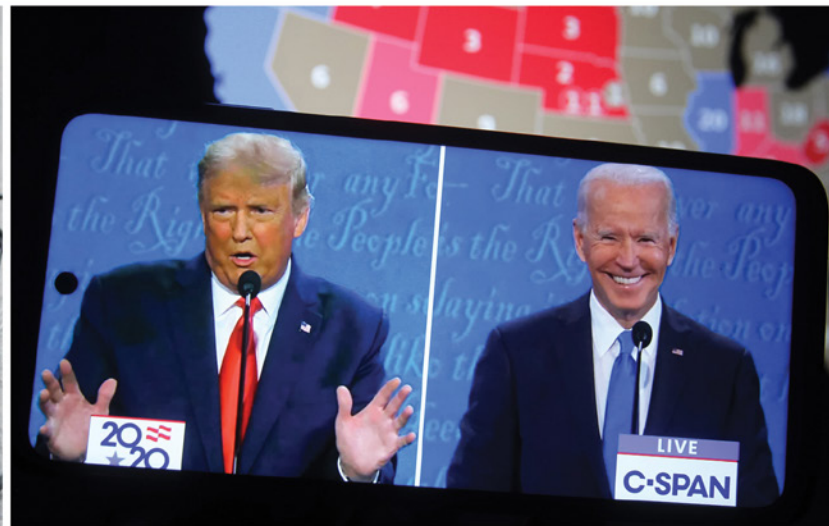




# *Pandemic, Protest, and Politics:* **A LOOK BACK AT 2020**

Hal Marcovitz





#### About the Author

Hal Marcovitz is a former newspaper reporter and columnist who lives in Chalfont, Pennsylvania. He has written more than two hundred books for young readers.

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# IMPORTANT EVENTS OF 2020



## January

- On January 16 the US House of Representatives submits two articles of impeachment to the US Senate, initiating the first impeachment trial of President Donald Trump.
- On January 30 the WHO declares a global health emergency in connection with the rapid spread of a new and deadly coronavirus.

## February

- On February 5 the Senate acquits Trump on both articles of impeachment.
- On February 11 the WHO names the disease caused by the new coronavirus COVID-19 (for coronavirus disease 2019).

## March

- On March 19 California becomes first US state to enact a statewide shutdown.
- On March 24 the International Olympic Committee announces a one-year postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## April

- On April 12 a massive storm system produces more than 40 tornadoes from Texas to South Carolina, killing 32 people across 6 states.
- As of April 26, the pandemic has killed more than 200,000 and sickened more than 2.8 million people worldwide.

## May

- On May 8 the US unemployment rate hits 14.7 percent — a number attributed to the massive layoffs of workers due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- On May 25 George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man, dies from a fatal chokehold applied by a White Minneapolis police officer. The incident sparks months of protests (nationwide and around the world) against racial injustice.



## June

- On June 5 Joe Biden secures the Democratic nomination after winning presidential primaries held that week in seven states and Washington DC.

## July

- On July 18 Oregon's attorney general sues the federal government, charging that unidentified federal agents unlawfully detained racial justice protesters in the city of Portland.
- On July 23, after a delay of nearly four months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Major League Baseball begins an abbreviated 60-game schedule.

# The Impeachment of President Trump

When President Donald Trump looked at early public opinion polls in June 2019, he did not like what he saw. In just seven months voters would begin casting ballots in their state caucuses and primary elections, the beginning of the process to decide who would be nominated by the two major parties for the 2020 presidential election. A Republican, Trump was not expecting competition in his party's caucuses and primaries, but on the Democratic side candidates were already lining up to seek their party's nomination. More than a dozen Democrats would soon launch their campaigns.

The polls taken at this early stage in the race showed that Trump was trailing behind several Democratic candidates. His most significant challenger promised to be Joe Biden, who spent eight years as vice president in the previous administration of President Barack Obama. On June 11, 2019, a poll conducted by Quinnipiac University in Connecticut found Trump trailing Biden by a margin of 53–40 percent. Trump realized that if Biden went on to win the Democratic nomination, Trump would be hard pressed to make up the difference, meaning he was likely to lose the presidential election in November 2020.

Elected in November 2016, Trump was a different type of leader than Americans were used to seeing hold the office of president. Dating back to the earliest days of the republic, most US presidents have come up through the coun-

try's political system. Many have served in Congress. Many have served as governors of their states. Some stepped into the presidency after serving long careers as military leaders. But Trump served no time in elective office or the military before launching his campaign for the presidency in 2015. At the time, he headed a company devoted to building hotels and apartment buildings in New York City, among other places. The world of New York real estate development can be hard fought, with competitors often resorting to underhanded ways to undermine one another. That was the culture in which Trump had thrived for decades.

As he prepared for his upcoming reelection campaign for the presidency in 2020, Trump searched for a way to attack Biden's candidacy. The action Trump is alleged to have taken would result in his impeachment in the House of Representatives and his trial in the Senate on the charge of violating the oath of office he took when he was sworn in as president.

## **The Call to President Zelensky**

Impeachment is a process conceived by the framers of the Constitution to determine whether a US president has violated the responsibilities of his office or has broken the law. The Constitution provides for members of the House to launch an investigation and, if they find the charges have merit, to draft articles of impeachment outlining the charges. The articles then must be approved by a majority of House members. If the articles are approved, they are sent to the Senate, which stages a trial. All members of the Senate act as jurors. At the conclusion of the trial, members of the Senate vote on the guilt or innocence of the president. Two-thirds of the Senate—sixty-seven members—must vote to convict in order for the president to be removed from office.

The act for which Trump found himself facing impeachment stemmed from a phone call the president made on July 25, 2019. Shaken by the public opinion polls that showed him likely to lose the presidency the following year, Trump was desperate to find



*Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky (left), meets with President Donald Trump (right) in September of 2019. In a phone conversation two months earlier, Trump had asked Zelensky to tie presidential candidate Joe Biden's son, Hunter, to a criminal investigation of a Ukrainian natural gas company.*

reasons for voters to oppose Biden. He thought he had found such a reason when he learned of business dealings involving Hunter Biden, Joe's son, in the eastern European nation of Ukraine. At the time, Hunter sat on the board of Burisma, a Ukrainian natural gas company. Hunter's tenure on the Burisma board ended in 2019. But while he was still a member of the board, Burisma's president was under investigation by authorities in his own country on corruption charges.

Trump reportedly wanted to tie Hunter Biden to the Burisma president's legal problems. And so he placed a call to the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, asking Zelensky to launch an investigation into Hunter Biden and publicly announce that Joe Biden's son was under criminal investigation. With such an allegation hanging over the head of the son of a presidential candidate, Trump's critics say, Trump hoped to convince voters that Joe Biden had knowledge of his son's alleged corruption. As such, Trump would charge that Joe Biden was complicit in Hunter's crimes and, therefore, unqualified for the presidency.

But there was even more to the charge. Weeks after the call was made—while Trump was still waiting for Zelensky to announce an investigation of Hunter Biden—the media reported that Trump had slowed military assistance to Ukraine. At the time, the federal government was sending \$400 million in weapons and other aid to Ukraine to help the nation stave off attacks along its border launched by Russia, its hostile neighbor. Critics of the president charged that Trump had slowed the military aid to pressure Zelensky into announcing the investigation into Hunter Biden.

## **The House Impeaches the President**

Soon information about the July 25 phone call came to the attention of Congress. Under federal law, so-called whistle-blowers are able to report misconduct by officials to investigating agencies. Under law, their identities remain secret in order to protect them from retribution from those under investigation. In this case a foreign affairs analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency with knowledge of the call to Zelensky filed a whistle-blower report that was sent to members of the House and Senate.

Based on the allegations in the whistle-blower's report, the House (controlled by a Democratic majority) announced that it would pursue an investigation. The House staged a public hearing on its inquiry, which was broadcast live on national TV. The hearing, and the evidence that emerged, captivated the nation.

One of the witnesses who testified during the hearing was Alexander Vindman, a colonel in the US Army, a native of Ukraine, and a member of the White House foreign policy staff. Whenever presidents speak with foreign leaders, members of the foreign policy staff listen in on the phone calls. It is believed that following the conclusion of such calls, the staff's input in interpreting the conversations is helpful to the president. Vindman was assigned to listen in on Trump's July 25 call with Zelensky. As he listened to the call, Vindman testified during the impeachment hearing, he was shocked by what Trump asked Zelensky. "I was concerned

by the call, what I heard was improper. . . . It is improper for the president of the United States to demand a foreign government investigate a US citizen and political opponent,” Vindman said. “It was also clear that if Ukraine pursued an investigation into the 2016 election, the Bidens, and Burisma, it would be interpreted as a partisan play.”<sup>4</sup>

**“It is improper for the president of the United States to demand a foreign government investigate a US citizen and political opponent.”<sup>4</sup>**

—Alexander Vindman, US Army colonel and White House foreign relations adviser

On December 13, 2019, the House Judiciary Committee approved two articles of impeachment against the president. The first article alleged that Trump abused his power as president by placing the call to Zelensky, asking for the investigation of Hunter Biden and withholding military aid to Ukraine to pressure Zelensky to comply with his demand. The second article alleged that Trump was guilty of obstruction of justice—that during the

House’s investigation of the case, Trump withheld documents and other records requested by House investigators as they sought to uncover the truth.

Five days later the House approved the articles of impeachment by a vote of 230 to 197. All Republicans in the House voted against the impeachment of the president. On January 15, 2020, members of the House who were to serve as managers of the impeachment—essentially, the prosecutors for the trial—delivered the articles to the Senate.

## **The Senate Trial**

On January 16, 2020, the trial commenced. In his opening remarks, Adam Schiff, a Democratic member of the House from California and one of the managers, said, “President Trump withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to a strategic partner at war with Russia to secure foreign help with his re-election, in other words, to cheat. . . . His scheme was undertaken for a simple but corrupt reason: to help him win re-election in 2020.”<sup>5</sup>

# The Impeachments of Presidents Johnson and Clinton

Prior to the impeachment of President Trump, just two US presidents had been impeached in the nation's history. In 1868 the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Andrew Johnson, alleging that he had abused the powers of his office by thwarting legislation he felt treated the southern states too harshly after they returned to the Union following the Civil War. A trial was held in the Senate, but a conviction that would have removed Johnson from office fell short by one vote.

The second impeachment occurred more than a century later. In 1998 President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, lied to federal investigators about an extramarital affair he had had with a staff member of the White House. At the time, both the House and Senate were under control of Republican majorities. Clinton was impeached in the House but acquitted in the Senate because Republicans fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to convict the president. Congressional scholars have argued that lying to cover up an extramarital affair should not be considered grounds to remove a president from office. They contend that the campaign to impeach Clinton was ginned up by Republicans purely to bring down a president from the opposition party.

For the next three weeks, the nation was captivated by the impeachment trial, which was broadcast live by several TV networks. During the trial, the president's defenders insisted the charges were contrived by Democrats who sought to bring the accusations against the president for purely political purposes. The goal, the defenders said, was to undermine Trump's standing among voters in the hopes they would turn to Joe Biden or another Democrat in the November election. Said Lindsey Graham, a Republican senator from South Carolina, "I'm not trying to pretend to be a fair juror here. What I see coming, happening today, is just partisan nonsense."<sup>6</sup>

The trial concluded on February 5. On the charge that Trump had abused his power, the Republican-controlled Senate

**"I'm not trying to pretend to be a fair juror here. What I see coming, happening today, is just partisan nonsense."<sup>6</sup>**

—Lindsey Graham, Republican senator from South Carolina

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