

Impeachment: A Conversation

Between William F. Buckley, Jr. and John Kenneth Galbraith

FRANK MCGEE: We're back now with William F. Buckley, Jr., the conservative spokesman, writer and editor of the *National Review* and with Harvard economist and writer, John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the outstanding spokesmen for liberalism. Gentlemen, in the year ahead, presumably the question of whether President Nixon is to be impeached is to be resolved. Should he be impeached, Mr. Buckley?

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.: I think that there's a very good argument for impeaching him, largely ritualistic. People feel that it is justice unconsummated if they don't hand down an indictment. It is important to stress to those people who forget that to impeach is not to convict.

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH: I would think so, yes. It would be hard to assume Mr. Nixon's innocence, and also, this could be a case where innocence is almost worse than guilt. If he did not know all of these things that were going on, he is a terrible man to be in charge of fissionable material. Innocence is not an impeachable crime, so let me anticipate Bill on that. But, no surely, this process should go ahead. I would like to see it go ahead with, if I may coin the phrase, all deliberate speed. Because I think that when it happens, it shouldn't be assumed that it's a plot by John Chancellor and Frank McGee and the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. But there should be no doubt about it, and there are other shoes that will drop. Because as Mr. Congressman Ashbrook, Bill's friend, once said, "Richard Nixon on these matters is a centipede."

McGEE: Polls show that public confidence in the President is low, very low. But the same polls show that most people do not believe that

he should be impeached. Now do you see any contradiction in this? How do you interpret this public attitude?

BUCKLEY: They don't think the alleged offenses are serious enough to warrant the invocation of a remedy that has, in fact, never been used in the history of the United States. That answers that, and successfully short. I might just say in connection with Mr. Galbraith's suggestion that if in fact Nixon is not guilty he is presumably incompetent, that it is lucky that he doesn't apply such rigorous standards to his colleagues — for instance, in the economics profession — who go on year after year after year making predictions that are not borne out. Why doesn't he call on them to resign their professorships and go back to school?

GALBRAITH: I certainly apply the same standards, as my colleagues know. I don't call on people to resign because of . . .

BUCKLEY: Or be impeached . . . what does it take to impeach a Harvard professor?

GALBRAITH: I wouldn't like to have to deny people their income and I am certainly not going to deny Mr. Nixon his wealth either. I would like to ask Bill a question, could I?

McGEE: Oh sure.

GALBRAITH: Bill, if Mr. Nixon is guilty as charged of this broad range of offenses, would you impeach him and would you impeach him if you were a Democrat rather than a Republican?

BUCKLEY: Oh this would make absolutely no difference to me. See, I think that it is extremely important in a republic society to have certain

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GALBRAITH: This is a slightly evasive answer, but would you or wouldn't you?

BUCKLEY: What the definition is of a high crime and misdemeanor is simply not known. My own feeling, as unequivocally put down in the *New York Times* in May, is that the impeachment procedure is something that one invokes when it becomes necessary to replace a president rather than punish him. Therefore I would want my own motives to be very clear to me. Do I believe that the safety requires a replacement of this man?

GALBRAITH: Do you have some instinct here that we have had not an answer but a cover-up, Frank?

McGEE: I won't pass judgment. I would ask a question. Do you think that the move to impeach the President is largely politically inspired?

BUCKLEY: Oh, I don't think that there's any question about it. I don't know of any commentator, not John Chancellor, not that whole bunch, who didn't say that one of the reasons that the congressmen want to go back to their constituents is to find out from them what they want them to do. They're not going back to study the law books . . .

McGEE: Let me phrase the question better then. Is it partisan politics, rather than politics?

BUCKLEY: I don't really distinguish between the two. The congressmen, for the most part, want to be re-elected. In order to be re-elected they have to accost this issue. On this issue, they have to be able to predict the public mood in November. Those who want to vote for impeachment are predicting that they will be rewarded by their constituents. Those who are reluctant to do so feel that it might be popular now but it might not be popular then.

GALBRAITH: Just one other question. Who is taking the leadership, Bill, on impeachment, the Republicans or the Democrats, would you say?

BUCKLEY: I don't see any leadership at all — whose leadership?

GALBRAITH: We surely are having difficulty getting answers . . .

BUCKLEY: I don't see any leadership in the thing. And does any name spring to mind to you, as the equivalent of the leadership of the impeachment forces?

GALBRAITH: I would think that one of the original spokesmen on these matters — one of the original critics — has been Senator Goldwater. He's more outspoken than any other politician . . .

BUCKLEY: I don't know that he has called for impeachment.

GALBRAITH: No, but he has been very, very critical of the President's behavior and lack of candor and . . .

BUCKLEY: So have I . . . so have I.

GALBRAITH: I would suppose that he has done more to set the stage for impeachment than almost any other senator.

BUCKLEY: Galbraith is spoiled. He likes to have presidents, and occasionally he does have presidents, who do exactly what he wants them to do. I have never had a president do what I wanted him to do. I am perpetually dissatisfied. And it is very dissatisfying because when the Galbraiths are in power, they heap more and more authority on these presidents, which is therefore used to my disadvantage.

McGEE: Let me ask then, are we at a turning point where power is going to be denied the President? Taken from him? Is Congress going to reassert its role or are we just

going through some spasm here and when it is all said and done we will be pretty much like we were?

GALBRAITH: Well things always remain more alike than they change. I think it is permanent, but nothing changes very much. We are not taking power away from the President; we have an extremely complicated economy which requires management, guidance and intelligence, or else it won't work as it does now. It is not, as Bill imagines, a matter of ideological choice. We have no choice. Circumstances force power on the government.

BUCKLEY: Well, circumstances do, but it is also, I think, the most liberating insight in the history of free government, that the more the government attempts to do, the more it tends to screw things up.

McGEE: May I just ask you if you think the President's authority and power will be reduced, or should be?

BUCKLEY: Both. The answer is yes.

GALBRAITH: Could I make a distinction here? I don't think there is any possibility of reducing the authority of the federal executive. I must say that I do agree with Bill that the mystery surrounding the President — the mystique of the imperial White House, the mystique of the cars and the planes and the guards and this elaborate apparatus — has got out of hand, under both Democrats and Republicans.

McGEE: Before this trend toward agreement gets out of hand, let's take time for this message and then let you get at each other again . . .

The question that I would like to pose is, first, in the upcoming Congressional elections, is this a Demo-

cratic year or a Republican year?

GALBRAITH: Well, I think it would depend, to some extent, on how long Mr. Nixon lasts in office. If he lasts until the time of the elections, it will unquestionably be, as the commentators say and as has become the cliché, a Democratic sweep. I also think that there might be an adverse reaction to Democrats who have been ducking the issues of whether or not the President should be impeached.

BUCKLEY: I find that very reassuring because the last prediction that I heard Mr. Galbraith make was McGovern in a landslide in 1972. So, assuming that he hasn't done a little basic studying of politics, and he has given no evidence of it today, I would say that a Republican Congress is pretty safe. But actually, actually, he is correct.

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