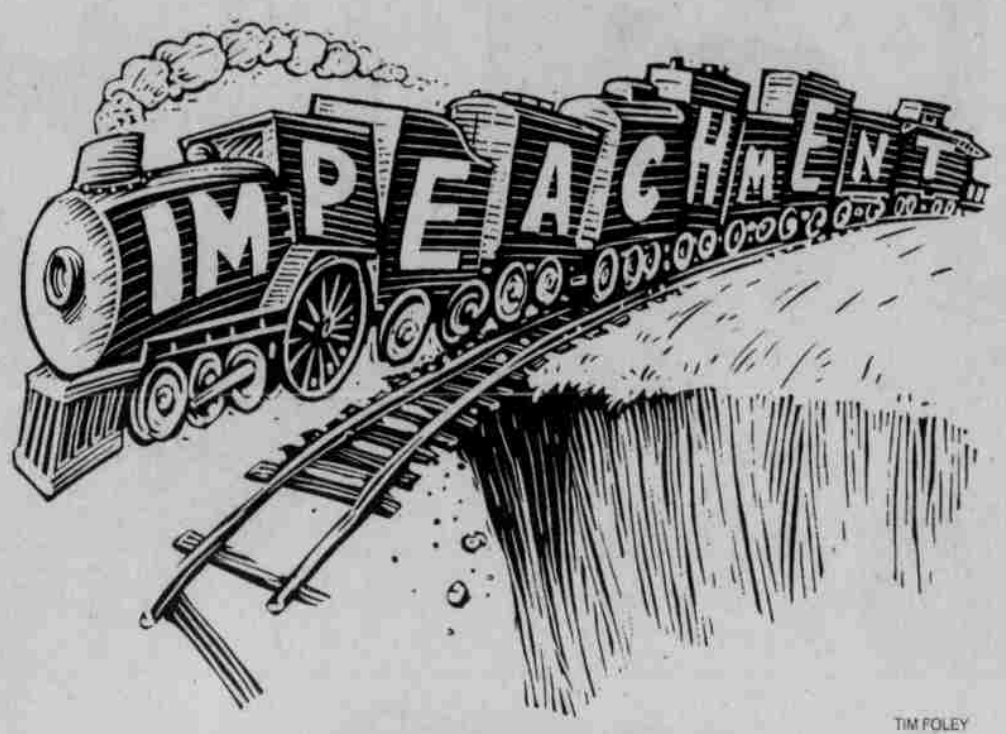
The trial has had some admirable performers so far.
But only one person can make it end anytime soon.

It's halftime in the Senate

By Alvin S. Felzenberg



TIM FOLEY

So what pundits already have called the last great "trial of the century" has reached its apex. Bill Clinton's case appears headed to full trial. Depositions will be taken. Can live witnesses be far behind?

This was not supposed to be. A president whose approval ratings remained in the 60s could never be impeached. But he was. Then many believed the Senate "would take care of it." It didn't.

With Clinton's case on Capitol Hill now at "halftime," what accounts for this turn of events?

First, the U.S. Constitution. Clinton's accusers and defenders showed a fondness for John Adams' remark that "facts are stubborn things." So are constitutions.

Had the U.S. Constitution included a "recall provision," as many state constitutions do, the 65 percent of the people who say they do not want Clinton removed would have an opportunity to demonstrate their fealty. But the Constitution gives the Senate the "sole power to try all impeachments."

That has made it hard for party leaders to do what comes to them instinctively: Cut deals.

Thus, when it came time for the Senate to protect and assert its prerogatives as an institution, action came not from the center, but from the ends of the political spectrum.

Then there was the unexpected tone of the House managers as they presented their case. While the President's team played to the stands and the television audience, the managers pitched their case to the only audience that mattered: the senators.

Sufficiently recovered from the kind of hit Clinton calls the "politics of personal destruction," House Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde appeared less the substitute teacher of an unruly class and more the distinguished professor. His evocation of Gettysburg, Flanders Field and Normandy drew goose bumps, even among Clinton defenders.

Stepping out from Hyde's shadow was one bright and effective "study group." Bill McCollum (R., Fla.), James Rogan (R., Calif.), Asa Hutchinson (R., Ark.) and Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) — together and individually — added a fresh new face to a party so often said to be a bunch of out-of-touch old men.

McCollum showed stamina and determination. Rogan stuck to the facts. Hutchinson laid out his case with all the precision and the intellectual force of a Thomas E. Dewey. Any of these could easily serve as attorney general in some future administration. One may even get to sit in Chief Justice William Rehnquist's place during a future impeachment trial.

Graham displayed an earnestness and a sincerity rarely seen in a town known for its cynicism. His audience may have gotten its first look at Strom Thurmond's successor as pro tem.

As is his want, the President fielded a defense team that "looked like America." No one asked Charles Ruff whether he was speaking for the President when he said Clinton had no intention of requesting a pardon for misdeeds that he insists he did not commit.

Greg Craig had the poor luck of having a split screen announcement during his presentation that one of his former clients, James Hinkley, in a mental hospital since trying to assassinate Ronald Reagan, could take unescorted excursions.

Despite all of this, the main reason the Clinton case has not gone away is Clinton himself. A year has past since the President shook his finger at the world and denied what he subsequently admitted.

Senators of both parties suspect that he may be a tad less contrite than he insists. They suspect that the Lewinsky matter may not be the last scandal of his presidency. Much as they might protest in public, few senators are prepared to give him a pass without careful deliberation.

Only one man — Clinton — can bring this case to a quick end. The longer the case goes on, the heavier the weight Democratic senators will have to carry. Sen. Russ Feingold, the only Democrat to break ranks yesterday, may not have to stand alone for long.

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

A guy like Rendell shows us the limits of having term limits

By Chris Satullo
Deputy Editorial Page Editor

What do you do with a President with a 63 percent approval rating? Try to run him out of town on a legalistic rail, of course.

That folly is in our faces, day in, day out, from dawn to well past dusk.

But here's another strange one.

Philadelphia, what do you do with a mayor whom 80 percent of respondents gave a favorable rating in a recent poll?

You tell him he has to pack up his desk at the end of the year.

It says so right here in the City Charter, Mr. Rendell. Only two terms per customer, even for one who helped save the city's bankrupt butt and by force of will let it believe in itself again.

So, in 1999, we will have ourselves a mayor's race, not a coronation. Roll the dice, the charter instructs. The spectacle will be loud and expensive; it may be rancorous and divisive as well. Who knows whether it will produce a mayor who can tame the rapids. (To be fair, back in 1991, few knew Ed Rendell could; his image was more snowball-thrower than dragon-slayer.)

Welcome to term limits, a simple-minded buzzword of reform if ever there was one.

Oh, the impulse to tell the rascals to skedaddle after eight years or so is understandable. You can't have gazed upon the Capitol Hill careers of a Jesse Helms or a Dan Rostenkowski without pining a bit for an automatic ejection mechanism.

Nor would it have been good for Philadelphia had the last mayor to spur talk of charter change to allow a third term — Frank Rizzo — actually won one.

The trouble with term limits, though, is that they eject the Rendells along with the rascals. They attack the arrogance of incumbency by undercutting the asset of experience. They reward leaders for good performance by forcing them to hobble toward a mandated sunset. They ignore that we regularly are invited to put our fingers on the perfect ejection button: the voting lever.

What's happened is this: Appalled at how often we voters prove too apathetic, clueless or venal, reformers seek artificial limits to save us from ourselves. We're like the sports owners who insist they need a salary cap to save themselves from spending $11 million on middle infielders who hit .237. Maybe they do, but that's their fault, not the infielders'.

And the fact is, we underestimate our own power. In 1994, voters dislodged the congealed mass of Democratic do-nothings who had been running Congress. Last fall, New Yorkers decided, praise be, that they'd had enough of Al D'Amato.

The 22d Amendment, limiting the POTUS to two terms, was passed in 1951. Come to think of it, it never really has come into play — thanks to age and illness, voters' choices, scandals and bullets. (Luckily it wasn't around in 1940 to show FDR the door as world war bloomed.)

Invoked or not, though, term limits have rippling effects. Advertised as a corrective to lawmakers cozying up to special interests, they actually goad officials to make nice to anyone who can offer a cushy job once the term-limit guillotine comes down. They revamp the political chemistry, inducing lame ducks to think short-term, while other major players plot every move with an eye on the race to replace the top guy.

In Rendell's case, the damage is visible in the public schools, the arena where he's been weakest but where a strong mayoral hand is needed. The fix here is patient, costly work. But Rendell, never at ease with the issue and staring into a 1999 sunset, went for ill-fated gimmicks: lawsuits and shutdown threats. Meanwhile, State Rep. Dwight Evans, a mayoral hopeful, damaged the school district's feeble standing in Harrisburg while posturing on the issue.

Similarly, on the stadium issue, Rendell was convinced — not without reason — that he was better-positioned to bargain with the state and team owners than any neophyte mayor would be. So he tried to rush through a deal but botched the politics and the PR — making the job more difficult.

Term limits derive from and reinforce a dangerous notion: that experience is poisonous to political virtue. "Career politician" is a standard campaign-ad sneer now. Elected officials forgetting why they are there, becoming captive to greed and lobbyists — these clearly are pitfalls. But so is the self-righteous cluelessness about deliberation and compromise exhibited by the callow "citizen legislators" who Republican voters sent to Congress in 1994.

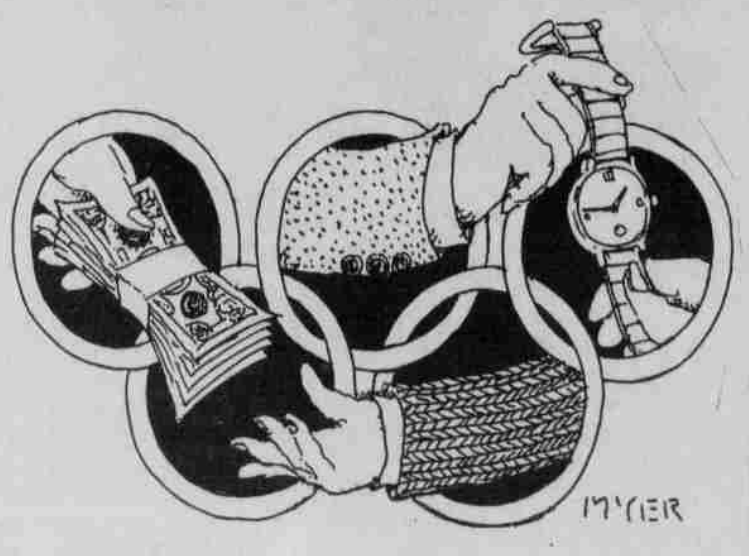
An effective executive, a wise legislator — these are civic boons to be cherished. The risk posed by term limits — that such treasures will be tossed aside needlessly — outweighs the risk of voters letting dolts or scoundrels linger in office.

To comment, call 215-854-4243 or e-mail csatullo@phillynews.com

Thursday columnist Acel Moore is on assignment.
Tomorrow: "Alarms and Diversions" with David Boldt.

An Olympic demonstration sport no one seems capable of winning

By Andy Myer



ANDY MYER

Welcome, everybody! This is Wynnette Allcosts, here with Ly Cheatinsteel in Salt Lake City to bring you this medal round of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) site selection committee finals. This has been quite a spectacle, hasn't it, Ly?

Ly: Unbelievable is the word, Wynn. This is the first year that Olympic site selection has actually been incorporated into the games as a demonstration sport, and the level of play has been exceptional.

I should explain that each of the IOC contestants performs a site selection duty of his or her choice. They're judged on two categories: Keeping up Appearance and Ethical Merit. Deductions are given for bribes, gifts over $150, or any other questionable financial conduct.

After yesterday's round with 17 disqualifications, including favored Jules Troiboyer of Belgium for receiving a Rolex, we're down to the last three IOC contestants to decide who gets the gold! Who are we going to see first?

Wynn: A promising youngster, Mbisi Luwandanabu of Kenya, is first up. For his program, Mbisi is going to be reviewing materials from Bangkok and Istanbul as possible sites for the Summer Olympics in 2006. Let's see how he does.

Ly: He's off to a great start, Wynn. Mbisi is opening the promotional packets with a lot of style. He's the only one who can execute a triple with the letter opener . . . a perfect finish, with no tear marks on the envelope! Now he's making notes in the brochure margins, something we haven't seen from any of the other contestants. What a wonderful touch! I think Mbisi stands a good chance for at least a silver if he can keep this up.

Oh, no! A blank check fell out of the Istanbul packet, and he's pocketed it! This is an automatic elimination! What a disastrous end for this young man today.

Wynn: Well, Ly, the next IOC member is a veteran site selector, and I think we can expect her to avoid that kind of mental lapse. She's Uta Haegendoorf of Finland, and she's helped choose 20 Olympic venues. She's going to place a call to Vasili Kornubutski of the Siberia 2010 Winter Olympic Committee. The phone's ringing, so we'll soon see how she performs under pressure.

Ly: Well, as expected, you can hear that her opening is effortless. No one does sincerity like Uta. Uta is now raising some strong concerns about the four hours of daylight available in the winter. This will be scored favorably by the judges, as it shows a high degree of impartiality.

What's this? Vasili has just interrupted Uta by asking how her daughter is doing at Dartmouth. She looks a little flustered, but her reactions so far will not bring any deductions. . . . She's attempting to ask about the minus-90 degree wind chills, but Vasili has added that he hopes the $25,000 "scholarship" was some help! Uta is banging the receiver, trying to act as if the connection is bad, but I'm afraid the damage is done. Another automatic disqualification. What a crushing blow.

Wynn: Well, that decides it, Ly. America's own Walter Flink of Crystal Bluff, Tenn., has won gold, silver and bronze by default. He's the only one of the 150 IOC contestants to survive this grueling competition.Let's watch the medal presentation.

Ly: Wynn, there seems to be some sort of disturbance at the far end of the stadium. It's the Salt Lake City police. I've just been told that Flink's been charged with accepting a bribe from the Calcutta Summer Olympics Organizing Committee. He's being ushered to a cruiser.

Wynn: Stay tuned for the closing ceremony. The Olympic Flame will be smothered under $40 million in currency from around the world.

AndyMyer (netwit@membrane.com) writes and creates art in Maple Glen.

Worth Repeating

Staying strong on behalf of weak

The strength of every system is in its weakest part. Alas for that rule! But when the weakest part breaks, the whole is broken. The chain lets slip the ship when the weak link breaks, and the ship founders. The body fails when the weak function is vitally attacked; and so with every structure, social and political, the weak point is the point of danger, and the weak point of the Constitution is now before you in the maintenance of the coordination of the departments of the government, and if one cannot be kept from devouring another then the experiment of our ancestors will fail. They attempted to interpose justice. If that fails, what can endure?

— William M. Evarts
Defense attorney for President Andrew Johnson
In the midst of a four-day summation during Johnson's Senate trial
April 28-May 1, 1868

ATTENTION

CHILD SUPPORT RECIPIENTS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Due to the installation of a Federal and State-mandated computer system, the Family Court of Philadelphia, 34 South 11th Street, cannot offer full services from Monday, January 25, 1999 to February 2, 1999. This conversion will result in the unavoidable delay of approximately ten (10) days in the processing of your support checks.

Temporary adjustments in services include:

- Staff-assisted filing of petitions for support and custody by the Intake Unit will not be available.
- The Clerk of Court Unit will continue to accept prepared filings, though processing may be delayed.

Full Service will continue for the following:

- Cashiers will be available to accept all support payments in the Customer Service Center.
- Domestic Violence Unit will operate in the normal manner.
- Bench Warrant surrenders will continue to be processed.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE DURING THESE UNAVOIDABLE DELAYS.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.