

One of our country's most distinguished magazines, The Atlantic Monthly, founded in 1857, was non-partisan, dedicated to impartial liberty, and to wage war against despotism in every form. They so rarely weighed in on presidents that they counted only three times: Abraham Lincoln, Lyndon Johnson, and Hillary Clinton.

Their endorsement of Clinton was not support of her as much as it was alarm over Donald Trump, whom they saw as "spectacularly unfit for office." "His affect is that of an infomercial huckster. He traffics in conspiracy theories and racist invective; he is appallingly sexist; he is erratic, secretive, and xenophobic; he expresses admiration for authoritarian rulers, and evinces authoritarian tendencies himself."

In their February 2019 issue, they note that they had been guilty of understatement, because Trump's performance as president has exceeded fears. In a bold and informative issue, they make a case for impeachment, and provide an illuminating history of the three other presidents who were subjected to the impeachment process.

The Constitution recognizes that there may be cases in which a president may be such a danger to the country that it would be folly to wait until the next election. Impeachment is designed to protect our democracy from tyranny (unconstrained abuse of power) that worried the founding fathers.

Our country was too new for Congress to impeach the first president who deserved it: Andrew Jackson. But a president, Andrew Johnson, who rose to office after the assassination of a great president, Abraham Lincoln, was the first ever to be impeached. Congress impeached him, but the Senate trial saved him by one vote from conviction. Nonetheless, he had no second term, and did not have enough time to do more damage to the country.

Richard Nixon was the next president who resigned before the impeachment hearings could finish. And Bill Clinton, who probably should have been just shamed in the well of Congress for lying about a sexual offense, was impeached but then tried by the Senate, where he was saved from removal from office. In this case, impeachment was the wrong tool.

What I did not know before reading this issue was the extent of terrible behavior of Andrew Johnson. I knew he was a Southerner who abhorred the emancipation of the slaves and would return life in the antebellum South, if he could. I did not realize in how many ways Johnson resembled our own president today.

The 1868 impeachment case is a model for what may come in this presidency. "The president of the United States," E. P. Whipple wrote in the 1866 Atlantic, "has so singular a combination of defects for the office of a constitutional magistrate, that he could have obtained the opportunity to misrule the nation only by a visitation of Providence. Insincere, as well as stubborn, cunning as well as unreasonable, vain as well as ill-tempered, greedy of popularity as well as arbitrary in disposition, veering in his mind as well as fixed in his will, he united in his character the seemingly opposite qualities of demagogue and autocrat."

The author further notes that Johnson was egotistic to the point of mental disease, and had become the prey of intriguers and sycophants. He horrified much of the East Coast establishment, but his raw, even profane style appealed to many voters.

I had to read this astonishing catalogue of horrors twice, the second time finding that I could substitute Donald Trump for Andrew Johnson in the description.

Although the Senate trial of Andrew Johnson failed to convict by only one vote, the impeachment process did spare the US from the further depredations of a president who had betrayed his most basic responsibilities. This is the point made by the current Atlantic article by Yoni Appelbaum, a scholar of how democracies succumb to fascism. In her thoroughly scholarly approach, she makes the case that impeachment process gives the voters a full picture of the crimes, a process salutary in itself, whether or not supported by a Senate trial. Today's case must define "high crimes and misdemeanors" as an attack on the bedrock of American Democracy.

684 words

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