



Notes on the Revolution / Column 16



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The USA: Race, war, and democracy in decadence

By Charles McKelvey

In the first 187 years of the great Republic in North America, there was one impeachment process. The nation is now facing its third in the last 45 years.

The first impeachment occurred in 1868, in the context of a political conflict, which had been unfolding for nearly a century, between the Northern industrial elite and the Southern planter class for control of the federal government. At stake were the vested interests of two elites in conflict, whose opposed interests were a consequence of the different functions in the world-economy of the sub-national economies that they controlled. Following the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson was among those who advocated a lenient attitude toward the Southern elite, and their reincorporation into national political life. He was opposed by the "radical Republicans" of the Congress, who were advocates of the Reconstruction of the South, a project that defended the political rights of the freed slaves, as a political weapon to destroy the power of the Southern planter class. Declaring that the president had violated the limits of his authority with respect to measures that the Congress had approved, the Radical Republicans were able to obtain his impeachment by the House of Representatives, but not his



conviction in the Senate.

In that sole impeachment during the first 187 years of the Republic, the vested interests of two elites in conflict were at stake. The next three impeachment processes of the last forty-five years, in contrast, have concerned secondary issues, in which vital political or economic interests were not directly expressed in public debate. That this would occur reflects a fall of the Republic into decadence, with an increasing incapacity to reasonably debate issues of substance.

In our last program on Monday, we saw one dimension of this phenomenon. Blacks and whites have had fundamentally different experiences in the United States, which has led to fundamental differences in political ideology. In the 1960s, proposals for the nation from an African-American perspective formulated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were not heard by white society. In the 1980s, Jesse Jackson's concept of a Rainbow Coalition provided a foundation for black-white dialogue in the context of political practice, but this option was not taken. The fundamental racial divide in political consciousness remained alive.

At the same time, the nation has been divided on the issue of the Vietnam War, with a similar incapacity to discuss, as a result of the profound intellectual and emotional division that the war provoked. And the divisions pertain not only to the U.S. conduct of the war, but also the conduct of the student anti-war movement, whose tactical excesses and association with countercultural tendencies alienated many in the society. Families and generations were divided.

In the late 1960s, there was a sector of the student anti-war movement that was on the path of discovery. In the midst of the political conflict over the war, some youth took to the study the history of Vietnam. We arrived to the understand that the USA was conducting a colonialist war against an anti-colonial movement, which led to further questions and to awareness of the imperialist character of U.S. foreign policy. In this insight, the student anti-war movement was approaching common understanding with the Third World anti-imperialist consciousness of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, as was indicated in my own small gesture of joining with black students in the unauthorized lowering of the American flag to half mast in commemoration of the anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X. The phenomenon of common ground between young white radicals and the black power movement had significant implications for overcoming the profound racial divide in the political culture.

However, the student anti-war movement disintegrated among its errors and contradictions, and its anti-imperialist insight was erased from the collective memory of the people. There emerged a popular consensus that the war was a disaster for the nation, but there has been no national conversation concerning in what way and why, and there is no consensus on the lessons that should be learned.

The anti-imperialist impulse of the 1960s, however ephemeral, discerned the true sources of the political-economic conflicts of the era, just as real as the 1868 conflict one hundred years earlier between the competing elites of the North and South. In 1968, the conflict was between a colonized people determined to attain its sovereignty, and an American empire seeking to impose on the world a neocolonial world-system under its direction. Important life-changing economic issues were at stake, with a sector of revolutionary youth in the USA siding the colonized, on the basis of democratic values that we had been taught in families and schools. But these issues were ignored in the upcoming impeachment of President Richard Nixon.

In defense of U.S. imperialist interests, Nixon between 1970 and 1972 ordered continuous bombings of Vietnam, including populated areas, even though the Johnson Administration had



arrived to the conclusion during the period of 1967-1968 that U.S. imperialist objectives could not be attained. In the 1974 initiation of the impeachment process against Nixon, a tiny fraction of the people believed that the continuous bombings of civilian populations in Vietnam on the basis of false ideological pretexts was an impeachable offense. What brought Nixon down was his indirectly approving the break-in of the headquarters of the opposing political party, presumably with the intention of obtaining some political advantage, and then covering up the crime when it was discovered. Nixon was castigated for a minor crime, while his major crimes were ignored. His supporters and allies knew this, and they sought revenge, giving rise to a caustic form of politics.

The investigations by two Washington Post reporters that exposed the Watergate scandal, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, are widely regarded as an achievement in investigative journalism. However, the event heralded a new paradigm in journalism, in which journalists dig to uncover secrets, possibly including some previous illegal behavior, or a proposal made in the context of internal discussion within the halls of power, or a covert operation not known and possibly not approved by the people. Although useful truths can be uncovered by this style of investigative journalism, the major crimes of imperialism are committed in plain sight; for the most part, they do not have to be uncovered through detective journalism, and they can be brought to consciousness of the people on the basis of study of publicly available books, articles, and documents.

As journalists became oriented to uncovering secrets, and as politics became caustic, investigations of politicians became fair game. During the 1980s and the 1990s, the careers of politicians were ruined by the uncovering of unacceptable behavior in their private lives. The impeachment of Bill Clinton 1998-1999 was caught up in this dynamic. He was accused of perjury for lying about having sexual relations with a young woman intern in the Oval Office; he was absolved by the Senate, in a vote that went entirely along party lines. Clinton's authorization of the bombing of Bosnia in 1995 and a massive bombing campaign of Kosovo in 1999, both justified with false pretexts, apparently was not an impeachable offense. The aggressive imperialism that the bombing represented was not discussed; sex in the Oval Office was.

The evolving political customs of representative democracy facilitated that the people would be increasingly unable to discuss and reflect on its profound differences with respect to race and war, seeking consensus on these issues. Nor would it be able to discuss its increasing insecurity and anxiety, as the power elite turned to the abandonment of the nation and the people in defense of its own interests. Indeed, the people could not reasonably discuss any issue. The political process has become a conflictive and manipulative game, with highly financed political advertising offering soundbites for the further confusion of the people. Between elections, the mass media leads the way in modeling an expression of different opinions that is characterized by cleverness, quick and short formulations, conflict, and superficiality. In such a political world, public discussion seeking consensus is impossible.

The third impeachment process in 45 years, now being initiated by the Democratic-controlled Congress against Donald Trump, continues this tendency toward caustic and conflictive politics, in which any strategy is fair game, except the strategy of reasonable discourse seeking to explain and to move the nation toward consensus. We will take a look at the initiation of impeachment proceedings against Donald Trump next time.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the unfolding global popular socialist revolution forged by our peoples in defense of humanity.



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