

Clinton impeachment trial begins in Senate

The senators are sworn in as jurors amid disagreement over how the trial will be conducted

By David Espo
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist presiding, the Senate somberly placed William Jefferson Clinton on trial Thursday on charges of high crimes and misdemeanors in the first presidential impeachment in 131 years. The White House promised a "compelling case" for acquittal.

The nation's 42nd president — and only the second to face a trial — was at the White House when all 100 senators stood at their desks in the Capitol, raised their hands and swore to render "impartial justice" in his case.

The momentous events unfolded as Senate leaders struggled for an elusive accord on guidelines for the trial, setting an extraordinary closed-door meeting of all senators for Friday.

"I think there is some common ground," said the Democratic leader, Sen. Tom Daschle of South Dakota, although he and Majority Leader Trent Lott added there had been no bipartisan accord on the thorny question of whether to permit testimony by witnesses.

Clinton stands accused of perjury and obstruction of justice, allegations that stem from his long campaign to cover up a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. The charges were brought in the name of the House of Representatives and "of the people of the United States of America," intoned Rep. Henry Hyde, the Illinois Republican who led fellow GOP lawmakers into the chamber to formally present the two articles of impeachment.

The nation tuned in on television, lines of visitors formed at the Capitol, and a lucky few dozen people got seats in the galleries overhanging the Senate chamber for the opening of the trial. "I came here to show my support for the Constitution and, I guess, the pageantry of it all," said Todd Marks, a law student from Cincinnati.

"We have an awesome responsibility," said Sen. Don Nickles, the Senate GOP whip.

And one without clear guidelines — or any understanding of how long the trial would take, or whether witnesses would testify — as lawmakers continued to struggle for agreement on a blueprint.

After several hours of behind-the-scenes discussions, Lott and Daschle made a rare joint appearance before reporters to declare their willingness to make one more attempt at a bipartisan agreement on procedures.

"We think that the best way to keep calm and cool and dignified is to look at each other and talk to each other," said Lott. The two sides were expected to exchange proposals for witnesses and other issues in advance of the scheduled Friday meeting.

Hyde and other Republicans have prepared a list of potential witnesses, including Ms. Lewinsky, presidential friend Vernon Jordan and White House secretary Betty Currie, central figures in the sex-and-cover-up case put together by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

In addition, Republican sources who spoke on condition of anonymity said GOP lawmakers may also want to have several current and former White House officials subpoenaed, including John

Podesta, the chief of staff; Harold Ickes, a former aide; and adviser Sidney Blumenthal.

Republicans crafted a plan that would give first the House and then the White House five days each to present evidence, after which senators could submit questions to lawyers through Rehnquist. The Senate would then decide whether to call witnesses.

Democrats generally opposed witnesses at the trial, and Daschle told reporters he favored a vote on the articles after presentation of evidence without live testimony.

Negotiations ebbed and flowed during the day, and one plan for an all-Senate closed-door meeting was scrapped, as was Lott's plan to submit the issue to the full Senate for a pair of votes. Some Republicans expressed concern about the political impact of a highly partisan vote occurring on such a historic day, and that plan, too, fell by the wayside.

It takes a two-thirds vote to convict a president and remove him, and Clinton has solid Democratic support in the Senate. Republicans outnumber Democrats 55-45.

At the White House, spokesman Joe Lockhart told reporters, "We are convinced we can make a compelling case that will lead the United States Senate not to remove the president."

He added that the president's lawyers are "ready to go" and ready to stipulate to evidence in the case in exchange for a ban on witnesses. But, he added, if the House insists on calling witnesses it will cause a delay "because bringing witnesses in and not stipulating to a record opens up a whole area of motions, discovery and depositions. And that takes time."

No person now living had ever witnessed events like those that unfolded during the day in the Senate chamber according to a script written by the Founding Fathers two centuries ago and adapted now for the television age.

"Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye," announced James W. Ziglar, the Senate sergeant at arms, a few moments after 10 a.m. "All persons are commanded to keep silent, on pain of imprisonment," he said, reading a proclamation used in a presidential trial only once before, in Andrew Johnson's case in 1868.

Hyde then led 12 other Republican lawmakers into the chamber, where he read the articles of impeachment aloud.

A few hours afterward — nearly 20 minutes after the appointed hour of 1 p.m. EST — all senators rose at their seats and turned to face the doors at the rear of the chamber. Rehnquist was escorted in, wearing his black judicial robe with four gold bands on each arm.

He took his oath from Sen. Strom Thurmond, the 96-year-old Senate president pro tempore, and then proceeded to administer the oath in which senators — jurors now — pledged to render justice "according to the Constitution and laws, so help me God."

Several senators said "I do," in unison, but then a clerk read each name in alphabetical order and each senator rose at his or her seat and again uttered, "I do."

With that, they walked to the front of the chamber where they signed their names in an "oath book" to record their presence. One hundred pens were laid out, mementos for the senators — from the veterans like South Carolina Republican Thurmond, a senator since the 1950s, to newcomers like North Carolina Democrat John Edwards.

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