

Preparing the President

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Poster

A congressman was overheard the other day saying in tones of angry laughter, "We're going to impeach his ass. We're going to do it."

He's right. We're going to do it although nobody will quite know why. In the case of President Andrew Johnson policy as well as pride and personality were involved. Nixon's policies, such as they are, would never get another man impeached. Nevertheless, one senses the decision has been made and that some time in the next year or so, if not sooner, Nixon will be impeached, convicted and thrown out onto the sidewalks of Pennsylvania Avenue. Your daily newspaper will carry a picture of the rear end of the moving van with a caption explaining that some of its contents may become tax deductible gifts.

None of this has to do with whether or not there are enough votes in the House of Representatives to do him in now. Before too long there will be. But the formal process of legal impeachment has to wait upon a

kind of informal social impeachment whereby the man is stripped of the reverence, protections and deference with which we treat our Presidents. He has to be tried, convicted, disgraced and expelled before he is formally accused.

That goes against our much quoted dictum that a man is innocent until proven guilty, but such is our awe of the Presidential office that we can't lay rough legal hands on its occupants, unless we are already certain of his guilt. The process is terribly unjust to Nixon who can't possibly get a fair trial but it will preserve the kind of monarchical Presidency that we dote on.

To accomplish this Nixon must be turned into a pariah before the House Judiciary Committee recommends his impeachment. We have a thousand devices for that. Until a few months ago, any American President could have sent the IRS American Express slips and doodles on April 15 and gotten a pass. But now under the dispensation of impeachment, Nixon is going "to be treated like everybody else." A President is only treated like

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everybody else when he is on his way to being turned into a non-President.

You strip Nixon of the golden aura of *potens et majestas* by having Galluping poll takers bounce around the country asking if we think the President should be impeached. An even better example is a recent Harris Survey that ran under a headline in one paper reading "Public Believes Dean Over President." The wording of the question itself would have laid Harris open to charges of blasphemy and *lese majeste* a year ago: "Who do you think has been more truthful about the Watergate cover-up—President Nixon or John Dean?"

Small unflattering tidbits about Nixon and his family are now broadcast and repeated with the special satisfaction of the self-righteous. Other Presidents have had to take this kind of insulting deglamorization from their enemies, but Nixon is now getting it from almost everybody. Had the French come forward with a bunch of documents to prove that Louis XVI wasn't really the legitimate King of France, they would be doing what we're doing. We're showing ourselves that we aren't committing regicide because this character Nixon wasn't our real King.

In all of this, Nixon has been unfailingly cooperative. By playing with his yo-yo in public, by swearing he isn't a crook, by his hand-pumping vulgarities at Pompidou's funeral, by two dozen gaucheries large and small, he makes it easier and easier for his friends to disavow him. The way he has released the tapes and other materials almost seems calculated to do him maximum damage. He does it with so many delays and evasions he gets no points for cooperation, and the trickle of information is slow enough so that the whole nation has time to focus on each petty theft, each tax delinquency, each bit of rottenness that affronts our ideal of the Presidency.

Beyond all questions of guilt or innocence he must be impeached because we, the Super Bowl people, have been promised the show. We're gearing up for it emotionally the way we did when the ballyhoo built up for the Billie Jean King/Bobby Riggs match. The business is already so advanced that some people like James Reston of the New York Times are pressing for a TV blackout but that can never be. We are a free people and we have been guaranteed the right to watch everything live in our living room.