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The Trial of the Week

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Eighty-five years ago this month, Bruno Richard Hauptmann, accused of kidnapping and murdering the infant son of famed aviator and international celebrity Charles Lindbergh, stood trial at the Hunterdon County Courthouse in Flemington in what the news media described as “The Trial of the Century.”

Using that standard, the impending confrontation in the U. S. Senate over the impeachment of President Donald Trump qualifies as “The Trial of the Week.”

While Hauptmann’s five-week long trial, prosecuted by New Jersey Attorney General David Wilentz, riveted the nation, there is a growing impeachment fatigue in the country, a feeling that interest in round the clock coverage has waned replaced by a weary “just get it over with already” air of resignation. The fascination with watching and hanging on every word uttered by Congressional leaders as they move toward removing a president from office has diminished, victimized in large measure by incessant posturing and partisan bickering.

The solemnity which should surround a decision of such magnitude has been overridden, producing an atmosphere of cynicism and a sense that it isn’t democracy at stake, but rather raw political advantage.

The haste with which the impeachment inquiry began was abandoned by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s abrupt decision to delay submitting to the Senate the two House approved articles of impeachment because she was unhappy with the Senate procedures.

Her decision to withhold the articles for an indeterminate period caught many of her colleagues unaware but, recognizing party solidarity is more important than an orderly process, leapt aboard and crowed that the Speaker’s move was brilliant politics.

Politics? Certainly. Brilliant? Not so much.

For someone who had masterfully navigated the minefield of conflicting pressures and demands from her factionalized party, Pelosi overplayed her hand by unilaterally deciding to halt a process she set in motion and setting up a confrontation with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

McConnell is not about to be bullied by Pelosi into accepting terms and conditions of the Senate’s trial procedure. The House, he said, has impeached the President and it is now the Senate’s Constitutional responsibility — not Pelosi’s — to determine guilt or innocence under rules it develops and approves. Her attempt to interfere was rejected out of hand, dismissed by McConnell as a non-starter.

In addition to injecting herself into the prerogatives of the upper house, Pelosi gifted to Republicans the opportunity to renew their criticisms of the impeachment process as a sham.

It opened a new line of partisan attack as well. The articles of impeachment — abuse of power and obstruction of Congress — they said, were so flimsy and so lacking in evidence of

Despite her public posturing, Pelosi, Republicans claimed, lacked confidence in the validity and strength of the impeachment articles and arguing with McConnell over process and procedure was nothing more than a strategy to head off a potentially embarrassing conclusion.

McConnell has remained unmoved by the arguments made by Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York that a Senate trial include witnesses under oath and the submission of documents.

All are aware acquittal will be the outcome, that 67 votes in favor of impeachment is unattainable. There is a bit of Kabuki theater at play, each player following a script even though the denouement is apparent well before the final curtain.

McConnell desires a process in which the Senate moves with dispatch to consider the allegations. He believes the longer Pelosi delays the pressure will build on her to concede to the Senate.

Republicans will ratchet up criticism of the Speaker, portraying her as stubbornly thwarting a Constitutional process for political advantage. They will mock the House floor speeches about reverence for the Constitution and “no one is above the law” as so much pious bleating to disguise crass power politics.

Should Pelosi persist, there will come a point when she will be forced to make a choice, to acknowledge her position is untenable, that she has overplayed her hand and risks losing public support.

The American people are a generally patient lot in matters as fraught with deep and far-reaching implications as a presidential impeachment.

Their forbearance is not infinite, however. They recognize that moving carefully and, when necessary, slowly when the stakes are high is prudent and fair.

The point is approaching quickly — if it hasn’t already been reached — when a resolution is required, when the time for delay and distraction is over and it is time to move on. Should she remain resolute in her view, Pelosi will receive the lion’s share of the blame for selfishly and petulantly standing in the way of bringing the issue to a conclusion.

The Senate deliberations and debate will certainly not rival the “Trial of the Century” and the nation will turn its attention to issues of more direct personal concern — the economy, health care, immigration, infrastructure, etc.

Rather, American voters and taxpayers will remember “The Trial of the Week,” and, whether it went their way or not, will rebound nicely and deliver their own verdict on Trump in November.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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