

The word which, so recently, could scarcely be uttered without incredulity or shudder has blossomed into an active threat to the Presidency of Richard M. Nixon. The House Judiciary Committee has started a formal impeachment inquiry, voting its chairman, Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr., of New Jersey, full subpoena powers to gather evidence.

In a way, it is a sign of constitutional health that the overlay of awe and fear covering the process of impeachment has been swept aside. Impeachment stands in the Constitution as a thoroughly respectable and orderly method of judgment. For all the mystery and argument that has grown up about the process, the early writings of the Republic treat impeachment in a perfectly matter-of-fact fashion. In *The Federalist*, Hamilton wrote that impeachment is designed "as a method of National Inquest into the conduct of public men." He explained:

"The subjects of its jurisdiction are those offenses which proceed from the misconduct of public men, or in other words from the abuse or violation of some public trust. They are of a nature which may with peculiar propriety be denominated 'political,' as they relate chiefly to injuries done immediately to the society itself.

"The prosecution of them, for this reason, will seldom fail to agitate the passions of the whole community, and to divide it into parties, more or less friendly or inimical, to the accused. In many cases, it will connect itself with the pre-existing factions, and will enlist all their animosities, partialities, influence and interest on one side, or on the other; and in such cases there will always be the greater danger, that the decision will be regulated more by the comparative strength of parties than by the real demonstrations of innocence or guilt."

There, 185 years ago, Alexander Hamilton summed up both the relevance and the dangers of impeachment in the present crisis.

No one can entertain the thought of this recourse without apprehension. But the provisions of the Constitution stand, and the House of Representatives is legitimately establishing the machinery to look deeply into the record of this Administration to determine if impeachment is warranted by today's sorry circumstances.

The Congress and its leaders would be no more justified in backing away from this provision of the Constitution than the President is in ignoring and defying other sections of the fundamental law of the Republic.