

# Impeachment

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In 1599, a group of London merchants got together to petition Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> to grant a charter to “trade on wares, jewels or merchandise in the East Indies.” A year later, it was granted. And so began the life of the East India Company (EIC).

Over time, and from very inauspicious beginnings as a private company, it came to rule and exploit the whole of the Indian subcontinent. Until India’s independence in 1947. After building a series of trading posts and forts, it negotiated for trading rights with the different ethnic and religious rulers of India, the Muslim Mughals in the North and Bengal, the Hindu Marathas in the West and Tipu in the south. Then it sent its representatives to spread out, trade, bully and insult them to make huge fortunes which make our High-tech billionaires look puny. Eventually, after several setbacks, the EIC fought them with its private armies, modern armaments, and military techniques. Eventually, it neutralized the French competition by practicing the old Roman policy of divide and rule.

Enter Warren Hastings. He was a career administrator and an honest, cultured and moral man. His mother had died in childbirth in 1732. His father disappeared on a voyage to the West Indies. Warren ended up in an orphanage from which an uncle rescued him and sent him to one of the best schools in England. There, he excelled, and the uncle got him a job in the EIC. Hastings rose up the ranks. He was sent to India. Captured in the battle of Kazimbazar he used his imprisonment to learn the language and the culture of his captors and in due course became governor of Murshidabad.

In 1760, Warren Hastings wrote to London that “this country lies groaning under the anarchy. Laws have no power of sanction, morals are corrupt to the ultimate degree...the oppressions committed under the sanction of the English name is beyond imagination.”

In London, Parliament was becoming concerned about the autonomy of the EIC and took a firmer interest in its activities. Warren Hastings was appointed Governor-General in 1773. He tried to balance the commercial interests of the EIC with humanitarian ones and to impose discipline and standards on the organization, its employees and the thousands of fortune-hunting agents spread out across the continent. But with limited success.

The EIC 's board like many companies was a hotbed of rivalries and cliques. It was split between those who wanted profits no matter the cost and those who also demanded standards of good governance and ethics. Hastings saw his mission as "draining the swamp." Inevitably, he made enemies both in India and back in London.

In 1774, a triumvirate of inspectors went out to India to inspect the situation. Amongst them was Philip Francis – the man who became Warren Hastings's nemesis. He had an old grudge against Hastings. He hated him with a passion and set out to undermine him. He denounced him to London. Eventually, they fought a duel in which Hastings bullet seriously wounded Francis. Hastings aided Francis's recovery and enabled him to return home in 1782. There, Francis, instead of being grateful grew more vindictive and embarked on a campaign to blacken the reputation of Hastings and eventually succeeded in getting him impeached by Parliament in 1788.

The impeachment was heavily politicized and set the leadership of the Whigs and the Tories, the two main parties, against each other. Each side produced champions who spoke to their constituencies and the gallery. It was an amazing circus in which seats to the hearings changed hands for large sums of money (the equivalent of \$10,000 in modern currency). Amongst the orators were Richard Brinsley Sheridan (the great playwright), Edmund Burke (the Whig Anglo-Irish political thinker regarded as the founder of modern conservatism) and Charles James Fox (the radical supporter of the French Revolution). They emphasized issues of what today we call "human rights". In reality, it was the EIC the institution and its investors who were under attack.

The case dragged on for seven years. Warren Hastings was finally and completely vindicated in 1795. The proceedings led to the complete restructuring of the EIC's role in India. Control of EIC was eventually ceded to the Government. Not that they were so much better. The record of British Imperial rule over India is one of brutality, racism and arrogance.

An interesting footnote is that the man sent out after Hastings to impose order and to defeat the Indian forces threatening to destroy the British presence in India was none other than Charles Cornwallis – the British General who had surrendered the Thirteen Colonies to George Washington. He was regarded as strong and honest. Having failed once, he learnt his lesson. He brought about a permanent settlement and defeated Tipu Sultan in the Third Anglo Mysore War (with the help of Colonel Arthur Wellesley who later became the Duke of Wellington for defeating Napoleon). If you are interested in history, I recommend *The Anarchy, the Relentless Rise of the East India Company* by William Dalrymple.

I am reminded of all this by what is happening in the United States today. An impeachment process where major governmental challenges are ignored and the whole proceeding reeks of personal vendetta. Then as now, politicians are not covering themselves with glory.

There is, of course, no comparison between Hastings and Trump as individuals. But there are similarities in the animus, theatricality and political grandstanding. It will be interesting to see how this one ends!