

J. J. Kilpatrick

A Republican Case for Impeachment

In a recent column in the Chronicle, James Kilpatrick suggested that impeachment might be a good thing, to clear the air of suspicion surrounding the President. Here, he proposes it would help the Republican party as well.

Washington

IN URGING that the House get on with the impeachment of Richard Nixon, I have in mind chiefly what seems to be the good of the country. The nation deserves a formal resolution, which resignation could not provide, of the poisonous stream of charges brought against the President over the past 20 months.



James J. Kilpatrick

Cruel as it may seem, the impeachment process might also prove to be for the good of Mr. Nixon himself. He now struggles in a dark swamp of ill-defined accusations and formless innuendos. To reduce these to writing, and to proceed to trial by the Senate, could bring the only formal vindication that Mr. Nixon possibly could receive.

If two-thirds of the Senate failed to vote for his conviction and removal, he would have survived the crisis and regained a position of leadership not

likely to be challenged again during his term.

There is yet a third consideration: The good of the Republican party.

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IT IS A CONSIDERATION, to be sure, not likely to lend itself to the support of professional Democrats, but it is a concern that Republicans of every philosophical persuasion should take to heart.

A recent Harris poll turned up a shocking statistic: If Congressional elections were being held right now, and the choice were simply between Democrats and Republicans, the Republicans would lag 22 points behind. That is the Watergate measure.

One may respond to the Harris poll, of course, by observing that such hypothetical questions bear little relationship to real world politics. Parties do not compete; candidates compete; and the experience, personality, and political philosophy of a candidate count for far more than his party label. There is abundant reason, indeed, to believe that mere party affiliation is among the least of the factors in our elections today.

All the same, in a close race between evenly matched candidates, the Watergate measure plainly could prove decisive. If the taint of "Republican corruption" affects even 3 or 4 per cent of the voters, and causes them to vote Democratic, the GOP loss in the House and Senate next year could spell disaster for the party.

Some of the prospective damage could be minimized, it seems to me, if House Republicans themselves would now join a movement to get this misery settled, once and for all, by the formal procedures laid down by the Constitution.

Gerald Ford, the prospective vice presidential replacement, understandably could be excused from taking a position, but other Republicans should not be deterred.

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A VOTE TO IMPEACH is not a vote to remove; it is a vote to compel the Senate to hear the evidence and to return a verdict.

The impeachment process, once set in motion, would bring order out of disorder. It would restore this wild and formless struggle to a context of ground rules acceptable to the people. No tradition is more deeply ingrained in our national psyche than the tradition of obedience to established law: A batter is out, or a goal counts, or a defendant is guilty. The decision of an umpire, a referee, or a judge may not be popular but their authority and finality are respected.

This would be true, I submit, of the President's trial by the Senate. Mr. Nixon would be defended by counsel; he would have the right to cross-examine witnesses who have yet to be cross-examined by anyone; he would be protected by all the familiar safeguards of due process.

The final vote of the Senate jury could not be wholly freed from political considerations — the evidence against Mr. Nixon would have to be overwhelming before two-thirds of the Senate would vote, in effect, to put Ford in the White House — but one way or another, the verdict would be accepted as an authoritative disposition of the case.

For Republicans, as a party, to resist such a disposition is to enhance the image of a party unwilling to have the charges of Presidential corruption proved or disproved. If party leaders are concerned about that image, they had better stop mumbling about resignation, which resolves nothing, and get behind impeachment instead.

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