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OPINIONS & VIEWPOINTS



HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

current events through a historical lens

Dr. James Finck, USAO History Professor

Mayorkas' Impeachment Charges Echo Those of Former Sec. of War with Ties to Oklahoma

By James Finck, Ph. D.

Last month Congress made the historic decision to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

With immigration being one of the hottest political issues of the day, Republicans impeached the secretary on charges of being “engaged in a pattern of conduct that is incompatible with his duties...[and] has failed to faithfully uphold his oath and has instead presided over a reckless abandonment of border security and immigration enforcement.” The charges also include that he, “willfully violated the Immigration and Nationality Act by releasing illegal aliens into the interior of the United States despite the plain language of the Act.

Personally, I am surprised that this is the first impeachment under the Republican House of Representatives. I was expecting it to happen much sooner and to a person much bigger – namely Joe Biden. Republicans have shown restraint after having their own president impeached twice and instead went after a Biden lieutenant.

Historically speaking, what is more interesting is that while we have now had four presidential impeachments, Mayorkas is only the second cabinet member to be impeached, and the first in 148 years. The first was Secretary of War William Belknap during the Grant administration and involves southwest Oklahoma. It is worth noting that neither Belknap nor any of the presidents were removed from office. Impeachment is done by the House of Representatives and simple determines if there is enough evidence to have a trial. If an official is impeached by the House then the Senate conducts a trial to determine guilt.

While recent scholarly works about President Grant, especially Ron Chernow's 2017 New York Times bestselling book “Grant,” has helped rehabilitate his reputation, the fact remains that his tenure had its share of corruption. Grant's presidency was in the beginning stages of what is known as the Gilded Age, a time period known for greed and corruption at every level and Belknap got caught in the fray.

Born in New York and attending college at what is now Princeton, Belknap made a name for himself as a lawyer in Iowa and entered politics as a Democrat. When the Civil War broke out, he joined the Union Army as a major. He fought in several engagements including Shiloh and rose through the ranks until he reached major general. After the war he was brought into the Grant administration as Secretary of War.

During the war, soldiers bought most of their supplies from people known as sutlers. After the war these same men set up shops in Western forts and made good profits as they monopolized sales. At first, sutlers were chosen by the forts' commanding officers. Belknap changed that practice when he took over and his department could solely license sutlers in all forts.

One of his personal hardships was satisfying his wife's financial needs on his meager \$8,000 salary. Carita Belknap had grown up in a wealthy Kentucky family and wanted to impress her fellow Washingtonians. She pushed for a family friend, Caleb P. Marsh, to receive the license for the store at Fort Sill in the southwest corner of Indian Territory. The problem was the current sutler, John S. Evans, did not want to give up his lucrative position and made a bargain with Marsh and Carita that he would split the payments if allowed to retain his post.

The deal was accepted, and Carita began receiving \$600 a year. While no evidence exists, there were later rumors that Belknap had similar deals with other sutlers around the west. Carita only received one payment for her part of the deal as she died of tuberculosis, but her widowed sister Amanda, who was living with the Belknaps, not only replaced Carita in the scheme but also took in her place as Belknap's new wife.

Amanda would prove even more lavish than Carita as belle of the ball amongst the Washington D.C socialites. So much so that some began questioning how she could afford so much on her husband's government salary. At the same time, some in the Army – most notably George Custer – began questioning the prices from sutler stores and where all the money was going. As rumors started to swirl about possible kickbacks, Democratic Congressman Hiester Clymer launched a congressional investigation. It did not take long for the investigation to lead to Marsh, who, under oath, spilled everything to Congress. Belknap tried to pin the blame on his wives and say he was unaware of their wrongdoings. But Marsh's testimony made that impossible.

The House acted quickly in bringing articles of impeachment against Belknap, but before they could finish he turned in his resignation to President Grant, who accepted it.

In a similar light with the 2016 Congress, the 1876 Congress had to decide if they had the power to impeach an ex-official now private citizen. In both cases the answer was “yes.” The 1876 House issued five articles of impeachment including “criminally disregarding his duty as Secretary of War and basely prostituting his high office to his lust for private gain.” The belief was Belknap should not be able to escape justice simply by resigning.

The Senate held a lengthy trial, considered all the evidence and acquitted Belknap of all charges by around 40 votes. Those who voted no tended to feel that Congress had overstepped its bounds in impeaching a private citizen. An actual investigation was also conducted by the Justice Department, but not much really happened after the Senate's acquittal.

Though disgraced, Belknap retained his law practice after the trial and practiced in Philadelphia and Washington. He remained popular among the soldiers and active in their interests. Belknap died of a heart attack in 1890 in Washington D.C.

In some ways Belknap's trial has more similarities to President Trump's second impeachment hearing than Mayorkas. Mayorkas is still actively serving as Homeland Security Secretary so his hearing will have a greater effect if convicted. However, with the makeup of the Senate, there is little doubt that Mayorkas will be acquitted.

James Finck, Ph.D. is a professor of history at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma and writes for the Southwest Ledger. You can follow Historically Speaking on Facebook or at Historicallyspeaking.blog.

A word, please

By June Casagrande

“My partner and I's bikes were stolen,” a woman posted on my local Nextdoor.com recently.

Not familiar with Nextdoor? It's the reason why, some years back, everyone you know in every town from coast to coast started talking about the crime wave hitting their neighborhood. The real crime was social media nudging out local news, siphoning advertising dollars away from professional journalism and toward a barrage of hysterical, context-free anecdotes about porch pirates and noises that sound like gunshots. But I digress.

Point is, a lot of folks go on this hyperlocal social media site to tell their neighbors about crimes, coyote sightings and whatnot and, when they do, they don't always use perfect grammar. Nothing wrong with that. These aren't doctoral dissertations. But sometimes the grammar is surprising. Revealing. Like “my partner and I's.”

As kids, we got it drilled into our heads that “me” is often improper. “Kim and me are going to the park” was swiftly corrected by a parent or teacher saying, “It's Kim and I, not Kim and me.” This valuable lesson about subject and object pronouns got filtered through our little kid brains and settled there as: “I” is bad. It doesn't go with Kim or any other person. If you don't want people to think you're dumb, avoid “I” anytime there's an “and” plus another person.

The result: Sentences like “The manager saw him and I” and “This is between you and I” and other “and I” structures that miss the mark of perfect grammar precisely because the speaker was trying too hard to be proper.

A lot of experts point out that these sentence structures are acceptable in casual speech. But that's the problem. The folks using “I” this way are aiming for proper speech. They're trying to be as grammatical as possible, and it backfires.

Whenever it's the object of a verb, like “saw,” or a preposition, like “between” or “with” or “to,” the most grammatical choice is “me,” not “I.”

The manager saw him and me. Thanks for meeting with her and me.

Usually you can find the right pronoun just by trying the sentence without the other person: The manager saw I, or the manager saw me? Thanks for meeting with I, or thanks for meeting with me? Adding an extra person or people doesn't change the fact that “me” is better in these sentences.

“My partner and I's bikes” is more complicated because now we're talking about possessives. If you're convinced that “I” is always proper with another person, it's understandable that you'd have trouble handling a sentence that calls for possessives. But the solution is just as simple: Try omitting the other person.

That is, would you say: “I's bike was stolen” or “My bike was stolen”? The answer is clear. There is no “I's.” When you're talking about something you possess, you use “my”: My bike was stolen.

Another matter complicating our bike-theft sentence: How do you form possessives when you're talking about two people's bikes? Is it “my partner's and my bikes,” or perhaps “my partner and my bikes”? Honestly, it doesn't matter. This is advanced stuff that your reader most certainly will not know. Frankly, even I'm a little fuzzy on the subject.

The simple rule for “shared possessives” is that if both people share a thing, add the apostrophe and S to only the final person: Hal and Betty's house. But if each person separately owns one of the things, each gets their own apostrophe and S: Hal's and Betty's bikes.

According to that rule, “My partner's and my bikes” is correct. But so is “my partner and my house,” which sounds bad to my ear. That “partner” screams for an apostrophe and S, simply because it seems weird without one. That's why, personally, I would use “my partner's and my house.”

Choose the one you prefer. As long as it's not “I's,” you'll do fine.

— June Casagrande is the author of “The Joy of Syntax: A Simple Guide to All the Grammar You Know You Should Know.” She can be reached at JuneTCN@aol.com.

