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William Raspberry

Impeachment: After a While, You Get Used to It

At some unremarked point in time, the people stopped talking about impeachment as a cataclysm too horrible to contemplate and came to accept it, almost calmly, as inevitable — like the 1974 football season or the 1976 elections.

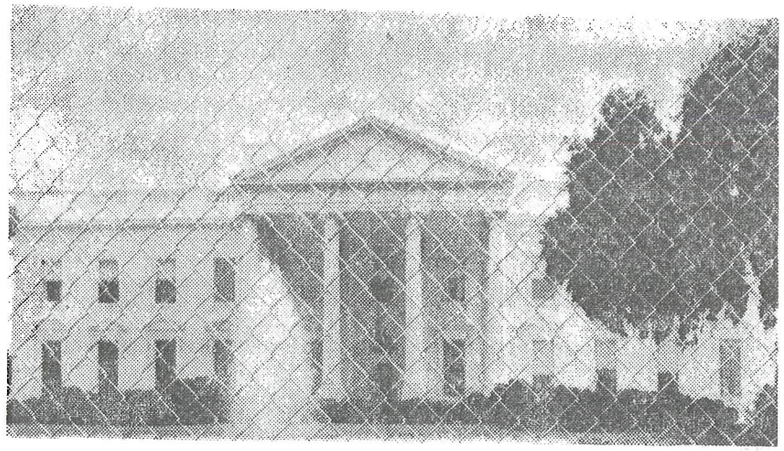
The change may have come about in part because of the President's tax problems, which are a lot easier to understand and relate to than, say, the unauthorized bombing of Cambodia, and because of his obvious stalling on the White House tapes.

But it isn't only that the people understand more clearly what kind of person their President is. It is also because the past seven months or so have been profoundly educational and the people are finally beginning to understand what kind of process impeachment is.

Getting rid of a President, it turns out, is a good deal like pregnancy. It seems to take too long, but during the time it takes, you get used to it—used to the process and used to contemplating the probable result.

And when the result finally comes, you've already made the necessary adjustments, and you're able to take the final event more or less in stride.

That's what has been happening with impeachment. When the question was first raised, impeachment was something vaguely remembered from high school history books. It sounded a lot like being thrown out of office, and that is what a lot of Americans took it to be.



Commentators and politicians tried to help clear things up by comparing impeachment with criminal indictment. The comparison isn't quite accurate, and in any case, indictment isn't all that well understood either.

Nearly all the early polls showed most Americans to be opposed to impeachment. But Democratic National Chairman Robert Strauss reported last month on a poll (in Ohio's first congressional district) that avoided direct mention of impeachment, asking instead if the respondents wanted their congressman to vote for the Senate to "hold a trial to determine President Nixon's innocence or guilt on the charges related to Watergate." Fifty-eight per cent said yes.

That doesn't mean that 58 per cent of all Americans want the President impeached, but it does suggest that some of the opposition to impeachment may have been an emotional reaction to the word rather than to the process.

As the process becomes better understood, the word is losing some of its forbidding quality. By the time the House Judiciary Committee is ready to vote a bill of impeachment, the people will be ready to take impeachment in stride.

One of the things that is helping to get the people ready is the fact that the President himself seems to have accepted the inevitability of his impeachment. He seems merely to be weighing which would be his best chance for avoiding conviction in the Senate: impeachment on evidence in the White House tapes and documents, or impeachment for refusing to make that evidence available.

This whole sense of inevitablility, of course, is having its effects within the President's party, particularly with the loss of five out of six special House elections. In fact, some commentators —notably Elizabeth Drew of the Atlantic Monthly—have started to worry that the President may wind up being impeached not for his crimes and improprieties but because his fellow Republicans see him as a political liabilty.

No one will ever know if that worry is well founded. There would be no way to tell whether the President was impeached because the Republicans lost some special elections or whether the people, having made up their minds about Richard Nixon, were simply repudiating any Republican who didn't have the guts to disavow him.

In any case, the people no longer seem to think of impeachment as a dark and dangerous threat to the integrity of the American system. An awful lot of them—and not just Nixon-haters, either — see Mr. Nixon's non-impeachment as far more threatening.