

Failing the 1868 Test

By James Reston Jr.

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In the past few months, Bill Clinton has often been compared to Andrew Johnson, who came within one vote of being impeached by the Senate. By that measure, can Representative Henry Hyde, the chief prosecutor in the Senate trial, be compared to Thaddeus Stevens, who as leader of the Radical Republicans pushed the hardest for the impeachment of President Johnson?

So far, if Mr. Hyde aspires to the stature of Representative Stevens, he has failed miserably at the task. Stevens was a champion of abolition and an advocate for black suffrage. He saw Andrew Johnson, whose priority was the speedy restoration of the Confederate states with the Union, as the undoer of Reconstruction principles.

Officially, Johnson was being impeached for violating the Tenure of Office Act in firing the Secretary of War and for denouncing Congress as unfit to legislate. But those reasons masked the issues that were more important to the Radical Republicans. Johnson had vetoed 20 Reconstruction bills, and he had urged Southern legislatures to reject the 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal protection of the laws.

Stevens, who was near death when he brought the impeachment articles to the Senate, had no reason to temper his rhetoric. He called Johnson "the nightmare that crouched on the heaving breast of the nation" and "a double skinned rhinoceros."

As the leader of today's impeachment radicals, Mr. Hyde needs to be as forthcoming as Stevens was about his personal reasons for pushing to impeach. Historians and the public in general will want to know why Mr. Hyde has fought so hard to flout the beliefs of most Americans.

Mr. Hyde's rhetoric needs more of Stevens's passion. (Mr. Hyde's banal phrase, that Congress needed to pursue impeachment to "catch the falling flag," will not do.) Stevens openly acknowledged the political motives behind the impeachment drive.

If Congress didn't impeach Johnson, Stevens said to an interviewer during the proceedings, "we are damned to all eternity."

"There is a moral necessity for it, for which I care something, and there is a party necessity for it, for which I care more," Stevens said. "In fact, the party necessity is the moral necessity."

Like Mr. Hyde, Stevens had his passionate detractors. To many, Johnson was trying to fulfill Lincoln's ideals and bind the nation's wounds while reining in the excesses of many Reconstruction bills.

But harsh words from Johnson's supporters did not deter Stevens any more than recent polls and angry Democrats have deterred Mr. Hyde. When Stevens rose to present the last article of impeachment to the full House, his voice was sickly.

"Unfortunate man!" he railed at Johnson "thus surrounded, hampered, tangled in the meshes of his own wickedness — unfortunate, un-

Henry Hyde vs. Thaddeus Stevens.

happy man, behold your doom." But Johnson escaped the doom that Stevens had prescribed for him. (Two months after the failed Senate impeachment vote, Stevens was dead.)

Unlike today's Congressmen, who are sensitive about charges of vengeance and outraged that history may judge them poorly, Stevens accepted and even welcomed that possibility. History holds Stevens responsible for the pathology of hatred that hovered over the 1868 impeachment.

History will judge modern Radicals just as sternly. The principles at stake today pale by comparison to those in 1868. Neither grand history nor profiles in courage nor great biography will emerge from this spectacle.

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