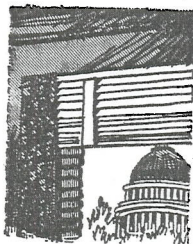


Royce Brier

The House Vote For an 'Inquiry'

LAST OCTOBER the House Judiciary Committee began shaping up an inquiry into impeachment proceedings against President Nixon. Please notice the distinction between starting such proceedings and starting to "inquire" into its feasibility or justification.

In any case, more than four months have elapsed, and Wednesday the House voted, 410-4 to ratify, so to speak, the Committee's course. By its vote the House granted broad powers, including subpoena to look further. Resultant hearings could consume another four months, if not twice that.



This is a good example of the weakness of the impeachment process established by the Constitution, particularly when it is aimed at a President. It contains a built-in necessity to drag on, to consume inordinate time and beget inordinate disruption of normal parliamentary government. The obvious and worthy purpose of this is to avoid precipitate, imprudent action in a matter so grave as removing a Chief Executive.

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NOTWITHSTANDING, the whole process promises to eat up two years before a final conviction or acquittal in a Senate trial. Two years is roughly the record of our only Presidential impeachment, that of Andrew Johnson in the postwar 1860s.

The primary cause of such delay is that impeachment and trial is a political, not the judicial undertaking it seems outwardly to be. It may seem naive in the Founding Fathers if they believed it would be a judicial undertaking, but in 185 years there has been no visible way to escape its fundamental anatomy. A parliamentary body numbering over 500 simply cannot align itself for resolution in a few weeks or months.

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TRUE, ALL THIS TURMOIL could be avoided were a President caught red-handed in a homicide or comparable felony, but that was not the circumstance with the two Presidents above-named.

The oratorical nature of the House vote was amply demonstrated in quoted remarks of Congressman Rodino, New Jersey Democrat: ". . . let us now proceed with such care and decency and toughness and honor that the vast majority of the American people, and their children after them will say: 'This was the right course. There was no other way.'"

It was a noble appeal, but one may suggest there was some wastage in tossing such words to his 500 colleagues, who achieved and hold office by political preference at the polls.

The news dispatches made clear that a 410-4 vote was not an index to impeachment sentiment in the House. An uncounted number supported the resolution to clear the air of a dense fog, and saw it as the only Constitutional road to that end.

It is extremely doubtful if Mr. Nixon can be impeached on what is presently established in the Watergate and related cases. What months of further inquiry (don't expect much less) would establish, is unknown to anybody.

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