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Impeachment Priorities

Among the senior members of the House of Representatives, discussions are on foot which have the theme, "let's get it over." The basic idea is that expressed by the respected Republican veteran from Vermont, Sen. George Aiken, who has said the Congress ought to impeach the President or "get off his back" without delay.

The leaders of the House discussions are Democrats—as they need to be, in the present House, in order to have much chance of getting anywhere. But their motives are wholly national rather than partisan. They simply believe that "the country can't afford to go on being torn to pieces month after month with no end in sight."

The quotation is from the wise Speaker of the House, Carl Albert of Oklahoma. There are plenty of others who share his view, including the powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Rep. Wilbur Mills of Arkansas. If these men could see their way clear to such a result—which they cannot, as yet—they would like the House to vote a bill of impeachment up or down before the present session ends.

That means, basically, that their view of the matter is strictly pragmatic. In other words, they are inclined to believe the President has done a fairly good job in managing the country's affairs—in sharp contrast to his management of his White House affairs. They further know the government cannot deal with the huge problems and dangers now confronting the United States without a fully operational President in the White House.

In fact, although this is never admitted, they think it considerably more important to have an effectively opera-

tional President, than to go much further in trying to get to the bottom of the horrors comprised under the word "Watergate." This may be deduced with confidence from the fact that as of now, according to the best counts, the House would vote down a bill of impeachment by a majority of 50 to 60—despite the huge Democratic majority on the House floor.

If you want a bill of impeachment to be voted up or down as soon as possible, and you further expect that it will be voted down, it can only mean that you give no very high priority to impeaching the President. It is this, of course, that creates a difficulty for these senior men of the House of Representatives, for there are now too many of the leftwing House Democrats who all but slaver for impeachment.

House Democrats of this stripe are also disproportionately numerous on the House Judiciary Committee. On the committee, their symbol is the priest-congressman from Massachusetts, Robert F. Drinan, who has judged the case already and wears an "impeach Nixon" button. In theory, to be sure, the Judiciary Committee can be short-circuited.

This is because a motion to impeach must be debated and then voted upon as soon as any member of the House offers such a motion. It is imaginable that such a motion may be offered later, if and when the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Rep. Peter Rodino of New Jersey, allows his committee to be pushed into an interminable partisan fishing expedition by Representative Drinan and friends.

For the present, however, the problem of the advocates of "let's get it over" really centers in the Judiciary

Committee. Speaker Albert has repeatedly urged Representative Rodino to deal with the impeachment matter with all the speed consistent with proper procedure.

Mr. Albert has also secured a commitment from Mr. Rodino that his committee will send Rep. Gerald Ford's nomination to the vice presidency to the House floor no later than Dec. 6, so nothing can be done before then.

Meanwhile, Mr. Rodino has already asked Speaker Albert for the means to hire a good lawyer plus a staff, and for accommodations for this extra personnel, plus space in which hearings can be held. Hearings can be very short or downright interminable, however, according to the will of a committee majority. This in turn puts Chairman Rodino on a spot which he quite clearly finds distasteful.

The spot is all the hotter, because the chairman, plus his two southern Democrats, plus the judiciary committee's Republicans (if they stick together) add up to a majority. It is in the chairman's power, in fact, to tell the Father Drinan group to go to hell, and to make the key decisions himself.

Thus Representative Rodino now finds himself with "cannon to the right of him, cannon to the left of him," in the manner of the light brigade in the poem. The "let's get it over" advocates are the cannon on the right, the Drinan group on the left. It is hard to know where Mr. Rodino will go in these circumstances. But a bill of impeachment, reported without prejudice to end argument in the committee and secure early House action is beginning to seem possible in the future.