COMMENTARY

# A moment like no other in our history

## *Distortion of the truth may be Clinton's legacy*

**By Alvin S. Felzenberg**

The House vote on impeachment against President Clinton is one of the most important congressional decisions in this century.

The scandal that goes by the name of Lewinsky has left many casualties in its wake. The Clinton presidency is one. Among the others are "that woman, Miss Lewinsky," Betty Currie, White House aides, the President's cabinet, Newt Gingrich, Clinton's feuding spinmeisters and high-priced lawyers, feminist organizations (does anyone still take them seriously?). Perhaps Hillary Rodham Clinton. Perhaps Al Gore. Personnel manuals and case law pertaining to harassment, sex at the workplace and perjury beg to be revised. Perhaps the military code of justice does, too.

Long-undisturbed ambiguities about whether Secret Service agents, government officials, and White House aides must testify about those they serve (the President) to account to those who pay them (the public) are gone.

Executive privilege has been clarified and perhaps diminished. It cannot be invoked — surprise, surprise — to shield a president's personal misconduct.

Barring a Supreme Court reversal, all future presidents will be subject to civil suits while still in office. If policy-makers renew the independent counsel statute, future presidents and their appointees will live in fear of having to prove their innocence of whatever charge anyone levies against them, a perversion of the American presumption of innocence. The actions of any Commander-in-Chief in a time of domestic crisis will be subject to reflexive cynicism.

History has been used and abused to save the President's skin. Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Grover Cleveland, Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and others, we are told, all "did it" — as if anyone seeks to impeach Clinton for doing what he has denied under oath.

The world has also been told that Dwight Eisenhower, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan and George Bush were liars.

One must ask: How do we maintain the powers and majesty of office by sullying the reputations of others who have held it?

Andrew Jackson's "censure" has been offered up as a model for this Congress. But Old Hickory was censured by his enemies; Clinton seeks censure even by his defenders.

Andrew Johnson has been portrayed as wrongly accused and rightfully vindicated. But his acquittal came at great cost. The federal government withdrew from enforcement of the rights of African Americans. There ensued a century of segregation and the economic isolation of the American South.

We are told that Clinton's actions do not rise to the level of Watergate, and that his removal would undo two elections and harm the economy. No, Clinton's alleged crimes do not strike at the core of the electoral process, as Nixon's did. But both presidents may have engaged other arms of government to cover up their misdeeds. As for the elections, Gore, not Dole, would succeed a dismissed Clinton. As for Wall Street, it seems as robust as ever.

All these sophisms and distortions are part of William Clinton Jefferson's legacy. He stands on the brink of impeachment, both for actions he committed and the attitude he conveyed as he stonewalled, dissembled, withheld information, demonized accusers, destroyed the English language, rewrote history and feigned contrition.

Many of his defenders are ready to break ranks with him despite his approval ratings. (Look for those to fall should the articles pass.) His accusers, whatever their motives or imperfections, know they cannot give him a pass without bringing dishonor on themselves. They would become his accomplices in further discrediting what Robert Kennedy called an "honorable profession."

Those whose constitutional duty it is to sit in judgment over Bill Clinton have been trying to tell him all this. They will soon see whether he gets it.

How much is he willing to sacrifice to save his presidency?

Alvin S. Felzenberg writes and lectures on the American presidency.

■ **Tomorrow:** Chris Satullo and Tony Auth begin their Christmas tale for 1998.

## *GOP's obsessive vendetta lays waste to all in its path*

**By Marie Cocco**

The United States has embarked on a military confrontation while the House of Representatives engages in a bitter battle over the first presidential impeachment vote in 130 years.

The two events collide to reinforce the base suspicions that drive the blood feud that is the presidency of Bill Clinton.



JIM MEEHAN

His visceral enemies see in the Iraqi showdown the ultimate, contemptible manipulation in a six-year manipulative reign. His defenders will insist, with equal passion, that the real goal of Clinton's tormentors is to disable him so completely at home and abroad that he is forced to surrender his office, despite his continuing support among an overwhelming majority of Americans.

Before the launch of airstrikes on Baghdad, House Republican leaders had been poised to muscle through a vote for impeachment in a display of rank partisanship, brute power and political mendacity more dangerous to this republic than any lies Clinton told in a now-settled lawsuit.

Sooner or later, the legislative branch will provoke a constitutional crisis the likes of which we have never seen.

That's right: We have never seen it. Because this isn't like Watergate.

The Democratic-controlled House Judiciary Committee moved against Richard Nixon not when the Watergate break-in occurred, not when the secret bombing of Cambodia was exposed, not when the White House plumbers' operation was revealed, not even when Nixon refused to give up the tapes that would precipitate his downfall. Congress was pushed to act when public rage exploded after Nixon fired special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox and ordered the FBI to seal Cox's offices shut and the two top officials of his own Justice Department resigned in protest.

Note who was enraged after the Saturday Night Massacre: We, the people. Today, the only people storming the streets of Washington are office workers scurrying through holiday shopping errands during the few days before Christmas.

"We are not in a constitutional crisis now," former Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman, a veteran of the Watergate-era panel, pleaded with this new and very different House Judiciary Committee last week. "The question is, will this committee and this House create one for this country?"

The same question confronted congressional Democrats when it was revealed that President Reagan secretly sold weapons to the terrorist government in Iran, then used the proceeds to finance a secret war in Nicaragua in naked defiance of a congressional ban.

Democrats could have moved to impeach Reagan. They didn't. They made a deliberate decision not to provoke the kind of crisis we now confront. Now Congress, in Clinton's lies about sex, finds an excuse to embark on the first-ever presidential impeachment that does not have public support. There is something terribly frightening about a government so out of step with the governed and so cavalier about its duty to the people — to democracy itself — that it can be whipsawed into obedience to right-wing fanatics who have marched us to this precipice.

There is still a case to be made against Clinton's impeachment, and it is not a defense of Clinton's conduct. It is a defense of the country, of the Constitution and of democracy itself.

There is a reason we have not had a partisan impeachment in more than a century and Saddam Hussein, in all his perversity, shows us why. In the 19th century, impeachment was used as a partisan bludgeon. That is how, in 1868, Andrew Johnson came to be the first president impeached.

Then America matured into the world's most important nation — the "indispensable nation" in current parlance — precisely because we are the world's most stable democracy. We are not subject to the wild swings and government collapses that mark parliamentary systems. Our chief executive is not a party's choice, but the people's.

Making impeachment the equivalent of a "no confidence" vote doesn't just weaken Clinton. It diminishes America itself.

Marie Cocco is a columnist for Newsday.

# I was in the seats at Shibe Park in '48, when the Eagles won it all

**By Barrie Maguire**

Fifty years ago today, on Sunday, December 19, 1948, Philadelphia awoke to a blizzard. The heavy snow only added to the excitement as my father and I pushed our way through the old wooden turnstiles at Shibe Park. I was nine years old, and this was my very first Eagles game. Our opponents were the Chicago Cardinals, and the game was for the National Football League championship.

The snow was so deep that pregame workouts were impossible. A half-hour before game time, the ground crew tried to roll up the snow-covered tarps that covered the field, but there was too much snow. So messengers were dispatched to the locker rooms, and the Eagles and Cardinals players came out to help, a long line of red and green jerseys against the white snow.

That's right: 80 players evenly positioned along the sideline, Cardinal-red jerseys from the left end-zone out to the 50-yard-line, and Eagle-green jerseys all the way to the other end of the field, all pushing against the big cylinders that rolled up the tarps. I watched fascinated, wondering which team would be strongest.

But the players couldn't budge the cylinders either, so they were sent back to their locker rooms to wait while the ground crew, armed only with snow shovels, cleared the snow so the tarps could be removed.

Finally, it was game time. But by kickoff the playing surface was covered with white again and the ref needed a broom to find the 40-yard line for the kicking tee. The Eagles received, and on the very first play from scrimmage, Tommy Thompson, the one-eyed quarterback, threw a long pass through the swirling snow to Pete Pihos for a touchdown.

But the play was called back on a penalty. After that, under those impossible conditions, neither team could move the ball.

By the time the gun sounded to end the first half, I was cold to the bone, my skinny little body shivering uncontrollably. When I looked up at my father, there was a two-inch crown of snow on the top of his great fedora, and, amazed and delighted, I pointed. He carefully removed it to see for himself, then laughing, he gently replaced the hat so as not to dislodge the snow. "Let's go get you warmed up," he said, and taking my hand, he led me up the steps and into the concourse beneath the stands.

We crossed the dingy, crowded concourse to a doorway in the concrete wall. "In here is where they make the hot chocolate," he said.

I remember being afraid that we would get in trouble



BARRIE MAGUIRE

for going in there, but my father boldly led me into the incredible warmth of a large subterranean room. He spoke to a huge black man dressed in a white apron stained with chocolate. The man grinned, nodded, and gestured toward an alcove in the concrete wall where we could stand out of the way. For a long time, the two of us stood bathed in the hot, moist, chocolate air, watching the hustle-bustle of snow-covered vendors hurrying in with empty wire mesh trays, then back out again, trays heavily laden with containers of steaming cocoa.

Not until my shivering had completely stopped and my father was satisfied that I was sufficiently warmed, did he lead the way back to our snow covered seats for the rest of the game.

We had missed most of the third quarter, but we were there to cheer when, late in the game, Steve Van Buren scored on a short powerful run to give the Eagles a 7-0 victory and the first of two straight NFL championships.

My father and I went to every Eagles home game from then until the fall I left for college.

Now I've got sons of my own. And when I brag to them that I was at the great blizzard game, I vividly describe Thompson's pass descending from the snow into Pihos' hands, and Van Buren dragging tacklers with him into the snowy end zone for the winning touchdown.

But the truth of the matter is that I can no longer picture either of those famous plays — after all, it was 50 years ago and I was only nine. Through all these years, however, there are three memories of the Championship Game of '48 that remain vivid to me: 80 red and green jerseys all in a row, the smell of hot chocolate, and the snow on my father's hat.

Barrie Maguire, whose drawings regularly appear in the Commentary Page, lives in Narberth.

**Holiday Watch:**

**Sixth day of Hanukkah**

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit . . .
**Zechariah 4:6**

Quotation courtesy of Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer. Rabbi Kreimer teaches at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Philadelphia.


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