Stop Comparing the Trump Impeachment Probe to Watergate

Our obsession with looking backward makes it seem we're afraid to look forward.

By Joan Walsh

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I'm old enough to remember watching the Senate Watergate Committee hearings, as a teenage Nixon-hater, raised that way by my liberal, devout Catholic, Nixon-loathing father. I can still be obsessive about Watergate trivia. But too much of our media is using the outcome of that inspiring process—Nixon's resignation—to impeach, so to speak, the Democrats' handling of Donald Trump's many high crimes and misdemeanors, after day one of the House Intelligence Committee's impeachment inquiry.
Peter Baker harks back to that triumph of democracy almost a half century ago to find the first hearing a little disappointing: “While major television networks broke into regular programming to carry it live, there was little sense of a riveted country putting everything aside to watch à la Watergate.” It’s worth remembering that the Times’ first-day, front-page coverage of the Senate hearings in May 1973 carried the headline “A Low-Key Beginning Before A Rapt Audience.”

Is all the looking backward because it’s too scary to look forward? My objection isn’t to parallels between the abuses involved in Watergate and the Ukraine scandal, because they exist, but to the expectations of what Democrats ought to do, and how, and jumping to the conclusion that they’re botching it. They may be, but fetishizing the Watergate investigations ignores how much media, politics, and the GOP have changed in the intervening 45 years.

Just to quickly dispense with Baker: C’mon, dude. We are no longer a country that is “riveted” by anything, or gathers around the TV for much beyond the Super Bowl, and even that spectacle’s ratings are in sharp decline. In 1974, we had three dominant networks; now, even beyond the 24-hour cable networks, we have an infinite media universe competing for our attention, as well as ideological media silos that “rivet” us with different stories, and sometimes different facts.

Midday Wednesday, “Walter Cronkite” began trending on Twitter, because people heard the voice of the late, sainted CBS anchor, once “the most trusted man in America,” in Ukraine Special Envoy Bill Taylor’s soothing.
authoritative tone. That's nice. And sad. Walter Cronkite is still dead. And if he wasn't, today's media might kill him.

Cronkite's two short Watergate special reports in October 1972, totaling 20-plus minutes, are widely credited with forcing the nation to pay attention to the shadowy, complex, and still-unspooling scandal. In an admiring NPR Cronkite obit in 2009, Alicia Shepard confessed to watching both broadcasts and concluding: “I can safely say that CBS would never run that story today. Frankly, it was far too complicated—and even boring. It was difficult to figure out what Cronkite was talking about.” She’s no doubt right. And despite all the Cronkite nostalgia on Twitter, the media found his vocal doppelgänger Taylor unconvincing. In a headline that should go down in history, an NBC News analysis complained that Taylor's testimony, and the entire day, lacked “pizzazz.”

(One more nod to Twitter: By Thursday morning “pizzazz” was trending, and not in a good way.)

Some Watergate parallels can be illuminating. MSNBC’s Lawrence O’Donnell found plenty of pizzazz in the hearing (despite some of his network colleagues’ disappointment), and featured much of North Carolina Senator Sam Ervin Jr.’s opening statement from the first Senate Watergate hearing. The respected Democratic chair of the committee, Ervin was chosen partly
because of his pull across the partisan aisle, and also because he wasn’t expected to run for reelection, and he didn’t. Ervin’s statement is worth reading; it was morally and politically compelling. The introduction alone shows the real parallels between Watergate and our current mess:

We are beginning these hearings today in an atmosphere of utmost gravity. The questions that have been raised in the wake of the June 17th break-in strike at the very undergirding of our democracy. If the many allegations made to this date are true, then the burglars who broke into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate were in effect breaking into the home of every citizen of the United States. If these allegations prove to be true, what they were seeking to steal was not the jewels, money or other property of American citizens, but something much more valuable—their most precious heritage, the right to vote in a free election.

But Democrats have no Sam Ervin, for some very good reasons. Ervin had moral and political pull across the aisle because he was, or at least had been, an ardent segregationist. The author of the 1956 “Southern Manifesto,” signed by almost all Southern members of Congress, that challenged the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education, Ervin mellowed a bit over the years. He would eventually say Brown wasn’t a bad decision—it was just that all the measures used to implement it were terrible. Despite his moving evocation of our “most precious heritage, the right to vote in a free election,” he called the 1965 Voting Rights Act “cockeyed and unconstitutional” and voted against it. Ervin was one of the guys former vice president Joe Biden remembered as a segregationist he could work with when he arrived in the Senate.

I was also struck by Ervin’s obvious lack of concern for “optics,” let alone “pizzazz.” He was rumpled and hunched over, wearing reading glasses and droning into the microphone; both the nattily dressed House Intelligence Committee chair Adam Schiff and Shirtsleeves Jim Jordan are clearly playing for the cameras. Ervin, mainly, was not; he could imagine Republican colleagues whose minds he might change. Schiff doesn’t have that social capital with Steve Scalise, for instance. Looking back at Ervin only serves to underscore how much the Democratic Party has changed, for the better, while the GOP of Ervin’s day, whose party leaders could ultimately have their minds changed by evidence and turn on a corrupt president, is nearly extinct.
I think we fetishize Watergate partly because very few people alive today remember how slow and confusing and sometimes even “boring” it all was. It’s also because we know how Watergate ended: Nixon resigned. It is understandable that many people, even many progressives, would imagine we could start from that happy outcome, and work back from it to engineer the same success. But Watergate tells us almost nothing about today. Many of us are craving some kind of playbook and some obvious source of moral authority, and we don’t have either. We have to create it.

Joan Walsh, a national affairs correspondent for The Nation, is the author of What’s the Matter With White People? Finding Our Way in the Next America.

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Amy Klobuchar Still Takes Newspapers Seriously

The senator is collecting endorsements and highlighting them as part of a campaign that is rising in the polls.

By John Nichols

TODAY 9:26 AM
In what seemed like an arcane exchange in the last debate before Tuesday’s New Hampshire primary, Amy Klobuchar reminded Bernie Sanders that some newspaper editorial boards actually like him.

Klobuchar had just concluded an argument that she would be the more electable Democratic nominee for president: “I have a way of working with people, that I think should be valued here as we look at these candidates, and it’s one of the reasons that I got the New York Times endorsement, along with Elizabeth [Warren], and that I got the endorsements of the three major papers here in New Hampshire, which is the Union Leader, the Seacoast papers, and The Keene Sentinel. I think that matters. Read those editorials, and you will get a sense of what I’m about.”

The moderator turned to Sanders, who said, “I must confess, I don’t get too many newspaper editorial support. Must confess that.”

It’s not often, these days, that newspaper endorsements come up as subjects for discussion in presidential debates. But Klobuchar goes there.

Of all the contenders for the Democratic nomination, the Minnesota senator takes newspapers especially seriously. Newpapering is in her blood. Her father, Jim Klobuchar, was a popular columnist for the Minneapolis Star Tribune. She grew up around daily papers and continues to talk them up—even as others speculate about the fading influence of so-called “legacy media” in an age of presidential tweets and 24/7 cable commentary.

Klobuchar’s affection for daily papers appears to be serving her well in a 2020 campaign where polls suggest her fortunes are rising. After securing a credible finish in last week’s Iowa caucuses, where she came close to elbowing former vice president Joe Biden out of fourth place, the Minnesota senator is showing signs of strength in New Hampshire.

One survey from WHDH-TV and Emerson College now has Klobuchar in third place—behind post-Iowa front-runners Pete Buttigieg and Sanders, narrowly ahead of Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and Biden. Other polls put Warren in third, but former New Hampshire Democratic gubernatorial nominee Arnie Arnesen says, “It’s clear that people are taking another look at Amy.”

To get those second looks, Klobuchar’s speeches and campaign materials urge voters to consider her newspaper endorsements.
Like President Trump and her fellow Democratic contenders, Klobuchar’s comfortable communicating on social media platforms and jumps at the chance to do TV and radio interviews. But she goes out of her way to reach out to and talk with the editorial boards of newspapers that still make endorsements. Not just The New York Times, which made a convoluted endorsement of both Klobuchar and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, but the smaller papers that still serve as vital voices across the country.

Klobuchar’s Iowa campaign highlighted warm endorsements from a pair of daily papers in the eastern part of the state, the Quad-City Times in Davenport and the Iowa City Press-Citizen. Those of us who have written newspaper endorsements know they are just one way to capture voters’ attention. But it’s not unreasonable to suggest that kind words from Iowa papers boosted Klobuchar’s prospects, as The Des Moines Register’s endorsement undoubtedly helped Elizabeth Warren.

As Klobuchar noted in the last debate before New Hampshire’s primary, she had the support of the state’s largest daily, the traditionally conservative Manchester Union Leader, endorsed her, identifying the Minnesotan as the candidate with “the strength and stamina to go toe-to-toe with the Tweeter-in-Chief.”

She also got support from daily and weekly newspapers associated with southeast New Hampshire’s Seacoast Media Group. And one of the state’s more progressive daily papers, The Keene Sentinel, gave Klobuchar a well-argued endorsement that identified her as the candidate best suited to unite the country and defeat Trump.

“Whip-smart and knowledgeable, she’s set on progress, but tempered by the political realities a new president would face,” the paper’s editors wrote. “Her record in Washington is one of getting things done, even when that requires reaching out to her GOP counterparts. Most candidates say they can ‘reach across the aisle’ and ‘bring people to the table.’ She’s done it.”

That was convincing for Maureen O’Brien, a longtime Sentinel reader from nearby Fitzwilliam. “I was deciding between Pete [Buttigieg] and Amy Klobuchar,” she said Sunday. “The Sentinel endorsement was well done; it helped convince me to go with Amy.” Even when I talked with people who were backing other candidates, the Sentinel editorial came up. It may not have convinced them to switch allegiances, but it inspired the second looks Arnesen talks about.
While all of the major candidates have swept through Keene, a college town that tends to favor Democrats and often backs liberal contenders, Klobuchar went out of her way to visit the Sentinel's office, where she talked for more than an hour with the editorial board about everything from climate change to income inequality. Andrew Yang visited, as well; as did Sanders, who told the editors in a December conversation, “We’ve gotta change the culture, I think, in this country, and that culture is one of greed.”

The Vermonter didn’t get the Keene endorsement, but he did earn an embrace from eastern New Hampshire’s Conway Daily Sun, which said:

> Despite resistance from mainstream Democrats and the media, he sits on or near the top of polls, attracts the biggest crowds and has raised the most money to date—mainly from small donors. So instead of fearing Sanders as a candidate on the fringe, we encourage voters to embrace the notion that he is the standard-bearer of today’s progressive movement and to join us in supporting him to be the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party.

That’s the Sanders endorsement Klobuchar highlighted in the debate—a reference that served as a reminder of just how seriously she keeps track of what all the papers are writing.

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**John Nichols**  

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