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Impeachment: Long Ordeal Ahead...

Suitable punishment of the Watergate horrors is certainly desirable; yet this is not, cannot and should not be an absolute first priority for sane Americans. The first priorities have to be national survival and a reasonable measure of national success.

These gloomily practical reminders are now in order because of a new political fact that needs to be squarely faced. The gradual changes on Capitol Hill have begun to make an impeachment proceeding more and more likely. And if the House of Representatives eventually votes a bill of impeachment, the Senate will hardly dispose of the problem until the summer of 1976!

The factual basis for this ghastly forecast is unfortunately genuine and solid. As just reported in this space, the President has already been warned by his own staff that the House Judiciary Committee must be expected to drag out its independent inquiry into the Watergate horrors until late October, 1974.

The wisest congressional leaders, both Democratic and Republican, regretfully agree with this estimate by the White House staff. Furthermore, this kind of protracted public investigation, with the Watergate horrors never out of the headlines, will most probably lead to a pro-impeachment committee report, and a House vote for a bill of impeachment by a narrow majority.

Here consider the powerful and astute chairman of the Ways and Means committee, Rep. Wilbur Mills (D.-Ark.). Chairman Mills is known to favor prompt disposal of the whole question, and to believe, too, that no impeachable crimes or misdemeanors have yet been adequately proved against the President. But he is being reliably quoted as saying, not without bitterness, that "It's beginning to be useless to point out we have no real grounds for impeachment; the feeling among a lot of members is getting too strong."

So there you have the first stage, with almost a year of inquiry by the House Judiciary Committee a near-certainty, and a House vote for a bill of impeachment a better-than-even bet. As to the time the Senate will need to give all the senatorial egos a proper run in the yard, and then to vote impeachment up or down, this is no bet. It is another near-certainty.

The Senate's Democratic majority is heavy, and may well increase in 1974. The leader of the Senate's Democrats, Mike Mansfield (D.-Mont.), can best be described as the Prince Myshkin of legislative politics. In other words, he is better fitted for a career of sainthood than for his career of Senate leadership. Only a wild optimist can therefore suppose the Senate will deal with a bill of impeachment until a few months prior to the next presidential election.

It is this dreadful prospect, in turn, that has produced the clear possibility that the President will resign. That possibility, also just reported in this space, is now beginning to be accepted in the White House staff itself. You no longer get the indignant denials by all members of the White House staff that anything of the sort can possibly happen.

Instead you get whistling-in-the-

graveyard suggestions that an abrupt turn in public opinion may change the future outlook. It is true that more and more people in the country plainly want to get the Watergate horrors over and done with, one way or the other. But that kind of impatience can just as easily hurt the President as help him.

You have, then, two questions to answer. The first is obviously: Will the President indeed resign to spare the country such an ordeal? The second is: Will the U.S. survive if he does not resign, and an impeachment proceeding then occupies the whole balance of Richard M. Nixon's term of office?

The second question arises because the presidency, for good or ill, is the unavoidable, essential, irreplaceable great engine of the U.S. government.

That fact has just been dramatically proved for the umpteenth time. There has never been a period, in nearly half a century, when the concentration of power in the White House was more under attack. Yet the threat of the energy crisis has just caused plenary powers to be voted the President, with little argument and by large majorities.

At home, meanwhile, we have both the energy crisis and its potential economic consequences. Abroad, there are half a dozen lurking dangers, of which several have life-or-death potential. Does anyone then, feel *sure* we can survive three years with a President crippled by incessant inquiry and incessant attack? Yet how does anyone suggest we can elude this risk, except by the President's own decision?

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