

When One Voice Mattered

In this week of celebrating the heritage of the United States of America, we should be reminded that the fate of our nation can hinge on one person's opinion. It has happened.

In his book *Courage – You Can Stand Strong in the Face of Fear*, Jon Johnson tells the story of United States Sen. Edmund G. Ross of Kansas. He could be called Mr. Nobody. No law bears his name. Not a single list of Senate "greats" mentions his service. Yet when Ross entered the Senate in 1866, he was considered the man to watch. He seemed destined to surpass his colleagues, but he tossed it all away by one courageous act of conscience.

Here's what happened. Conflict was dividing the American government in the wake of the Civil War. President Andrew Johnson, a Tennessean, was determined to follow Lincoln's policy of reconciliation toward the defeated South. Congress, however, wanted to rule the downtrodden Confederate states with an iron hand.

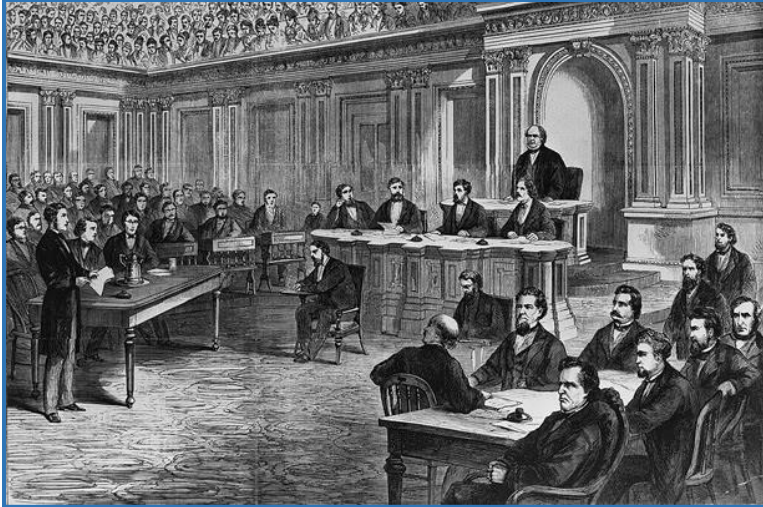


Congress decided to strike first. Shortly after Sen. Ross was seated, the Senate introduced impeachment proceedings against the hated President. The radicals calculated that they needed 36 votes, and smiled as they concluded that the 36th vote was none other than that of Ross.

The new senator listened to the vigilante talk. But to the surprise of many, he declared that the President "deserved as fair a trial as any accused man has ever had on earth." The word immediately went out that his vote was "shaky." Ross received an avalanche of anti-Johnson telegrams from every section of the country. Radical senators badgered him to "come to his senses."

The fateful day of the vote arrived. The courtroom galleries were packed. As a deathlike stillness fell over the Senate chamber, the vote began. By the time they reached Ross, 24 "guilties" had been announced. Eleven more were certain. Only Ross' vote was needed to impeach the President. Unable to conceal his emotion, the Chief Justice asked in a trembling voice, "Mr. Sen. Ross, how vote you? Is the respondent Andrew Johnson guilty as charged?"

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Ross later explained, at that moment, “I looked into my open grave. Friendships, position, fortune and everything that makes life desirable to an ambitious man were about to be swept away by the breath of my mouth, perhaps forever.”

Then the answer came – unhesitating, unmistakable: “Not guilty!” With that, the trial was over. And the response was as predicted.

A high public official from Kansas wired Ross to say, “Kansas repudiates you as she does all perjurers and skunks.” The “open-grave” vision had become a reality. Ross’ political career was in ruins. Extreme ostracism and even physical attacks awaited his family upon their return home.

One gloomy day, Ross turned to his faithful wife and said, “Millions cursing me today will bless me tomorrow ... though not but God can know the struggle it has cost me.” It was a prophetic declaration; 21 years later, Congress and the Supreme Court verified the wisdom of his position by changing the law related to impeachment.

Ross was appointed Territorial Governor of New Mexico. Then, just prior to his death, he was awarded a special pension by Congress. The press and the country took this opportunity to honor his courage, which, they finally concluded, had saved our country from crisis and division.

Perhaps you will never be forced to make an unpopular decision guided by your conscience – instead of following along with the herd – on such a grand stage as did Ross. But truth and integrity matter.

Even if we stand alone. And even if the personal cost is high.

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice (Proverbs 21:3 NKJV).

– Beecher Hunter