A historian examines the impeachment of Andrew Johnson

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

Once upon a time, a president of the United States branded his political opponents traitors, pardoned his friends, ignored the will of Congress, inflamed racial tensions, and coarsened political discourse. His opponents deemed him vain, vulgar, incompetent, erratic and a danger to democracy. An influential member of the U.S. House of Representatives declared, “If we could succeed in an impeachment, it would be a blessing probably, but it is perfectly evident that with the Senate constituted as it is, we cannot affect an impeachment.” And yet, he warned, impractical politicians “are determined to push the insane scheme of making the attempt and setting the country in a ferment.”

This president, of course, was Andrew Johnson. Following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Johnson had become America’s “accidental president.” A white supremacist, he collided with the Radical Republicans, the majority faction in Congress, over the treatment of former Confederate leaders and the responsibility of the federal government to the 4 million formerly enslaved individuals. Impeached by the House, Johnson survived, by one vote, conviction by the United States Senate.

In “The Impeachers: The Trial of Andrew Johnson and the Dream of a Just Nation,” historian Brenda Wineapple, the author, of among other books “Ecstatic Nation: Confidence, Crisis, and Compromise, 1848-1877” and biographies of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Gertrude and Leo Stein, provides a terrific — and timely — account of the first attempt in American history to impeach and remove a sitting president. She also analyzes debates about whether impeachment requires a criminal offense, an abuse of power or (as some Radical Republicans claimed) deplorable, bigoted, reckless acts, especially if they undermined other branches of government.

Along with most historians, Wineapple claims that Andrew Johnson was a “chief architect” of the impeachment crisis. The president’s political instincts were terrible. His speeches, often delivered when he had had too much to drink, were incendiary. He turned good men out of office. He continued to pardon unrepentant leaders of the Confederacy. His penchant for martyrdom, a tendency to listen “only to news that justified what he already thought,” and a refusal to reach out to moderates, she writes,
allowed him to conclude that he was “deeply unappreciated, wholly persecuted and denied the respect he rightfully deserved.”

Perhaps surprisingly, with the exception of Radical Republicans’ Thaddeus Stevens and Wendell Phillips, “The Impeachers” contains no profiles in courage. Wineapple’s U.S. Grant, who served briefly as Johnson’s interim secretary of war, is cautious, duplicitous and self-serving. Salmon P. Chase, the chief justice of the United States who presided over the trial, has the presidential virus. William Seward, secretary of state under Lincoln and Johnson, is a “slippery survivor,” determined at all costs to retain his position.

Several moderate Republican senators, who loathed Johnson, decide to keep him in office because a conviction puts Radical Republican Benjamin F. Wade, the president pro tem of the Senate, in the White House. And, although Wineapple acknowledges that “sleaziness is hard to nail down,” she makes a strong case that Edmund G. Ross of Kansas (whom John F. Kennedy praised in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book of 1956), was bribed to cast the decisive vote to acquit.

In 1868, Wineapple maintains, the stakes were higher than they were with Richard Nixon’s bungled burglary, hush money payments and obstruction of justice or Bill Clinton’s perjurious testimony about his sexual peccadillos. “Reasonably and with passion,” she suggests, “the impeachers believed that President Johnson sought to render emancipated slaves defenseless and restore civic and political power to officers and officeholders of the Confederacy.”

Impeachment, Wineapple reminds us, “had evidently been designed’ to remedy situations for which there was no other remedy. And the Framers believed that conviction would leave “the office of the president — and the presidency itself” — intact.

The impeachment of Johnson, she concludes, “had not succeeded but it had worked.” It demonstrated that the president can — and should — be held accountable for his actions, and reduced him to a shadow (who “did not cast a long shadow”); that a system of checks and balances could work, “without waging war, even right after one.” And it provided hope in what, alas, proved to be a dream deferred: that the federal government could help free the nation “from all vestiges of human oppression.”

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