
Just the Facts, Please

By John Hart

There are a number of journalists who believe it's all over for the President. They have counted noses in the Congress, checked their wind socks for the direction of national sentiment, read the rumblings of their own and other journalistic stomachs and concluded that impeachment is certain in the House, conviction ordained in the Senate. The trouble is not that they believe that, but that more and more of them are saying so publicly.

It is too much to ask trained observers not to see patterns in their observations. It's too much to ask wise men not to warn of the future. It is not too much to ask journalists to refrain from predicting the outcome of a process that is supposed to determine guilt or innocence. Predicting is not reporting.

When the majority leader of the House says he expects impeachment, he's not reporting, he's predicting.

When the President's public relations office says it does not expect impeachment, it is predicting.

Journalists who pass on these pre-

dictions are reporting. But when they make their own, they are not.

When journalists take a nose count and say, "If the vote were taken today, this is the way it would turn out," they're reporting. When they take a summer nose count and try and freeze it for the winter, they're not reporting, they're predicting.

There's an irresistible urge in journalists to be first with any story. Now that instant broadcasting has reduced scoops to minutes and seconds, one sure way to be out ahead of the story is to report it before it happens. The trouble is that predictions foster expectations, and expectations have some influence on the future.

Due process presumes innocence right up to the verdict. At this point, when the President has not even been charged by the House, journalists take a risk by predicting a guilty verdict. The wider their audience, the greater the risk to the presumption of innocence, to say nothing of the risk to the reporter who claims to be observing from the sidelines.

John Hart, correspondent of CBS News, delivered this commentary on The CBS Morning News.

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