

THE IMPEACHMENT OF BILL CLINTON

Summary

When Bill Clinton was elected President in 1992, he promised to provide “the most ethical administration in history”. Due to the bitter partisanship that dominated Washington D.C. during his two terms, and to his personal flaws, he became the most investigated President in history. In the second impeachment trial of a U.S. President, the prosecutors failed to convince two-thirds of the Senate that Clinton was guilty of “high Crimes or Misdemeanors”.

Narrative

In the highly charged partisan politics of the 1990s, President Bill Clinton’s personal indiscretions led to the second impeachment trial in our history. Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr was investigating Clinton’s pre-presidential financial dealings, but could prove no wrongdoing. In a separate case, Clinton was being sued by Paula Jones for sexual harassment. In her effort to demonstrate that Clinton was a harasser, Jones called a young former White House intern named Monica Lewinsky to testify. Lewinsky had told a friend that she had been having a relationship with the President.

In the Jones case, Lewinsky at first denied a relationship with the president. In his deposition, Clinton denied under oath any involvement with Lewinsky. This denial caught Starr’s attention; Starr suspected the president had committed perjury and obstructed justice in the Jones trial. Starr assembled a grand jury, issued dozens of subpoenas, and eventually offered Lewinsky immunity in return for her testimony. She finally admitted that she had lied—she and Clinton had had sexual encounters. When Clinton testified for Starr’s grand jury, he gave evasive answers. However, that same night, he admitted the Lewinsky affair to the American people, apologizing to his family.

Starr submitted his report to the House Judiciary Committee, saying that he had proof of eleven impeachable offenses. The House of Representatives approved two articles of impeachment, both regarding his relationship with Lewinsky. House prosecutors said that Clinton deserved to be convicted and removed from office because he had committed perjury and obstruction of justice in the Jones investigation. Lying under oath is clearly a crime.

The president's own lawyers said his behavior was "morally reprehensible," but not impeachable. They explained that the accusations against the president did not "meet the constitutional standard to remove the president from office." Whatever wrongs the president had committed were wrongs against his family, not matters of public concern because they did not threaten the national interests that the president is sworn to uphold. The House of Representatives voted to impeach Clinton in 1998 on strict party lines, but in the Senate trial, Republicans fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to convict.

The 1990s was a time of viciously partisan politics in the United States. According to U.S. News & World Report published in December, 1998, "The House that voted to impeach President Clinton is more deeply divided than at any time since Reconstruction." Some people believe that Clinton was impeached for political reasons, not for constitutional reasons.

Questions

1. What was the issue at the heart of the impeachment charges against President Clinton?
2. Is lying about an illicit extra-marital relationship a "high Crime or Misdemeanor"? Is lying under oath a "high Crime or Misdemeanor"?
3. Was Clinton guilty of "high Crimes or Misdemeanors"?
4. Was Clinton impeached mostly for constitutional reasons or mostly for political reasons?