until his son—in-law defected and told us where they were. The notion that the status quo is acceptable, I think, should be rejected by the President. And I think if he showed leadership, there would be more support among the American people for getting rid of Saddam. We cannot live—we cannot live with Saddam with biological weapons.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** But there will be more support. I think that there could be two steps here in initial air strike, and then the President can go to country after that and maybe get support.

**SAM DONALDSON** Then he has to make the case to the country for ground troops.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS** Yes.

**COKIE ROBERTS** And maybe he will.

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