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Two Voices From the Hill

For purposes of practical political analysis, 99.9 per cent of what is currently being said about the President's political future is the opposite of the old soap advertisement's claim. In other words, this huge proportion of the clamor is impure in one way or another; and it can be ignored.

In any tribe or nation, however, it is never safe to turn a deaf ear when the elders speak. In the President's own party, no veteran in the Senate is so respected as the highly independent-minded Vermonter, George Aiken. In either party in the House, no single member is so respected as the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Wilbur Mills of Arkansas.

Both these elders spoke out last week; what they said deserves far closer attention than it has yet received. This is all the more true, because they seemed to say quite different things; yet much the same conclusions have to be drawn from the Aiken statement and the informal Mills press conference, both on Nov. 7.

Senator Aiken, characteristically, started by reciting some currently fashionable views. For example, he mocked the very notion of a President of the United States prosecuting himself, through the medium of a "special prosecutor." But the nub of his statement lies in just two points. He said the President ought not to resign. But he added that the House of Representatives ought to set itself the shortest possible deadline for voting for or against a bill of impeachment.

"Either impeach (the President) or get off his back," was Aiken's culminating message—to which the senator added that he expected no impeachment. Representative Mills, in contrast, told his interviewers that he had come to think the President would probably be "forced to resign." In some degree, Representative Mills also echoed the White House view that the media are the real hounds of hell on the President's traces. He put the relentless hostility of the media a long way first, in other words, among the factors now tending to force the President toward resignation. Coming from Mr. Mills, these are grave and ominous words—unless the leaders of the media really think it is desirable, or even safe, to be seen as makers and unmakers of Presidents.

In basic approach, Representative Mills and Senator Aiken do not really differ. The difference is, instead, that Mr. Aiken does not know the House of Representatives as intimately as the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. When he gave his interview, Mr. Mills had been hearing—on the telephone from Arkansas, where he then was—slight but significant changes in tone from colleagues he regards as good indicators.

Only a fortnight ago, for instance, House Speaker Carl Albert was reportedly saying that he did not believe there was majority for impeachment on the House Judiciary Committee. This is a conspicuous leftwing-liberal stronghold. Hence, the Speaker was saying, further, that those who wanted impeachment were an even smaller minority in the House as a whole.

Today, the Speaker's views are unknown; but it is plainly possible that a bill of impeachment may indeed be

reported to the House by the Judiciary Committee. It is even imaginable that the House will vote a bill of impeachment by a narrow majority. The unending hue and cry noted by Mr. Mills has plainly contributed to this change in the past fortnight.

Another significant contribution is also coming from George Meany's AFL-CIO. Organized labor is extremely powerful on the floor of the House. Meany's serious effort in favor of impeachment can therefore, prove to be the kind of development that barely tips the balance. No such effort would now be in progress, one must also remark, if Meany were not dead sure (rightly or wrongly) that he and his friends now have the leftwing Democrats on the run.

Meanwhile you can reconcile the Aiken statement and the Mills interview by asking yourself a single, simple question. What will the President then do, if the House actually votes a bill of impeachment? Will he expose the country and himself to the horrors of a presidential impeachment trial by the present frivolous, divided and partisan Senate? Will he take this kind of risk for the country in a time that he regards as deadly dangerous? Will the President resign when this situation faces him, in short; or will he "tough it out," when doing so begins to mean acute peril for the United States as a whole?

Given the President's strong nation-mindedness, the question is all but self-answering.

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