

The Scramble for Survival

One glance tells you: God had a congressman in mind when He made John Rhodes. And he is just what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they designed the House of Representatives, the body intended to be closest to the common man.

Rhodes looks every inch like a House member ought to look. A little shorter than average, perhaps a little heavier than he ought to be, he dresses in business suits that are almost flamboyantly nondescript.

His name is not a household word, and probably never will be. To his credit, he probably doesn't mind a bit.

But there is one house where he is

well-known and closely watched. It is an important house, the big white one, sixteen blocks down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol Building. There they know the importance of the fact that Rhodes recently was elected to replace Gerald Ford as House Minority Leader.

Rhodes, 58, born in Council Grove, Kan., and a Harvard Law School graduate, is the first Republican elected to the House from Arizona. He was elected in 1952, the year the name Richard Nixon became a household word.

Rhodes represents 442,589 souls in the Phoenix area. That is Nixon country, if anything still is.

But what complicates Rhodes' life, and makes him a potential maker of history, is the fact that as minority leader he has a second constituency: the Republican membership in the House. That used to be Nixon country, but loyalty to Mr. Nixon, which has never been reciprocated, has been superseded by a pervasive concern for self-preservation.

Many Republican congressmen know that a significant portion of the voters they must have to win re-election are hard-core Nixon supporters. These voters will brook no criticism of Nixon. But a comparable portion of the voters will insist on a forthright disavowal of Nixon as a precondition of receiving their support.

Republicans with constituencies divided in this way—and there may be several score of them—are damned if they do, and damned if they don't. What will they do? Don't ask; read Thomas Hobbes.

The life of every congressman is dominated by a categorical imperative. In the Hobbesian world of American politics, the first rule governing (and excusing) all behavior is the one Hobbes recommended: save yourself.

At the federal level, American political nature is red in tooth and claw. Representatives must scramble for survival every two years, so they scramble

all the time. They have worked so hard to get to Washington that they are not going to sit passively while Nixon drags them to their political graves.

If having Nixon in office will cost the GOP, say, 40 House seats, at least 80 GOP members will feel vulnerable. And even those members who do not face defeat will fear an election that threatens to produce a Democratic majority swollen by 40 more members. In that case both the vulnerable and the alarmed members will insist on leadership from the man they just elected Minority Leader. They will petition him to petition Nixon to resign.

Rhodes does not think it will come to this. He does think the House Judiciary Committee, which is handling the impeachment investigation, is a nest of extreme liberals. He observes the traditional congressional courtesies, offering perfunctory praise for the chairman, Peter Rodino of New Jersey. But he knows Rodino joined with the tiny band of fanatics who voted against the confirmation of Gerald Ford as Vice President.

So Rhodes admits that one must be "a hell of an optimist" to doubt that the Judiciary Committee will vote for impeachment. But Rhodes thinks he can influence the timing. He believes he has a commitment from Rodino to bring the matter to the House floor for a vote by April.

This timing is crucial. Most Republicans, Rhodes included, think there will not be a full house majority for impeachment in April. They believe that only prolonged public committee hearings, producing panic among Republican members as the November elections approach, could produce a majority.

Republicans say that a quick April vote, with impeachment losing, would be viewed in the country as a vindication of Nixon. Rhodes believes this would "settle" Watergate, "in a political sense."

But Rhodes has too much political sense to really believe that Democrat Rodino will allow any April vote that will get Republicans off the hook.