

William Rusher

Why Democrats Want to Keep Nixon in Office

Washington

AS A VOTE on the impeachment of President Nixon draws slowly nearer, first in the House Judiciary Committee and then in the House of Representatives itself, advocates of impeachment are going to work on the Republican members of Congress.



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The argument is being pressed, in some ways quite plausibly, that Mr. Nixon's impeachment is in the best interests of the Republicans themselves. It does not seem to have occurred to anybody that, if so, then — by the iron rules of political polarity — it is not in the best interests of the Democrats.

All politics is conflict. There never has been, and never will be, a democratic society in which all issues of policy are settled and everybody is working happily toward the same goals. Since the struggle

is perpetual and no victory ever really settles very much, the shrewd political strategist will direct his attention, not to the question "Who's winning?" but rather to the question, "Where's the battlefield?"

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AT PRESENT, and for almost a year, the central political question before the country has been whether Richard Nixon should be impeached. It is difficult to imagine any issue more agreeable, purely as an issue, to the leaders of the Democratic party. As long as that question looms before us unresolved, they simply cannot lose.

Take any side you choose — yes, he should be impeached; no, there isn't enough evidence; or merely wait and see — and you are automatically doing the Democratic party a favor.

To be sure, there are plenty of Americans for whom the impeachment and removal of Richard Nixon, as promptly as possible, is a far higher goal than merely accommodating the Democratic party. But I doubt that many Democratic Congressional leaders look at it that way.

After all, if Mr. Nixon were removed from office Gerald Ford would automatically become President, and there would be an obligatory "honeymoon," probably at least several months long, before his Congressional opposition could decently start opposing him. Meanwhile the present Republican members of Congress, who must fight for re-election this November, could put Mr. Nixon and the whole Watergate nightmare behind them and pose instead as good soldiers of the new President.

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DOES THAT STRIKE you as something sensible Democratic leaders of Congress would prefer to the present state of affairs? Every time they pick up a newspaper there's a headline telling of some fresh indictment of a high presidential aide, or reporting some new refusal by the White House to turn over allegedly crucial documents or tapes, or hinting at still further scandals soon to be exposed.

It would take a statesman indeed to hand his political foes an easy way out of a mess like that.

And, incidentally, don't suppose for a moment that the Republicans would be any more magnanimous if the positions were reversed. Politics is a tough business, and there isn't one politician in a hundred, in either party, who wouldn't, in John Ehrlichman's unimprovable phrase, let his adversaries "hang there," twisting "slowly, slowly in the wind."

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SOONER OR LATER, of course, the Democratic leaders must bring the whole grand flap to a climax and close, lest the American people tire of this particular bit of bearbaiting and start feeling sorry for the bear.

Even then, it would probably be in the best interests of the Democratic party to fall one or two votes short of the two-thirds needed for Mr. Nixon's removal by the Senate, rather than give the Republicans and the nation a fresh start under President Ford.

Meanwhile, don't count on the Democrats' sheer kindness to shorten the agony. There will still be a number of them around, with long lists of "Unanswered Questions About Watergate," when Gabriel blows his trumpet.

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