

A New Task, A New Rodino

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WASHINGTON, June 17—“My granddaughter calls me ‘Mr. Chairman’ now,” Peter W. Rodino Jr. said with a raspy laugh and a quick grimace. But he seems to prize “granddaddy,” more than “Mr. Chairman” when it comes from Carla, his brown-eyed, 7-year-old granddaughter.

The unpretentious, good-natured Democratic chairman of the House Judiciary Committee—the man now directing the inquiry into the possible impeachment of President Nixon—reluctantly concedes that his sudden rise to fame has altered his private life, if only in small ways.

“The family is strictly Old World Italian, very close, very private,” said one of Mr. Rodino’s staff members. For the last 26 years, since he was elected to Congress, Mr. Rodino has deliberately

molded his life into two separate worlds, screening the Washington political arena from his family domain.

On weekdays, when Congress is in session, he goes home at night to a one-room apartment near Capitol Hill, a place his family rarely visits. But every Friday, he flies home to his 10-room frame house in Newark, to his wife, Marianna, and children, to the parties and meetings of his friends and constituents.

Family Life Affected

Now, however, despite the chairman’s specific design, his political role has made inroads into his family life—even on Sundays, a precious day in the Rodino home.

Mass in the late morning is always followed about 1:30 or 2 P. M. by a sumptuous Italian dinner, with his mother-in-law’s homemade pasta for “at least 10 or 12” relatives by Mr. Rodino’s count. Mr. Rodino’s son, Peter 3d, a law student who lives at home; the chairman’s daughter, Margaret, and her husband, Charles Stanziale, a Newark municipal judge, with their daughter, Carla, and Mr. Rodino’s widowed sister are the regulars at Sunday dinner.

“But we always have extras,” said Mr. Rodino—extra relatives, that is.

“I won’t tell them anything” that’s going on in the committee, said Mr. Rodino, smiling as he conceded that even the family besieged him with questions about the impeachment hearings.

At Sunday dinner a few weeks ago, Mr. Rodino discovered that several publishing houses had approached his son-in-law, Judge Stanziale, urging him to use his influence with his father-in-law to secure a book contract for a six-digit sum.

Necessary Seclusion

“Dad, I know you’re not interested, but I think you should know,” Judge Stanziale told his father-in-law.

The chairman turned down the offer, saying, “I can’t think about things like that now.”

Another disruption of the Sunday family ritual comes when Mr. Rodino must seclude himself to review hundreds of impeachment documents prepared by the Judiciary Committee staff.

“Do you have any idea how much we have to read,” exclaimed Mr. Rodino in a recent interview. “Look at this,” he said—pushing himself away from his desk, which is adorned with snapshots of his family and a small framed picture of Jesus as he rose to unlock the large gray wall safe in his closet.

There, nestled among such things as a red and white plastic traveling bag with Paris printed on it, were stacks of three- and four-inch black impeachment notebooks. Thumbing through one of the books, Mr. Rodino said, “It takes all your time to read all this.”

Mr. Rodino has turned increasingly to his son to stand in for him at some functions in Newark as the demands for time mount with seven-hour committee hearings, long consultations with committee counsel, caucus meetings, and speaking engagements.

The impeachment task has left its heaviest mark on Mr. Rodino’s Washington world. For more than two decades, he was never credited as a powerful or dynamic leader, but simply as the affable, competent servant of the iron-fisted former chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Emanuel Celler, who was defeated two years ago.

New Image Emerges

The respect and authority that the 64-year-old, silver-haired chairman now commands surprises many of his colleagues. “I’m amazed,” said one Democrat who has served several terms on the committee, “I didn’t know he had it in him.”

“We used to kid him a lot,” said one Congressional source close to Mr. Rodino, who was explaining the chairman’s changing demeanor in recent months.

“At first he would always talk about the ‘awesome responsibility’ of the committee every time the television cameras caught him, and he wouldn’t say anything else. Now he has total confidence to express himself, and talk freely before the cameras.”

Mr. Rodino’s Congressional office also has a new look. His new administrative assistant, Francis O’Brien, is a young polished political aide formerly on the staff of New York’s last Mayor, John V. Lindsay. Under a heavy workload with hundreds of letters pouring into Mr. Rodino’s of-

fice each day, the staff strains for efficiency and forfeits some pleasantries, such as calling the chairman by his first name. “No one would dream of calling him Pete now,” said one staff member.

Sleepless nights and lost leisure dinners with friends are now unavoidable consequences of the chairman’s job. He weighs more now, as a result of long hours of work that have cut into his trips to the gymnasium, where Mr. Rodino says he once played paddle ball “at least three times a week.”

But one thing remains untouched. He is still immensely proud of having won the Justinian Society’s “Man of the Year” award in 1973. And the handsome, leather-bound book presented to him by the society, which contains letters of congratulations from dozens of the most prominent men in the nation, still opens—as the chairman is quick to point out to visitors—with a letter of praise from Richard M. Nixon.



Associated Press

Peter W. Rodino Jr. at his home in Newark recently with Carla Stanziale, his 7-year-old granddaughter. She calls him "Mr. Chairman," but he still likes "granddaddy."