

A Television Nightmare

Washington

A FEW WEEKS AGO, it was a good bet around here that there would be no resignation by the President, no impeachment, and no clear exoneration. In short, an indecisive mess. The outlook was that the Judiciary Committee of the House would vote for impeachment but fail to get a majority on the floor to send the President to the Senate for trial. But that was a few weeks ago.

Lately the tide has turned against the President. The Republican whip in the Senate, Robert P. Griffin of Michigan, said the other day that the likelihood of the President's impeachment by the House "seems much greater today than it did a month or two ago."

The majority leader in the Senate, Mike Mansfield of Montana, usually a cautious and compassionate man, told reporters that his information was that "the votes are there" in the House to impeach, and both houses are now considering the tactical — maybe even the decisive — question of whether the debate in the House and the trial of the President in the Senate should be televised.

But before the suggestion of a televised im-

peachment and trial goes much further, maybe it should be examined. The feeling in this corner is that it's the worst suggestion in broadcasting since the singing commercial.

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IN THE FIRST PLACE, the House and Senate prohibit live radio or television coverage of their debates. The arguments for and against this rule have been debated ever since we have had national radio and television networks, but the rule has always been observed.

The late Speaker Sam Rayburn loved the members of the House but knew their weaknesses. It was hard enough, he said, to get members to concentrate on the facts and stop grandstanding for the folks back home, but if you put them on television, they would be impossible. Mr. Sam never left you in much doubt: "Things are bad enough as they are," he said. "Keep the cameras the hell out of here."

The argument for televising is clear enough: The impeachment and trial of a president are the "people's business." This is a special case that has

happened only once before in the history of the Republic. It would be a dramatic lesson in democracy and therefore a useful educational exercise for the people.

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THESE ARE NOT frivolous arguments. They have to be considered with the utmost care, but so do the consequences of turning the impeachment debate and the trial into a television spectacular.

Consider the scenario suggested by Mike Mansfield. The House votes to impeach the President, the Senate convenes two weeks later for the trial. The Chief Justice of the United States presides. Presumably, the President of the United States sits in the well of the Senate, like an accused criminal in the dock, with the Senate ablaze with lights, and the cameras turning, and the whole country and the world watching.

The emotional tension on all the actors on this world stage would almost forbid careful and precise discussion. The pressure on the President would be almost unbearable. The reaction of the television audience is fairly predictable. They would be sending telegrams, expressing their views for and against the President, by the millions, threatening House and Senate members with defeat at the next election if they voted this way or that.

Even in the most calm and judicial atmosphere, the problem of members of the House and Senate weighing the evidence, deciding whether the law has been broken or the moral code of the nation abused, will not be easy. And beyond that there is Mr. Nixon's favorite test of the past: What after all is the best thing to do in the interests of America?

But to do all this before the red eye of the camera, to sift the evidence and condemn the President on the floor of the House or Senate, knowing that you will be seen on Soviet, Chinese, and European television tomorrow, is a complicated nightmare for every man who rises to speak.

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ALL THIS RAISES a problem for those of us who have fought for the equal rights of television, who have sided with our brothers in the networks, but the impeachment of a president is a very special and delicate case, in which the powers of radio and television have very special political consequences.

It is a troubling question, but we had better be careful about it and be careful in time. A casual decision to televise could be unfair to the accused and the accusers alike and could wound the Republic. So maybe we need to take this one a little easy.

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