

Exorcism Down in the Rat Maze

Lowell Ponte

Redlands, CA — Springtime in ancient Babylon brought the annual religious festival called Akitu. From far corners of the empire worshippers dragged their city idols to the capital via crooked dirt roads for the celebration — a spectacle which prompted the exiled prophet Isaiah to scoff, "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

During Akitu, priests governed Babylon. The King went into city streets, picked some lowly citizen, and by throwing his robe around him made the poor man symbolic king of the festival. While the ten-day celebration lasted, this surrogate king got all food and intoxicants, run of the royal harem, and numerous other exotic pleasures owed the king.

On the final day of Akitu the priests recited the creation myths concerning death and rebirth. Then the symbolic king was ceremoniously executed. The robes were handed back to the real king, who as reborn ruler could govern Babylon for another year, his power resurrected and renewed.

This spring in Washington the idols are being gathered, the sacred Constitution consulted, and national destiny divined, all with an eye to the political ritual execution — impeachment, we now call it — of the ruler. Former Senator McCarthy, in a display of pragmatism his 1968 followers must find amazing, opposes such punishment in our capital. He prefers playing cat and mouse (cat and rat?) with President Nixon, using "vacuums and pressures" to prod the crippled leader into taking socially useful actions. Apparently he believes Mr. Nixon is on the run, and that the President's political vulnerabilities make it easy to foreclose old conser-



"FAREWELL, A LONG FAREWELL, TO ALL MY GREATNESS!"

Harper's Weekly, March 13, 1969, commemorated President Johnson's departure from office.

vative paths and steer him into new channels.

Perhaps McCarthy is right: Mr. Nixon is so desperate for any political victory that he will let himself become surrogate king of a Democratic festival. But with so many clouds over all politicians in Washington, it is hard to tell victims from victimizers amid the

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shadows. Why is Senator McCarthy's accent more on vacuums than pressures? Why does he rejoice at new Congressional opportunities to relinquish power and responsibility to the executive branch — at a time when Americans are beginning to perceive that our Vietnam involvement, recession, moral despond, and sundry other evils are precisely the result of too much power flowing from Congress, the Courts, and the People into the hands of the White House?

If impeachment offers anything to America, it is catharsis. Because we cannot condemn ourselves, we frankly need a good, ugly scapegoat on whom we can blame our sins, and by whose exorcism we can purge the body politic of its accumulated poisons. By remov-

ing surgically the occupant of the White House, many politicians hope to preserve and renew the magic once attached to "The Presidency," and to their power as courtiers as well.

Somewhere along the way most of us got trapped with Eugene McCarthy down in the rat maze; we developed tunnel vision and lost our perspective on the meaning of politics. Recalling some ancient rituals, like the Akitu Festival, can help us see again the bigger picture.

Consider, for example, that only half of Rome fell. The other half, the Eastern Empire centered by Constantine in Byzantium, endured a thousand years after the half centered at Rome was ground into dust. The Eastern Empire had a secret to its success: a two-party political system much like ours, whose opposed factions called themselves "The Blues" and "The Greens."

What The Blues or The Greens stood for we know not. They probably played musical chairs with issues, much like our Republicans and Democrats. But the bigger point is that their philosophies did not matter. Like ours, the Byzantine government was firmly controlled by a bureaucracy that changed little from administration to administration, from century to century. The ebb and flow of the parties rarely influenced the bureaucrats, who viewed elections more as opinion polls than as mandates for change.

But for the populace the political contests were a major form of entertainment. Each week the parties confronted one another at the Constantinople coliseums; Blues and Greens shouted at each other, waved banners, got drunk, cheered election victors and wept for the vanquished. Politics was sport. And so it always is, for the military theorist Karl von Clausewitz was wrong by 180 degrees; in the real world politics is the continuation of war by other means. Rome weakened and died in large part because her one-party political system meant the government was endlessly subject to coup

d'état, rival successors, and assorted internal tyrannies. Constantinople thrived because she developed a political system that let citizens play mock war. Blue vs. Green; that satisfied their combative urges, provided a lightning rod for public tensions, and created the unifying illusion that the people were the government.

The genius of two-party politics, as Constantinople and modern Washington demonstrate, is that those

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playing the game get lost in the illusion. Some actually believe, despite evidence that the parties are funded by the same bankrolls and are in reality two heads on the same body, that by the victory of one party or the other some fundamental changes can come in the direction and concentration of power.

We can appreciate the aesthetics of impeachment better if we realize its prime effect is psychological. The world will not end tomorrow if the President is cut down. Such beliefs are the delusions of those who think the President in fact has power, or that the sun would not rise tomorrow if tonight Washington, D.C., sinks into the Potomac. Inasmuch as what Americans most need is a sense of renewal and revitalization, a tastefully performed impeachment morality play might prove exactly what the doctor ordered. We have been taking politics too seriously lately anyway, and we have all been spending too many precious hours of the day on political soap operas lacking mythic depth, relaxing humor, or cathartic tragedy. Impeachment would enrich the plot line, and the moral content of this drama. Off with his head, or at least his crown.

McCarthy knows, of course, that impeachment would likely fail. The members of Congress are largely men, puffed up with hot air and jello spines — characters in search of an authority. But even so, the drama might create a newer and more interesting Nixon. At one Akitu festival in the 19th century B.C., the king threw his robe around a poor gardener named Bel-Ibni, who became surrogate king. But before the festival ended, the real king dropped dead. In panic the priests consulted their astrology charts and decided that the gods meant this as an omen to Babylon. The gardener was installed as permanent king, and his reign ushered in a millenium of great success for the empire. At Akitu the following year, his Highness Bel-Ibni by a toss of his robe elected another poor citizen temporary monarch of the festival and stepped back to watch the little man rejoice, absorb in scapegoat fashion the pretense and hatred heaped on him by visitors from throughout the empire, then take the knife destiny and the gods had ordained as the price of wearing the festive crown. Bel-Ibni probably wandered quietly around his city, smiling at the slow luxuriant growth of the hanging gardens near the palace. As the crowds grew drunk and cried for blood, he for a brief moment was the only one who remembered the once and future king.

P.S. Had McCarthy's letter come to me on a day when I felt less philosophical, I'd have probably declared impeachment an outmoded part of the Constitution, like formal Declarations of War — bits of scripture to be overlooked, like "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." What we need instead is a computer that could pick a random American to be President every four years, so we need not choose a lesser evil from a bunch of people obsessed with power and glory. But, gods willing, that message comes through in my letter anyway.

Fortieth Congress U.S. Second Session

SENATE CHAMBER,
May 16th and 26th 1868

The vote of the Senate sitting as a High Court of Impeachment for the trial of **ANDREW JOHNSON**, President of the United States, upon the 11th, 2nd and 3rd Articles

W. Bradley Chief Justice

W. M. Howey Secretary

Guilty

- 1 *B. J. Leake*
- 2 *H. M. Corbett*
- 3 *Ceciliaus Cole*
- 4 *L. H. W. W. W.*
- 5 *W. M. Stewart*
- 6 *M. Patterson*
- 7 *John S. Smith*
- 8 *James W. Smith*
- 9 *John W. Stone*
- 10 *Henry Wilson*
- 11 *A. W. Craigie*
- 12 *C. O. Sprague*

- 13 *Jas. Harlan*
- 14 *Os. Johnson*
- 15 *Ally. Ramsey*
- 16 *Sam. Cornish*
- 17 *Geo. Edmunds*
- 18 *Sen. J. D. Huntington*
- 19 *W. M. Howey*
- 20 *Sam. Howard*
- 21 *S. C. Pomeroy*
- 22 *W. J. Willey*
- 23 *Rich. Yates*

- 24 *Charles Sumner*
- 25 *Geo. S. Coates*
- 26 *Geo. H. Williams*
- 27 *Z. Chandler*
- 28 *G. P. Morgan*
- 29 *Sam. Sherman*
- 30 *John M. Clayton*
- 31 *Reese Jenkins*
- 32 *C. O. Drake*
- 33 *Simon Cameron*
- 34 *S. W. Lipton*
- 35 *O. P. Morton*

Not Guilty

- 1 *J. A. Hendricks*
- 2 *W. A. Allison*
- 3 *J. F. Johnson*
- 4 *M. C. Little*
- 5 *H. C. Henry*
- 6 *George Vickers*

- 7 *J. P. Henderson*
- 8 *Simon Fairbank*
- 9 *E. L. Ross*
- 10 *W. P. Cyprian*
- 11 *Sam. Davis*
- 12 *J. T. Bayard*
- 13 *W. S. Fowler*

- 14 *John C. Breckinridge*
- 15 *Sam. J. Johnson*
- 16 *Willard Saulsbury*
- 17 *Henry Johnson*
- 18 *Wm. M. Wood*
- 19 *James D. Porter*