

Nightmare's End

Yes, it was wretched, and we're glad to wake up. But even bad dreams can serve useful purposes

By NANCY GIBBS

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, WAS GRADUATION DAY, full of pomp and circumstance. The Senators voted to acquit the President, and he gave his 82-second commencement address. The daffodils didn't know enough to stay under the mulch, the little white flags fluttered on the South Lawn putting green, aides stood in the sunshine listening to him apologize and reconcile one more time. And of course it was the postscript that sealed the day, after he turned to leave and heard the heavenly question transmitted by Sam Donaldson. "In your heart, sir, can you forgive and forget?"

Perfect. Pause. "I believe," Clinton answered, reaching for his diploma, "any person who asks for forgiveness has to be prepared to give it."

He had been up so late—thinking and writing, thinking and writing, the long version, the short version—that he slept through his 8 a.m. wake-up call and was still scribbling as the votes tolled, guilty, not guilty. He knew—everyone knew—that every time he had opened his mouth about the scandal he had made things worse: too glib, too bitter, too unbowed, too phony. But as Dick Morris once said, Bill Clinton will make every mistake a President can make, but he will make it only once. This time he was so determined to get the tone right that he kept searching for the word he knew was still missing. The last word he added came at the end, when he urged everyone to "rededicate ourselves to the work of serving our nation and building our future," and then wrote in "together."

Within moments of the vote, the Senators were cheering the Chief Justice and one another, and no one lunged for anyone else's throat. The U.S. is still a superpower, and the only elected President to be impeached is still the leader of the free world.

A public content to ignore its government can take heart that its institutions are sturdy and forgiving: the presidency forgave a reckless President, the Congress survived a bout of cannibalism, the Constitution warded off anyone who tried to ransack it for any reason. It was tempting to blame the clanking 18th-century impeachment mechanisms for dragging out the investigation for months after the public had made up its mind; yet that stately pace served the purpose of forcing both sides to confront the evidence, honor the process, hear each other out. It turns out the Constitution wasn't built for speed. It was built to last.

In some ways the system turned itself inside out. The House members, who stand for election every two years in districts so small that all voices should be heard, were the ones who drove the



process forward despite widespread resistance. The Senate was designed to judge the case on the legal merits, protected from public passions by its six-year terms; yet in the end the Senators accepted the fact that the public had reached a complex decision to tolerate Clinton's conduct, and groped their way through the law and politics and duty to find a way to honor the people's will.

In the process some blurry principles came into focus. For years debate has raged over which conduct is public and relevant, which is private and protected. One after another, in the effort to prove they were being prosecutors, not Puritans, Republicans declared that the private aspect of Clinton's misconduct was no one's business, certainly not the Senate's. If the media get the message, the country will be happy to move on. Similarly, the culture of investigation that created Ken Starr with his searchlights and Bill Clinton with his Dobermans has been examined under bright lights, and so surely we will look for a better way to hold politicians accountable without holding them hostage.

The Senate today is a different place from what it was six weeks ago, before what Bob Kerrey calls its "confinement" during the 37-day trial. Senators these days are free agents: they talk to cameras, not one another. But during the trial's last week, when the TV lights and microphones were turned off, that slowly changed, and the members became like neighbors who take down the fences after the floodwaters have swept the whole town away. They

WHAT IT COST IN DOLLARS

Ken Starr spent millions on his investigation. As his costs soared, so did the legal bills of the main cast and the backup players. Who got the biggest bill? Taxpayers, of course.

Starr's investigation	\$40,835,000*	\$4.4 million of that on investigating Lewinsky alone
The Clintons	\$8,000,000	Attorney fees
	\$850,000	Paula Jones settlement
Monica Lewinsky	\$2,000,000 +	Attorney fees
Linda Tripp	\$350,000 +	Attorney fees
Vernon Jordan	\$150,000 +	Probably covered by his law firm as pro bono work
Betty Currie	\$150,000 +	Attorney fees
Sidney Blumenthal	\$150,000 +	Attorney fees

*Estimate as of January 1999

turned to one another and had an argument unlike any other in their experience: pointed, passionate and thoroughly private. On Friday, once the vote was taken, Tom Daschle and Trent Lott reached across the aisle and shook hands. "We did it," said the Democratic leader as his counterpart slapped him on the back. "We sure did," responded Lott. There were thumbs flying high and backs thumped and hugs all around as the Senators filed out.

Reflecting later on the new mood, a bone-weary Lott told a few reporters, "We've gotten to know each other better as people, as individuals rather than Senator So-and-So from Minnesota or Senator So-and-So from Alabama. There's been a lot of holding of hands and slapping on backs

and nuzzling of each other and trying to keep this from breaking out into a really nasty affair." Newly bonded, the Senators are hopeful. "It doesn't mean we won't get into fusses over tax policy or farm policy or foreign policy or whatever," Lott added, "but I think we will be a little less quick to question the other's motives or to publicly be critical of each other." ■

Questions

1. What verdict did the Senate reach in its trial of Bill Clinton? To what extent does the verdict reflect public opinion?
2. How did the trial change the Senate?





Building Web Skills: Voices in the Impeachment Debate

In the House Judiciary Committee, in the news media, in homes and schools across the country and later in the Senate, lawmakers and citizens argued passionately for and against impeaching President Clinton, putting him on trial, and removing him from office for his actions in the Monica Lewinsky scandal. What are the most compelling arguments on both sides of this important question? Go to the Internet to collect a sampling of those voices and arguments, record them on this page, and then offer your own view of the action Senators took when they voted on the four articles of impeachment passed by the Judiciary Committee.

Conducting Your Internet Search

Begin your search at a major news website or the news section of a web search engine. Be sure to make use of archive features, special report sections, and collections of polls, commentary and analysis.

Starting points for your search:

- TIME/CNN sites (time.com, cnn.com, allpolitics.com)
- MSNBC (www.msnbc.com)
- National Public Radio (npr.com/news/national/impeach)
- C-SPAN (www.c-span.org/guide/executive/investigation)
- ABC News (www.abcnews.com)
- The Los Angeles Times* (www.latimes.com)
- The Wall Street Journal* (www.wsj.com)
- USA Today* (www.usatoday.com)
- The Washington Post* (www.washingtonpost.com)
- The New York Times* (www.nytimes.com)

	For Impeachment	Against Impeachment
Member of the House
Newspaper or magazine column or editorial
Public opinion poll on impeachment
Member of the Senate
Now add your own voice for or against the Senate's acquittal of President Clinton