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Rep. Rodino: "I'm not looking to make headlines."

Peter W. Rodino Jr.

Little-Known N.J. Congressman Finds Himself in Rare Spotlight

By Richard L. Lyons
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A year ago Rep. Peter W. Rodino Jr. (D-N.J.) was a Newark congressman little known elsewhere and able to eat his lunch in peace.

He may still be widely unknown, but yesterday half a dozen colleagues interrupted his lunch in the House members' dining room to introduce visiting constituents, a sure sign of enlarged importance.

Rodino is now chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and as such in charge of the inquiry into whether President Nixon should be impeached, as well as of hearings beginning today on whether House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford (R-Mich.) should be confirmed as Vice President. Ford and Rodino have come a way since they were sworn in together as House members 25 years ago.

Rodino and his committee long worked in the shadow of Emanuel Celler, who dominated it for two decades as chairman until his defeat last year. Most committee members have served less than five years, and both Rodino and they are untested in handling a major controversial issue, let alone such a blockbuster as an impeachment inquiry.

Rodino finds it "awesome" to have both impeachment and the first confirmation of a Vice President dumped on him at once. But he doesn't appear scared by it. He is moving slowly—too slowly, some think—to set up the machinery to find the answers.

"I'm not looking to make headlines," he told a reporter. "I'm looking to do a thorough, fair job. I'm going to do it as it needs to be done and to the best of my ability."

Rodino was born in Newark, 64 years ago, son of an Italian immigrant working man, and has lived there all his life. He worked his way through college and law school, opened his own law practice, went to war and came to Congress in 1949, succeeding Republican Fred Hartley (of Taft-Hartley Act fame), whom Rodino thinks he scared into retirement by a close race two years earlier.

For all those 25 years, Rodino has lived in an apartment here while his wife and two children stayed in Newark where he returns each weekend. That is not uncommon for nearby urban congressmen who feel the need to get home regularly to see constituents, and

must choose between seeing their families here during the week or at home on weekends.

He is known as a hard worker, often staying at his office late into the evenings. Silver-haired, below medium height and trim, he stays fit as a regular paddleball player in the House gym. This is a mix of handball and squash, and has a devoted following among House members.

Rodino views the high points of his legislative career as playing leading roles in abolishing the national origins formula that for more than three decades formed the inequitable base of the nation's immigration policy, and of writing the fair employment practices provision into the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Rodino was also instrumental in making Columbus Day one of the three-day holiday weekends legislated by Congress a few years ago.

Making Columbus Day a holiday and getting rid of the national origins formula,

which discriminated against immigration from Italy, endeared Rodino to what was in earlier days a largely Italian constituency. But now Newark is largely black and employment practices work is more pertinent.

Last year, three black candidates split 43 per cent of the vote in a Democratic run against Rodino. He may have been saved a closer fight next year by the Democratic sweep in New Jersey last week which produced a Democratic legislature and governor. They may provide more comfortable redistricting for him.

Rodino and Hugh Addonizio were both elected in 1948 to represent Newark, and for a time shared an apartment here. Addonizio quit to become mayor of Newark, and recently was sent to prison for various acts of corruption while mayor.

Herbert Stern, the U.S. attorney in Newark who prosecuted Addonizio and many other public officials, recently said about Rodino:

"There's never been an inquiry about Rodino, never the slightest anything. In my opinion, Pete Rodino is an honest man and a fine public servant."

In a region where organized crime has been entrenched and political corruption common, Rodino stoutly defends his reputation for honesty, and says he wouldn't know a mobster "if I fell over him." He said there is nothing in his background that the administration could use to induce him to go easy on impeachment.

Descriptions of Rodino by colleagues who know him well include "the most industrious man I ever saw . . . seems relaxed and confident . . . not flashy but solid . . . experienced, fairly intelligent, not much of a self-starter . . . a low profile, so far untested."

One of the most important issues Rodino's committee will confront is the definition of an impeachable offense. Ford once defined it, while trying to impeach Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas as whatever a majority of the House considers impeachable at any given time.

Others contend that an impeachable offense must be a criminal offense. Rodino rejects both, and sounds as though he might settle for an act that brings disgrace upon the office of President.

The committee's impeachment inquiry got off to a rocky start with a partisan wrangle over procedures. Rodino says a partisan outcome to the inquiry would be a "national disaster," and appears to be moving more carefully to consult Republicans before acting.