

David S. Broder

No Strong Push to Impeach

MIDDLETOWN, Ohio—The people of this southwestern Ohio city, one of two dozen towns visited last week by Washington Post reporters in a voter interview project, are not up in arms about the possible impeachment of President Nixon.

They are concerned about the weather, which has been miserable, and daylight saving time, which puts their school kids on slippery streets in dangerous pre-dawn darkness. They are angry and cynical about the fuel shortage, less severe here than in other areas, but still viewed as another of those unanticipated, unfathomable assaults on normal expectations. And they are worried about the "temporary" layoffs in a local Ford plant, a possible harbinger of trouble in what has been, for most of them, a very healthy economy.

Compared to these immediate concerns, the question whether the House of Representatives sometime later this year should impeach the President of the United States appears remote and almost theoretical. Certainly, there is no great demand for impeachment here or in most of the other congressional districts we visited. A questionnaire distributed by Middletown's representative, Republican Walter E. Powell has so far drawn a 2600-1500 vote against impeachment.

Those in the White House who have argued that the House would impeach Mr. Nixon only if confronted by an overwhelming public demand for such action may breathe easier—at least for the moment. That kind of demand is nowhere in evidence.

That it is not is a matter of puzzlement to many observers. Tom Wicker asks in *The New York Times*: "How is it to be explained that while 79 per cent of the 2,000 persons recently polled by the Roper organization believed Richard Nixon guilty of one or more serious charges against him, only 44 per cent of the same persons favored his impeachment?"

Wicker suggests that Howard F. Stein of Meharry Medical College may be on the right track when he argues, in *The American Scholar*, that the voters will accept hypocrisy in a President because they are so familiar with it in themselves. With "a stern veneer and a corrupt core," Stein says, "one can get away with as much as possible while righteously punishing those who get away with too much too openly."

That may be so, but conversing with the voters on the subject of Mr. Nixon leads me to other conclusions. The public judgment on him is a hard one; his credibility is low, even among many here who say they voted for him.

But they hesitate to recommend impeachment for two quite sensible reasons. Even if they do not understand the process fully, they appreciate that it is a drastic step. The voters in the Sherman School precinct are of Appalachian stock, deeply and instinctively patriotic, and they feel that in humbling the President, they humble themselves and the country they love. "Haven't we done enough to shame ourselves already?" one man asked. The second reason for their caution is equally reasonable: they don't feel they know much about Gerald Ford and they have little idea whether he would be a better or worse President than Mr. Nixon has been.

These considerations seem strong enough to explain their reluctance to endorse impeachment without turning to theories of national hypocrisy. But they also suggest a complexity in the public mood that should give pause to any simplistic interpretation of the vacillating congressmen's current "recess referendum."

The voters here are not saying: Vindicate the President. They are not even saying: Halt the impeachment proceedings. They are saying: Think carefully about what you're doing.

But that is the beginning of the process for the members of the House, not the end. It would be fatuous to suggest in an election year that public opinion will not be a major factor in the House's final decision. It will; and some Republican congressmen from marginal districts will decide, as Powell did this week, that they don't even want to run again in such a climate of uncertainty.

But public opinion is only one of the factors that will finally shape the House's judgment. The weight of the evidence the Judiciary Committee assembles; the manner of its conduct and presentation, whether partisan or nonpartisan in tone; the advice of party leaders in the House; and, not least, the responsiveness or lack of responsiveness of the President to substantive questions that are raised—all these will influence the House's decision.

What the voters of America's Middletowns are saying is that they expect a sober serious judgment from their representatives. The members of the House now face a test of immense importance whose significance is enhanced by the splendid fact that, for once, the Senate will not be hogging the show.