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# Impeachment Then and Now

By Aram Bakshian Jr.

WASHINGTON—As a small boy I witnessed the wave of rage and rebellion that swept Washington when Harry Truman sacked General MacArthur. The Truman Administration had already experienced more than its share of scandals (State and Justice Departments, Internal Revenue and White House staff, to name a few disaster sites), and charges of "the most corrupt Administration in American history" whistled through the air like grapeshot.

Exultant voices of anti-Truman radio commentators, such as Fulton Lewis Jr., broadcast nightly promises that impeachment was just around the corner. Opposition hardliners in the Congress were not long in taking up the call, warning the lonely figure in the White House to get out before he was kicked out.

For some reason, Clark Clifford, a sometime contributor to these pages and a Truman confidant, did not then advocate resignation and the formation of a new "Government of national unity."

The attack, of course, was made in the name of outraged decency. A cover given a few slender shreds of plausibility by the misconduct not of Truman but of some of his aides and old political cronies. Then, too, there was the famous Truman temper, often directed at gentlemen of the fourth estate. Whether it took the form of malicious mimicry of the venerable (but anti-Truman) newscaster, H. V. Kaltenborn, or threatening the music critic of *The Washington Post* with a fate ordinarily reserved for aspiring oxen and boy sopranos, Harry Truman seemed to seek out confrontations with the press. However, since these little collisions were not televised and rerun nightly, few people gave them a second thought outside Washington.

Unfortunately, I lived in Washington and was not yet ten years old, so I took all of the partisan, press-bred frenzy much more seriously than Truman or the general public. Daily I awaited news of his resignation or impeachment. Daily I was disappointed.

I wonder what that tough little Missouri bantam would make of the current crisis in Washington. What would his reaction be to the same old battle fought over again with a new electronic weapon, television, on the side of the President-stalkers? Now it's no secret that Richard Nixon was never one of Harry Truman's favorite people but, whatever his personal feelings, I am sure that the man from Independence, keen amateur historian that he was, would see this case in its true historical perspective.

Quite probably, he would think back beyond his own ordeal to that of another beleaguered President, Andrew Johnson, who was impeached at the hands of his political and journalistic foes but not found guilty.

A young writer named John Kennedy described the climate of Andrew Johnson's Washington in a book called "Profiles in Courage." The capital city, Kennedy wrote, had become "the central point of the politically dissatisfied and swarmed with representatives of every state of the Union, demanding in practically united voice the depo-



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sition of the President." According to a newspaper of the day, *The Philadelphia Press*, there was a "fearful avalanche of telegrams from every section of the country," calling for the ouster of the President. The car not having been invented yet, anti-Johnson forces were deprived of the horn as a political weapon.

In the end, despite a torrent of leaks, allegations and rumors, Andrew Johnson, though impeached, was not found guilty. The votes of seven Republican Senators—honorable adversaries who put conscience above party—tilted the balance. One of them, Lyman Trumbull, a veteran legislator from Illinois, had opposed almost all of Johnson's policies but refused to use impeachment as a means of deposing a man who was innocent of any proven crime or misdemeanor.

"Once set the example of impeaching a President for what, when the excitement of the House shall have subsided, will be regarded as insufficient cause," Trumbull warned, and "no future President will be safe who happens to differ with a majority of the House and two-thirds of the Senate on any measure deemed by them important. What then becomes of the checks and balances of the Constitution so carefully devised and vital to its perpetuity?"

Most Americans seem to have

agreed, both then and now. Even after the shock of the now-famous lost weekend, a Gallup Poll finds 55 per cent of the public against impeachment and only 28 per cent for it, a margin actually slightly stronger against impeachment than a Harris Poll taken in September before the latest cloudburst on the Potomac.

One suspects that, despite any philosophical differences they might have with the present occupant of their old official residence, Messrs. Kennedy and Truman—not to mention Andrew Johnson—would be among that sensible 55 per cent if they were still with us today.

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