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News from the Swenson Center

How Dared You Take Such Constitutional Liberty? A Swedish-American Perspective on the Impeachment Trial of Andrew Johnson

BY ANDERS BO RASMUSSEN
2016 OLSSON SCHOLAR

Swedish-American history is full of good stories - and some of the best even have yet to be properly unfolded. Luckily a host of historic true (and sometimes tall) tales can be excavated from the depths of Augustana College's Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center. A good case could therefore be made to focus this brief text on Pastor Andrew Jackson and his call for fellow Swedish-Americans to move west just days before he and his Minnesota congregations were attacked by Dakota bands in 1862. Or another might have involved the psychological hardship of Civil War soldiering apparent in Nels Knutson's dispatches from occupied Confederate territory in 1864, or yet another could have utilized the unique Civil War letter collections in Swedish-American genealogist Helene Leaf's possession.

Nevertheless, for the purposes here, I decided to recount the somewhat forgotten story of President Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial in 1868 through the eyes of Swedish immigrant pastor Erik Norelius.



Erik Norelius 1833–1916.

In the Scandinavian press, the proceedings in Washington (where the House of Representatives in early March 1868 - for the first time in American history - adopted articles of impeachment against a sitting president) were met with sensation. "A court of impeachment, already a rarity in the country's history, has never before been brought against the highest executive authority, the President," wrote the Swedish-American newspaper *Hemlandet* on March 3rd.

Importantly for Swedish-American readers, *Hemlandet* (as part of its detailed impeachment coverage) landed a Scandinavian scoop as it received a dispatch from Pastor Norelius who happened to be in Washington D.C. in early April. What Norelius saw was a beautiful city full of cypress trees and mansions yet a city haunted by its racial past where slave quarters still reminded visitors of "the former dark times."

The paradox, of course, was that the legacy of slavery was still at the center of American politics. The impeachment articles and the subsequent trial hinged on President Johnson's choice to remove Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who had opposed the President's leniency toward former Confederate leaders without the Senate's consent. In doing so, Johnson had seemingly violated the recently passed Tenure of Office Act and stepped even deeper into a conflict with Republican congressmen over how best to secure four million freedmen and freedwomen's economic, political, and legal rights in the immediate aftermath of emancipation.

Norelius's impeachment account, however, was more focused on the inner workings of American politics. On Friday April

3rd a little after noon, the Swedish pastor strolled towards the United States Capitol (its new dome constructed just two years earlier), and got to the Senate chamber in time to see the elected officials arrive, "some took off their hats, some not, some took their seats, read the news, pamphlets, or wrote, others went into the side room, others stood and talked. Among others, I noticed Senator [David] Patterson, the President's son-in-law, that miserable drunk," Norelius wrote.

"The speaker now struck twice on his gavel ... and immediately after the prayer, the presiding judge [former Secretary of the Treasury Salmon] Chase entered in his

Stämningen. I lördags kl. 4 infann sig senatens ordningsman hos presidenten och företedde den af Chase undertecknade stämningen för honom att infinna sig inför rättsrådet.

Så har saken gått sin jemna gång hittills. Anklagelseledarnes kommitté arbetar strängt med uppsättande af bevisen för anklagelsepunkterna. Alla preliminära frågor äro utan förändring bland republikanerna afgjorde. Nå ransakningen gå lugnt, men raft, utan onödigt dröjsmål och tidsutdrägt.

Hemlandet 10 March 1868.

The summons. Last Saturday at 4 p.m. the constable of the Congress came to the President and showed him the by Chase signed summons for him to appear in the impeachment court. So far the case has now advanced peacefully. The committee of the accusers now work diligently with listing all the points of accusations. All preliminary questions are now decided in unity by the Republicans. May the trial be done peacefully but quickly, without any unnecessary delay and waste of time.

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official robe ... the President's lawyers had taken their seats and all gave a similar impression: old, almost all grey-haired, well-polished, old-fashioned gentlemen with a sad, melancholic expression, bearing witness to the despairing cause they had agreed to defend."

In stark contrast to the old defense attorneys stood the attorney Benjamin Butler of Civil War fame and notoriety. "One must see and listen to him to understand that a more appropriate prosecutor could never have been found," Norelius wrote and offered an example of Butler's approach in an examination of Colonel William Moore, Andrew Johnson's secretary, who had been called as a witness:

" 'How dared you,' he [Butler] asked with a nonchalance that eludes all description, 'take such liberty with the President's constitutional freedoms and rights,'" Norelius remembered the prosecutor asking before adding admiringly, "Butler always has a response and answers biting-ly."

Thus, it was little surprise that the Swedish pastor confidently predicted "the President's case is here considered lost and one does not need to be present at more than one session to see what advantage the prosecutors have." Apart from his own on-



Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln in 1861, before the partially complete Capitol dome.

the-ground experience, Norelius's confidence was likely rooted in the overwhelming Republican majorities enjoyed in the Senate (45-9) with "only" two-thirds of the members present needed to convict the president.

Having witnessed the impeachment proceedings, Norelius headed back into the bustling capital full of "elegant people, especially the ladies." Yet, not all was as pleasant as it sounded. "It is horrible how far the extravagance in our country extends especially in the capital and the bigger

cities," Norelius noted. "A reformation is certainly greatly needed."

A month later, however, it became clear that an American political reformation would have to wait. On May 16, President Johnson was saved by a single Senate vote (35 for and 19 against) as 7 Republicans crossed the aisle and voted with their Democratic colleagues against impeachment.

Hemlandet Det Gamla Och Det Nya.

The author:

Anders Bo Rasmussen is Assistant Professor at the Center for American Studies (University of Southern Denmark) and is currently writing a book titled "*For God and Country: Scandinavians, Citizenship, and American Empire*" with the aim of publication in 2018 - the 150th anniversary of Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial.

Anders Bo Rasmussen's research examines transnational relations between the United States and Europe from the middle of the 19th century to the present. He has published articles and books on immigration history, slavery and emancipation, cultural diplomacy, and Americanization.

His work on American history, culture, and society has appeared in national publications such as *Weekendavisen*, *Information*, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, and *Politiken* among several other outlets.

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Anders Bo Rasmussen. (Photo by Jill Seasholm).