**Only four US presidents have ever faced articles of impeachment**

On September 24, speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi announced the initiation of impeachment inquiries over President Trump’s dealings with Ukraine. The story of impeachment dates back to the founding of the United States but when it comes to presidents it has only been seriously considered and invoked three times in the nation’s 250-year history: once in the 19th century and twice in the 20th century. Trump is now the fourth president to face articles of impeachment after Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton.

*Origins:* Following the American Revolution, the young republic entered a phase of turmoil and chaos under the Articles of Confederation – the US’ first governmental system. Afraid of the instability, a group of men known as the Federalists came forward and proposed a new form of constitutional government made up of three separate bodies: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The three bodies were vested with their own powers and were to be accountable to each other. Their experiences under the Articles of Confederation made them wary of the oppressive capacities of republican governments, and seeing legislative abuse on a state level, the founders decided to check Congress by first dividing it into two distinct bodies – the House and the Senate—and then vesting the president with a veto over the legislature’s decisions.

However, having recently freed themselves from the shackles of Britain’s constitutional monarchy, others were more afraid of executive overreach, which could turn the newly independent colonies into what they had escaped in 1776, a European-style monarchy. To that end, the founders set in place certain mechanisms that would prevent the executive branch from abusing its powers. Even the most ardent supporters of an energetic government such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton recognised the need to check executive powers. One of those checks is Article 2, Section 4 of the Constitution which states that: “The President, Vice President and all civil officers of the United States, shall be removed from office on impeachment for, and conviction of treason, bribery, or other crimes and misdemeanours”.

Impeachment is mistakenly compared to a vote of no confidence which can be found in parliamentary democracies such as the UK. The main difference between impeachment and a vote of no confidence is that the latter can be triggered and passed by a simple majority. Impeachment on the other hand, is a much more rigorous and lengthy procedure. It starts at the House which under its investigatory and oversight responsibilities charges its committees with gathering information and evidence. Then with a simple majority the president can be impeached.

But that does not guarantee removal from office, because the case is then taken by the Senate which essentially puts the president on trial and thereafter requires a two-third majority to remove the president from office. Secondly, even if a president is impeached and removed from office, a change of government is not warranted, and the vice-president takes over for the remaining term. Up until now, two presidents have been formally impeached: Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Bill Clinton in 1999 with charges of “high crimes and misdemeanours”. Richard Nixon resigned before he could be impeached in 1974.

By James Deferalist