

JUNE 19, 2003

The media politics of impeachment

Early summer has brought a flurry of public discussion about a topic previously confined to political margins – the possibility of impeaching President George W. Bush. The idea is still far from the national media echo chamber, but some rumblings are now audible as people begin to think about the almost unthinkable. A few generations of Americans are apt to view impeachment as an extreme step. One factor has been John F. Kennedy's widely read 1956 book "Profiles in Courage," which captured a Pulitzer Prize. The book devoted a chapter to lauding Sen. Edmund G. Ross of Kansas, whose "not guilty" vote prevented the Senate from convicting an impeached president, Andrew Johnson, on May 26, 1868.

In real life, Ross – who promptly put the squeeze on President Johnson for a series of patronage appointments – was hardly the idealist that Kennedy's book cracked him up to be. But the chapter's melodrama popularized a negative image of impeachment.

That outlook was especially strong for nearly 20 years, until a few of President Richard Nixon's lies caught up with him. During many months of the Watergate scandal, throughout late 1972 and 1973, defenders of the president routinely blamed journalists. Republicans insisted that the Washington Post and some other "liberal" news outlets were just trying to make trouble for Nixon – who, after all, had recently won re-election in a landslide.

While the specter of impeachment grew, Nixon diehards insisted that the president was being unfairly targeted – until released tapes of the chief executive made him politically indefensible. When Nixon finally resigned in August 1974, the new president uttered a phrase that instantly became famous. Gerald Ford told the nation: "Our long national nightmare is over."

That's how the news media have tended to portray impeachment, with coverage largely presenting it as an ordeal that involves a lot of attorneys and vast piles of legal documents. But impeachment is not really about law or even about evidence. It's all about politics. As a political weapon, impeachment will be used to the extent that the president's foes believe they can get away with it. While the Constitution speaks of

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"high crimes and misdemeanors," that provision offers scant clarity about standards for impeachment. In recent decades, we have seen it utilized as an appropriate tool (against Nixon) and as an instrument of political overkill (against Bill Clinton). In both instances, the media climate determined the possibilities and impacts of impeachment.

In general, the punditocracy is averse to the option of impeachment and reflexively dismisses any such suggestion. Misuses of presidential power – and outright mendacity in the service of policy objectives – are political realities, accepted or even avidly supported as long as they remain within vaguely customary limits. Few editorial writers or other commentators want to risk seeming too far ahead of the media curve by suggesting that the latest presidential deceptions might rise to the level of impeachable offenses.

At the height of the Iran-Contra scandal, in 1987, journalists frequently made excuses for President Ronald Reagan. There was much media talk about the imperative of avoiding another "failed presidency" scarcely a dozen years after Watergate. On "NBC Nightly News," the venerable broadcaster John Chancellor declared: "Nobody wants another Nixon." Chicago Tribune editor James Squires cautioned reporters not to repeat the "excesses" of Watergate. And the relative restraint of the Washington Post and other outlets was symbolized by the fact that the Post's publisher, Katharine Graham, often socialized with the president's wife, Nancy Reagan, and publicly touted her as a dear friend.

Democrats in Congress did little to challenge the demagoguery of fast-talking Jimmy Stewart impersonator Oliver North – a former Reagan team operative who was greatly assisted by the news media. Lieutenant Colonel North held "an entire nation enthralled" during his congressional testimony, Ted Koppel told ABC viewers. On NBC, Chancellor called it "a terrific performance" that "played in Peoria."

During the Iran-Contra hearings on Capitol Hill, journalists frequently reported as though the proceedings would be inconclusive unless a Perry Mason style of ironclad proof emerged. Longtime political analyst Elizabeth Drew commented on the irony that people were "searching for a smoking gun in a room filled with smoke."

Midway through 2003, there's plenty of smoke as clear evidence emerges that President Bush and several of his top foreign policy officials lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq during the lead-up to the war. In this context, impeachment is a reasonable idea. But with Congress run by Republicans – and with news media all too deferential to entrenched power – the chances of a serious investigation in Washington are very slim. ■