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Trends. The Senate Trial of President Clinton: There's More than One Way to Wag the Dog

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Wagging the dog has entered the political lexicon as staging a crisis to avert attention from a pressing political problem. In the movie that popularized the term, a Hollywood producer and staff of the President of the United States (US) stage a phony war to minimize mass media attention from the President's sexual molestation of a minor. Wagging the dog was then applied retroactively and a posteriori to the current U.S. President. Facing impeachment, conviction, and removal from office, he threatened to launch and did launch attacks on Iraq.

However, wagging the dog has long had a different meaning. It has referred to a very minor aspect of an entity controlling a major part or all of that entity as in a tail wagging the dog as opposed to a dog wagging its tail. This meaning of wagging the dog also may be applied to the President's political problems in a manner empathetic to his travails.

In events leading up to the U.S. House of Representatives impeachment vote and affecting and constituting part of the U.S. Senate trial, Republican Party House managers have paid homage to the hoary and sacrosanct rule of law to the virtual exclusion of all other factors. The managers have done this by insisting that all violations of the law are equally insidious--e.g., perjury is perjury, whether about sex, electronically bugging one's domestic political opponents, or selling secrets to the country's direst enemies. Yet, this total focus on law violation--even if this is no more than a façade for "getting" a President from the opposing political party or kowtowing to the Christian Right--violates the law. All aspects of the U.S. criminal justice system are predicated on and operate according to the principle that any two law violations--even if identically classified--have different features that may lead to different kinds of investigation, adjudication, and corrections procedures. In fact, the House managers are living contradictions of their own contentions by their harping on all law violations as equally egregious and necessarily leading to impeachment, conviction, and removal from office and by their tail of law violation wagging the dog of the rule, purpose, and intent of law. As this dawns on more and more of "the people," the managers may need to resort to the other wagging the dog in the run up to the 2000 elections. (See Choi, I., & Nisbett, R.E. (1998). Situational salience and cultural differences in the correspondence bias and actor-observer bias. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24, 949-960; Farthing, G.W., Venturino, M., Brown, S.W., & Lazar, J.D. (1997). *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 45, 433-446; Gelpi, C. (1997). Democratic diversions: Governmental structure and the externalization of domestic conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41, 255-282; Rosen, S., & Grandison, R.J. (1994). Effects of topic valence and pictorial distractor valence on verbalizing and evaluating topic-evoked visual imagery. *Motivation and Emotion*, 18, 249-268.) (Keywords: Bill Clinton, House of Representatives, Impeachment, Republicans, Senate, Sex, Trial.)