

The Impeachment of the President

Among the Darkest Times of American History - Part 2

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By Mike Scruggs

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Edwin Stanton, US Secretary of War, January 1862 to May 1868, Public domain from Wikipedia.
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This is going to be hard reading for Republicans who are not aware of the terrible corruption and despotism that prevailed under the Congressional dominance of the Radical faction of the Republican Party from the end of the Civil War until about 1877. Today it is Radical Democrats who are attempting to destroy the foundations of American freedom and culture and are threatening to impeach a Republican president on baseless false accusations and outrageous lies.

President Andrew Johnson was not the only high level Federal executive who had come to distrust Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles had privately warned Lincoln of Stanton's overriding personal ambitions, perfidy, and back-stabbing, but to little avail.

In February of 1867 at the behest of Stanton, the Radical dominated Congress passed the Tenure of Office Act, prohibiting the President from dismissing any officer confirmed by the Senate without Senate approval. This act was primarily intended to keep Secretary Stanton, a sympathetic ally to the Radical Republicans and a strong proponent of stern Reconstruction for the South, at his very influential post. Congress promptly overrode the President's veto of the bill.

In March of 1867, when most Southern states had rejected the Fourteenth Amendment, Congress passed the infamous Reconstruction Act, putting most Southern states under military governments, enfranchising blacks, disenfranchising most Confederate veterans, establishing corrupt carpetbagger governments, and imposing debilitating taxes and a tyranny over the South that would last until 1877. Passing the Fourteenth Amendment was made a prerequisite for Southern States to reenter the Union. Johnson's strong protest and veto were overridden.

In early August of 1867, President Johnson learned from the trial of John Surratt and a conversation with Col. William P. Wood, superintendent of the Old Capitol Prison in 1865, that Edwin Stanton had deliberately suppressed a petition of mercy from five officers on the Lincoln Assassination Tribunal that would have caused him to spare the life of Mary Surratt in July of 1865. Johnson knew that the Radical Republicans would try to impeach him for violating the Tenure of Office Act, if he attempted to fire Stanton. But the very day he learned of Stanton's treachery regarding the trial and sentencing of Mary Surratt that resulted in her hanging, he decided that justice and honor required him to dismiss Stanton.

The relationship between President Andrew Johnson and the Radical Republicans who dominated Congress was very strained in the two years following his assumption of office. He strongly opposed the harsh terms of Reconstruction imposed upon the South and vigorously resisted Congressional usurpation of power over the states. His relationship with his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, was particularly strained. Stanton had a clandestine alliance with the radicals even while serving under Lincoln and had become, in fact, not only a key ally of the radicals in Congress, but also one of their most influential leaders. He was among the most determined proponents of a punitive and repressive Reconstruction as a means of preventing conservative Democrats from regaining power in the South and the nation. Also having his own presidential ambitions, Stanton

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frequently used sly and underhanded tactics to undermine Johnson.

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During the 1867 trial of John Surratt, who along with his mother, Mary Surratt, was accused of conspiracy in the Lincoln assassination, it was revealed that Stanton had withheld John Wilkes

Booth's diary from evidence during the previous 1865 conspiracy trial. There was also a controversy over missing pages of that diary, disputing whether more pages were missing when examined during John Surratt's trial than when recovered from Booth's body in April 1865. There were many embarrassing revelations that the War Department had used torture, threats, and bribery resulting in perjured testimonies in prosecuting its case against Mary Surratt. Most alarming to the public and to Andrew Johnson was the revelation that five officers on the military tribunal had submitted a plea for mercy for Mary Surratt, but that petition had been suppressed, resulting in her hanging on July 7, 1865.

Johnson called in his Chief of Secret Service, Col. William P. Wood (ironically appointed on July 5, 1865, the day Mary Surratt and three others were sentenced to death) to inquire as to his opinion on the matter. Wood was a close confidant of Stanton, but while commandant of the Old Capitol Prison during Mary Surratt's stay there, he had come to believe that she was innocent of any complicity in the assassination of Lincoln. Wood's background would seem incongruous with sympathy for Mary Surratt. She was a devout Roman Catholic, and he had rejected that church and turned to atheism. He was a radical abolitionist and had even helped to train some of John Brown's men before their infamous raid on Harper's Ferry, but he refused to approve of Brown's moving arms across a state border. Regardless of their contrasting worldviews, Wood had attempted to deliver a statement of his strong conviction of Mrs. Surratt's innocence to President Johnson before her hanging, but had been stopped by Stanton's Chief Detective, Col. Lafayette Baker, carrying a restraining order specifically directed to Wood and signed by Stanton.

Col. Wood's conversation convinced President Johnson that Mary Surratt was innocent of any significant wrong-doing and should not have been hanged. Though a close friend of Stanton, Wood admitted that Stanton's conduct regarding the investigation, trial, sentencing, and finally the hanging of Mary Surratt had been regrettable. On August 7, 1867, President Johnson addressed and signed a letter to Stanton, which read:

"Sir:

Public considerations of a high character constrain me to say that your resignation as Secretary of War will be accepted."

Stanton, however, refused to vacate his office, although on August 12, Johnson temporarily suspended him and designated General Grant as Acting Secretary of War. Congress was not in session at the time.

When Congress returned on January 13, 1868, the Senate refused to concur with Stanton's suspension by a vote of 35 to 16. President Johnson then formally dismissed Stanton, designating

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General Lorenzo Thomas as his replacement.

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Led by Radical Republicans Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin Butler, and John Bingham, the U. S. House approved an impeachment resolution by a vote of 126 to 47. Stevens of Pennsylvania was the House leader of the Radical Republicans and so powerful that some referred to him as “the Boss of America.” Butler of Massachusetts was a former Union Army General whose conduct as commander of the Union forces occupying New Orleans during the war earned him the sobriquets “Beast Butler” and “Spoons Butler” for his outrageous order to treat Southern women who showed any disrespect to Union officers as prostitutes and for his infamous looting of Southern households. He also had a young man hanged for cutting down an American flag. Following the assassination of Lincoln, Butler, speaking on the floor of the U.S. House, accused President Johnson of complicity in the assassination. Bingham of Ohio had been one of the assistant prosecutors at the trial of Mary Surratt and other alleged Lincoln assassination conspirators in 1865. It was he who inscribed per the directions of Stanton and Army Judge Advocate Holt, the military tribunal’s petition requesting mercy for Mary Surratt, which was then by various means suppressed. Stanton had also made Bingham promise never to reveal what they knew concerning the Lincoln assassination and the trial of Mary Surratt.

Eleven articles of impeachment were presented to the Senate for Trial. Ostensibly, the main issue was Johnson’s violation of the Tenure of Office Act that Congress had passed in 1867 to protect Stanton. This Act was later ruled unconstitutional. The real issue was that the Radical Republican majority disagreed with Johnson’s lenient plan to restore the Southern States to the Union. Their plans were to punish and loot the South severely and structure its electorate to insure long-term Republican dominance in the South and thus the nation. Johnson had also criticized the Radical Republicans and exposed their intent in public speeches. In truth, the Tenure of Office Act had been passed as a means of trapping Johnson into impeachment. With Johnson out of office, Radical Ohio Republican Senator Benjamin Wade, Speaker Pro-tem of the Senate, would become President, and the way would be cleared for unopposed social and economic revolution in the South—the key to long-term Republican power and national dominance. This would assure the perpetuation of high protective tariffs, government subsidies for Northern industry, and the fiat money of a national bank.

Much more on the unjust hanging of Mary Surratt and the corruption and despotism of the Reconstruction era can be found in my book: *The Un-Civil War: Shattering the Historical Truths*. (Leonard M. Scruggs).

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;”—Hosea 4:6