

TV and Impeachment

Hearings Found to Give House an Image Of an Institution Worthy of Respect

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WASHINGTON, July 31—Some months ago, Thomas P. O'Neill, the genial Bostonian who serves as the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, was reflecting on the way his elevation to the leadership had changed people's perceptions of him. "I used to be an Irish hack," he said. "Now I have become a statesman."

Something of the same thing has happened in the last week to the House Judiciary Committee as a result of its deliberations on the impeachment of President Nixon, and by extension to the House as a whole. Suddenly, the House is seen and sees itself as an institution worthy of respect. For the moment, at least there would seem to be few takers for the derisive judgment of Representative Big Tim Sullivan of New York, who said upon his retirement in 1906, "Congressmen? In Washington they hitch horses to them."

The consensus in Washington is that the committee's six days of nationally televised meetings were marked by a dignity commensurate with the occasion. To be sure, there were some pomposity and some posturing and some pettiness (members on both sides were irked by an attack on Albert E. Jenner Jr., the associate special counsel, for his views on prostitution).

Competence and Eloquence

But for all that, what struck most of those who watched the hearings close up, including reporters accustomed to dismissing the House as 435 orators in search of an idea, was the competence of lawyers like Wiggins of California and Jordan of Texas; the eloquence of Mann of South Carolina and Sandman of New Jersey; the evident emotion felt by Railback of Illinois and Waldie of California.

The onlookers were impressed as well with the patience and evenhandedness of the committee's chairman, Peter W. Rodino Jr., Democrat of New Jersey. He proved to the satisfaction of many that the Truman tradition was not dead in America, that a relatively obscure, somewhat scorned backbencher could rise to even the most intimidating occasion.

"They didn't look like renegades," said a man with close connections to the White House, "and we'd been led to believe that they would."

Nor did the committee give the impression of ritual partisanship. Only eight Democrats voted for all five proposed articles of impeachment; only 10 Republicans voted against all five. By far the largest group,

20 members—13 Democrats and 7 Republicans—voted for some and against some.

Representative William S. Cohen of Maine, a handsome 33-year-old Republican, was commenting at a break in one of the sessions last week. The impeachment deliberations, he said, were giving the country a chance to see what he had concluded shortly after arriving here—that the House was full of talent that got lost "because of the sheer numbers."

Relevance and Decorum

Television clearly had much to do with the tone of the debate. There were complaints about the lights, and Hungate of Missouri finally took to wearing sunglasses. There were complaints last night from the Republicans that the Democrats had deliberately delayed discussion of the tax article so it would be seen during prime time.

But the presence of the cameras held the members to a reasonable standard of relevance and decorum and guaranteed that all would be in their seats. It also gave those who feared that they were voting against the grain of their constituents a better chance to explain themselves than a whole year of speeches, newsletters and news conferences.

If television is permitted to cover future Congressional debates on momentous questions, it could work a profound change in Congressional politics—in some ways as profound as its impact on Presidential politics since 1960. In a manner the Founding Fathers never dreamed of, the Representative could truly become the Federal office-holder closest to the people.

With the assistance of television, the committee did much to ruin the climate for the kind of counterattacks on which the White House has relied almost since the advent of the Watergate scandals more than two years ago.

It becomes more difficult, for example to describe the case as the illegitimate product of the News Media when detailed accusations are issuing from the mouths of those who have studied the case for weeks.

Compliments Recalled

It becomes difficult to persuade the country that a committee looks like a kangaroo court when the most impassioned defenders of the President lard their speeches with compliments for the fairness of the chairman and the procedures that he devised.

And it becomes more difficult to picture the "prosecution" as a partisan lynch mob, out of touch with middle America, when, on the first two articles of impeachment, there is a coalition of Republi-

cans and Democrats of urban, suburban and rural antecedents; of ideologies rated from zero (Mann of South Carolina) to 100 (Drinan of Massachusetts) by Americans for Democratic Action; of legislators from Tuscaloosa and Bangor, Roanoke and Akron, Moline and Flatbush and Harlem.

It is for that reason, perhaps, that White House spokesmen have abandoned their caustic critiques and began speaking of the fairness with which they hope Congress will attend to its "Constitutional responsibilities."