

A Duty To Impeach

From remarks by Historian Henry Steele Commager on Bill Moyers' Journal, March 26.

MR. MOYERS: Isn't there a danger that impeachment will cause people to think somehow the country itself has been found guilty?

DR. COMMAGER: I have two answers to that. First, to some degree the country is guilty, (it) did re-elect Mr. Nixon after they knew him well, by a majority of 17 million. I'm not sure that the word "guilt" is the appropriate one. Perhaps the word "folly" is more appropriate. As for the larger issue, there's no reason to suppose that the country fails because it impeaches the President. It may fail more egregiously in not impeaching him. The egregious failure would be to accept this man, and to accept the subversion of the Constitution, and the violation of the Bill of Rights as an inevitable concomitant of the Presidency. I think it's far more important to prove that the Constitution means what it says—that the instrument of impeachment was put there by the founding fathers to be used when necessary, and to vindicate that, than it is to avoid the crisis of impeachment.

MR. MOYERS: So you think there's no reason to be afraid of impeachment?

DR. COMMAGER: There is, indeed. But there's far greater reason to be afraid of failing to impeach. Impeachment, after all, is merely a grand inquest. It is merely a trial which will then take place to find innocence or guilt. I do not under-

stand why Mr. Nixon is afraid of it if he's sure of his innocence. He should welcome a verdict of impeachment from the House, and prepare himself to vindicate himself, and the Presidency, in the Senate. We have far more ground to fear a continuation of the kind of crisis that has confronted us in the next three years, than we have ground to fear impeachment processes. And I will go further than this, and say that the whole of the civilized world is looking at the United States to see if we dare vindicate the office of the Presidency, and the Constitution of the United States — if we dare show strength enough to put these matters on trial—to put these matters to the test of the Constitution — or if we're going to take refuge in obfuscation of one kind or another. I'm tremendously impressed, however, at the radiance of public opinion in the last year — at the awareness in the American people of the nature of the crisis and at their readiness to rally to the support of the Constitution, and to the support of the traditional separation of powers. And I think this augurs very well for the solution of our problem. No problems are solved — the British can't solve theirs, the French can't solve theirs, the Danes, the Italians, and others are in trouble. We must not expect a re-creation of the 1789 syndrome, as it were, which was an era of the solution of great problems without comparison in our history. But I think we can get on with the job, and we can return to the tested habits and practices of our Constitutional system without tearing our society apart.