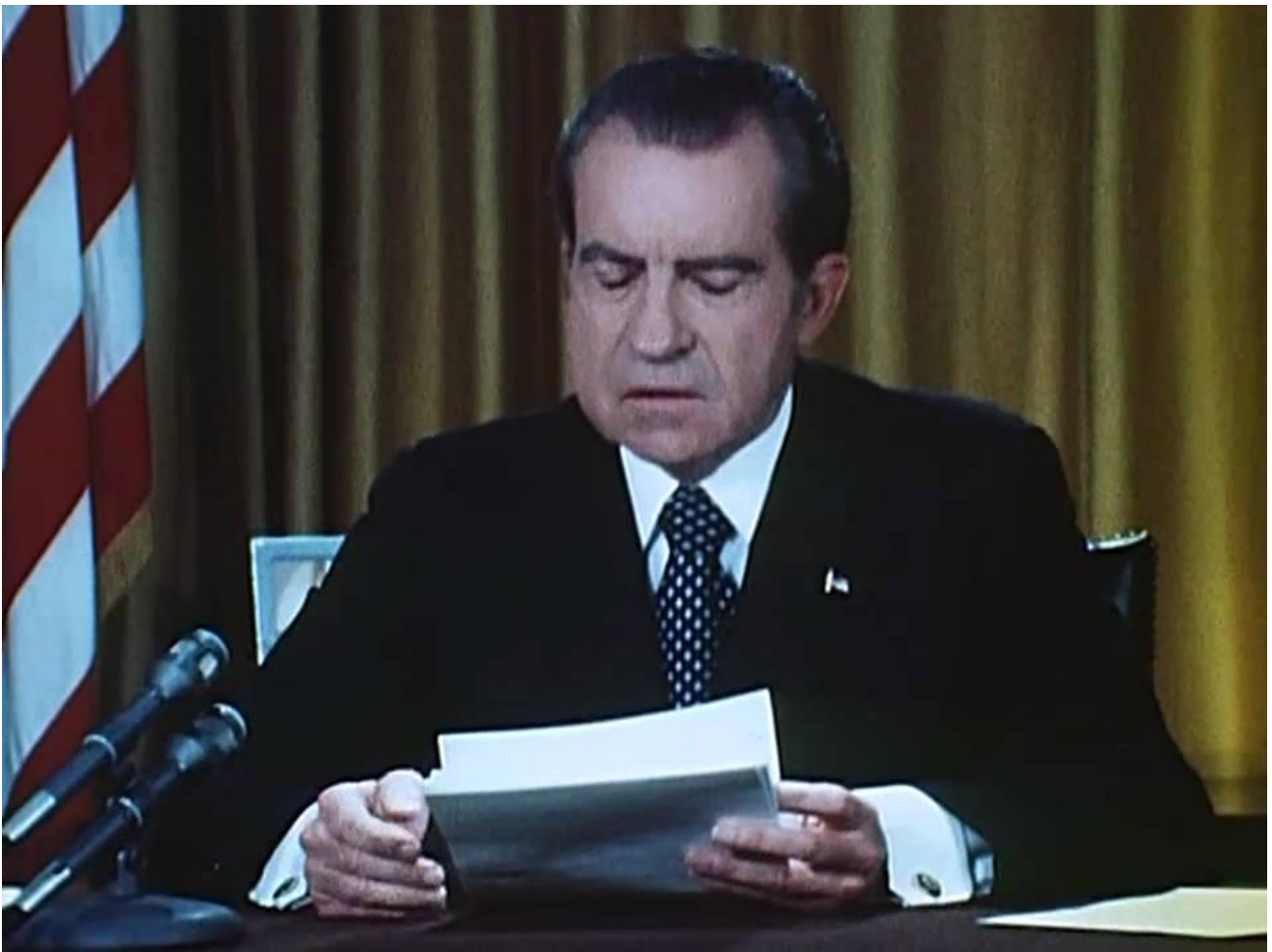


Nixon's Lessons for the Would-Be Impeachers

Only extremely grave offenses should deprive Americans' right to choose their president. Nixon didn't meet the impeachment bar. Neither does Trump.

by Conrad Black



One thing that will quite possibly be achieved by the nonsensical impeachment investigation being conducted in the House of Representatives is the end of the extreme criminalization of policy differences. Andrew Johnson was impeached in 1868 (an election year in which he would not be nominated) for firing the secretary of war for insubordination, because the majority in the Congress, with not all the Southerners reinstated and Johnson a Tennessean

whom Abraham Lincoln had chosen to run with him to emphasize national unity, resented Johnson's conciliatory approach to the South. Johnson survived the outrageous allegations against him by one Senate vote, and he became (again by one vote in Tennessee), one of only two ex-presidents to return to Congress (John Quincy Adams was the other). After a lengthy wait, he gave a powerful defense before his former Senate colleagues and judges. This was such a debilitating constitutional experience that the country did not go near presidential impeachment again for over a century.

One of the many galling aspects of the contemptible farce being conducted by the House Democratic leadership is the historical myth-making they glibly inflict on the country. This is the mentality that held that the detention centers on the southern border, were, to Speaker Nancy Pelosi, reminiscent of Nazi death camps. Each asinine day in this absurd divertissement is "prayerful and solemn," Pelosi laments, adding that the hearings prove that this president's conduct was "much worse than Nixon's" and that "he should resign," too.

He was narrowly elected in 1968 in a country wracked by constant racial and anti-war rioting, after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and with 545,000 draftees in Vietnam, 200 to 400 coming home in body bags every week, with no concept of an exit strategy and all for an uncertain objective. Difficult though the times were, at one point or another in 1968, Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Robert Kennedy, Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan, and Richard Nixon were all running for president. They were all outstanding men; the comparison with the animated flotsam seeking the Democratic nomination today does not incite optimism about the trajectory of the country, or at least of the Democrats.

Though his opponents controlled both houses of the Congress, Nixon had one of the most successful presidential terms in the

country's history. He ended the Vietnam War while conserving a non-Communist government in Saigon; opened relations with China; signed the greatest arms-control agreement in history, with the USSR, and started the de-escalation of the Cold War; ended school segregation without the court-ordered busing of millions of children out of their neighborhoods; began the Middle East peace process; ended the draft; and reduced the crime rate and founded the EPA. The riots and assassinations stopped, and he was reelected by the greatest plurality in U.S. history, 18 million votes (in an electorate barely half the size of the present one). The only presidents who accomplished more in that office are Washington, Lincoln, FDR, Reagan, and perhaps Truman.

The Watergate affair was the forced entry – with no damage, theft, or injury – by some Republican campaign workers into the Democratic-party headquarters. A number of insalubrious campaign activities came to light, though nothing remotely as odious as the Steele dossier – and Nixon had no prior personal knowledge of any of them. He authorized substantial payments to defendants, to deal with their legal bills. The allegation has been that he also incentivized the alteration of testimony and effectively obstructed justice, but this has never been adjudicated, and there has never been conclusive evidence that, when cant and emotionalism subside, meets a criminal standard of proof.

As he admitted, Nixon badly mismanaged the investigation and squandered his political capital by making public statements that were not under oath, but which, when found to be untrue, mortally damaged his credibility and popularity in the country. In the circumstances, patriotic former combat-decorated Navy lieutenant commander that he was, as with contestation of the 1960 election, Nixon did what he thought was best for the country and resigned.

The articles of impeachment that were adopted in committee against him, examined today, are ridiculous. The first was

that Nixon “made it his policy . . . directly and through his close subordinates and agents . . . to delay, impede, obstruct, cover up, conceal . . . illegal activities.” He had a national-security argument, and he was trying to prevent false plea bargains – his guilt on this charge has never been clear. Article 2 was that Nixon had “endeavored to misuse the IRS,” an utterly outrageous charge, especially when many Democratic presidents including FDR, JFK, LBJ, and Obama really have used the IRS in this way. Article 3 was delayed compliance with subpoenas, hardly an indictable offense. This was the feeble case against a very considerable and indefectibly patriotic president.

The despicable frivolity of the present onslaught against president Trump was highlighted when Congressman Jerry Nadler of the House Judiciary Committee called John Dean to testify on the Mueller report. With that and the rest of the Mueller fiasco, Pelosi handed putsch-making over to Schiff.

Richard Nixon’s enemies toil on, trading off their contributions to a monstrous injustice that was fashioned from the vehemence of American politics and the psychological susceptibilities of a complicated president. Woodward went on to make up books, such as *Veil*, in which he delivers his infamous fictitious interview with a comatose and heavily guarded ex-CIA director Bill Casey, who supposedly had a deathbed conversion about the Iran-Contra controversy and admitted he’d known about the diversion of arms-sales profits to Nicaraguan *contras*. Casey’s widow has said the interview was [entirely made up](#), that either she or her daughter was at Casey’s hospital bedside “every day, every hour, every moment,” and that guards prevented Woodward from entering Casey’s hospital room.

Every new season of presidential controversy has seen Woodward producing equally shabby and unverified potboilers, including a keyhole pastiche of malicious gossip about this president. Bernstein can’t stay away from the camera, which, in the

desperation of the Trump-haters, still seeks him out – he was the champion of the “constitutional crisis” allegedly caused by Trump’s brain turning to mush, requiring his removal under the 25th Amendment. John Dean, the lowest squealer in the history of cooperating witnesses, gave his evidence against Nixon in congressional committee hearings, thereby getting round the immunity that prevents a person from being convicted by his own counsel.

But Nixon has made the greatest of all his comebacks. He remains the president Americans are most interested in, after Lincoln, because he allowed the great puritanical conscience of America to be roused against him and drive him from office. But ever since, he and his memory have raised and teased that same conscience with the thought that Nixon was wronged. He was wronged. There is very inadequate evidence that he committed a crime, and he was undoubtedly an outstanding president.

There was never a claim against President Clinton that justified his removal from office, though he may have lied to a grand jury. When this impeachment drive collapses, the result should be that both parties learn the lesson that impeachment of a president is a drastic measure to be applied only to extremely serious offenses, that political differences must not be criminalized, and that the people’s right to choose the president and vice president must not be compromised except in circumstances so grave they have never remotely occurred in the 230-year life of the Constitution of the United States.

Richard Nixon’s accusers were and remain unrelievedly odious, and so are most of Donald Trump’s, and the survivors of the first mob are huffing and puffing to keep up with the present mob. This will be their last lap, and this time they will lose.