

LONGING FOR ANDREW JOHNSON

by James Reston, Jr.

The policy of confidentiality in the Judiciary Committee has finally ended, and with it ends the doldrums about the process in the public mind---at least for a while. Now the historic vote is approaching with its promise of televised debate and high drama and the ~~xx~~ unanswered question: How will the ~~xxxx~~ legislators and the institutions comport themselves in this period that all have waited for, for a very long time.

Because the evidence is now public and will not change much from now on, the impeachment doldrums are certain to return. The prospect ahead for the average citizen is not very elevating. Possibly until the end of the year, he is asked to immerse himself in these banal and mean White House conversations. There will be endless clashes between the prosecutors and the petty foggers over the nuances of intent, motive, and design. Many outside Washington will surely want to put the whole embarrassing business out of their minds---saving their sensibilities for the time when it is mercifully all over.

How much more elevating a time the American people must have had during the ~~xxxx~~ Andrew Johnson impeachment. Then the leaders were gigantic figures, and they knew what they believed, without waiting for the latest poll to tell them. Thaddeus Stevens was in the House, wizened and dying, pressing revolutionary legislation like the Reconstruction Acts and the 14th ~~and 15th~~ Amendments. Charles Sumner was his ally in the Senate, scarred from a caning attack by a Southern congressman 12 years before, from which he almost died, and staunchly denying that he ~~had~~ ^{must have} any resentment about it. And Andrew Johnson was in the White House, dogmatic, self-taught, his language sprinkled with biblical and Shakespearean references.

When these leaders spoke in public or in private, they knew how to use the language. Oratory was still an art, and they could devastate with subtlety or with the bludgeon as they chose. Even when they swore, one expects the words were more deft than: "Son-of-a-bitching tough thing." In fact, the censors of the

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Congressional Globe (forerunner of the Congressional Record) often had to delete Stevens's expletives. Once upbraided for his "foul language" in the House, Stevens replied,

1c. "That gentleman has complained that my language was foul and talked about its being learned in Billingsgate, and Cripplegate and Newgate (A British fish market, gathering place for cripples, and jail). Sir, with all the gates that the gentleman has gone through and that he refers to, there is one gate which the gentleman will enter which I shall try to avoid." (The references to Cripplegate must have particularly galled Stevens, for the old man had a club foot, about which he was very sensitive.)

Johnson's violation of the Tenure of Office Act was only the superficial pretext for the grand confrontation of impeachment then. Beneath it was a much deeper and more poignant issue: reconciliation vs. reconstruction. After the cataclysm of the Civil War, was the Union to be restored as quickly and painlessly as possible? That was Andrew Johnson's view, and he felt he was following the lead of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address: malice towards none, charity for all, to bind up the wounds of the nation. Or was the South to be reconstructed after slavery, the freed slaves protected from becoming slaves by a different name, the aristocracy of the South impoverished? That was the view of the Radical Congress. Had the Civil War been fought for nothing? they asked.

It was an issue about which men could argue without loss of dignity, without thinking of their opponents as wily schemers or their leaders as petty criminals. Indeed, the reason that the Johnson impeachment was a fiasco was that political disagreement was made a high crime or misdemeanor.

The impeachment struggle was fierce, of course. Johnson was called "the nightmare that crouches upon the heaving breast of this nation," and a "double-skinned rhinoceros." Charles Sumner told the Senate: "He once declared himself to be the Moses of the colored people. Behold him now, the Pharaoh. With such treachery in such a cause there can be no parley.... ~~Rax~~ Pharaoh is at the bar of the Senate for judgment."

But even with such language, there remained a sense of respect among men. Contempt for the President such as the Nixon conversations inspired in Senator Hugh ~~Scott~~ Scott ("Shabby, disgusting, and amoral") was never an aspect of American life in the Andrew Johnson days. The respect for Johnson, the man, is borne out by his reelection to the Senate in 1876 and his welcome upon his return to Washington. Eight years after his conviction failed by one vote, he entered the Senate chamber to the applause of the gallery and of the Senators, a number of whom had voted against him. The ex-president's desk was covered with flowers.

Perhaps the memory of Attorney General Henry Stanberry's closing speech to the Senate was still sharp: "I regarded him closely in the cabinet and in still more private and confidential conversation. I saw him often tempted with bad advice. I knew that evil counselors were more than once around him. I observed him with the most intense anxiety. But never in word, in thought, in action, did I discover in that man anything but loyalty to the Constitution and the laws. He stood firm as a rock against all temptation to abuse his own powers or to exercise those which were not conferred upon him. Steadfast and self-reliant in the midst of all difficulty, when dangers threatened, when temptations were strong, he looked only to the Constitution ~~and~~ of his country and to the people."

Reconstruction is the issue today as well; indeed, this could be the second great reconstruction of American history. But if through exhaustion, the American people lose interest in the lessons of Watergate, ~~as~~ they lost interest in the lessons of Vietnam, when that conflict neared an end, then the last thirteen years will be simply a period of national masochism. In any event, ~~it's~~ It's less exhausting and less demeaning to view our impeachment process as an attempt at reconstruction, rather than simply an exercise to determine what conspirator Nixon really had in mind when he said,

"For Christ's sakes, get it."